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## **Minerva's Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures**

NOËL CARROLL

WILEY-BLACKWELL, 2013, x + 358PP. £16.99 (PBK).

Noël Carroll requires no introduction and his reputation comes courtesy of the quality and quantity of his contributions to analytic aesthetics over a period of thirty years. Where his most recent collection, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), targeted aestheticism, formalism, and artistic autonomy, the focus of *Minerva's Night Out* is broader: the philosophical questions raised by the phenomenon of mass art. Carroll concurs with the traditional classification of the popular arts in general as emotional arousal, charts the relationship between popular and mass art which developed in the twentieth century, and characterises the latter in terms of its intended consumption, i.e. large numbers of people, often separated by great distances. He justifies his choice of subject on the first page of the first paper, "The Ontology of Mass Art" (originally published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1997): 'mass art, or, if you prefer, mass entertainment, is probably the most common form of aesthetic experience for the largest number of people' (9). The phenomenon is indeed one which philosophers should not ignore, and although the last two decades have seen increased attention paid to popular film, popular music, song, photography, and comics, the mass arts remain under-represented in academic philosophy. As such, *Minerva's Night Out* is a very welcome addition to the literature.

The volume comprises a brief introduction and twenty-one self-contained papers, which span the period 1997 to the present (and includes one new paper scheduled for forthcoming publication elsewhere). There are six sections: The Philosophy of Mass Art, The Philosophy of Motion Pictures, Philosophy and Popular Film, Philosophy and Popular TV, Philosophy on

Broadway, and Philosophy across Popular Culture. In terms of particular art forms, there are nine papers on film, three on television, and two on theatre. The value of the collection is enhanced by the inclusion of five essays which – appropriately, given the subject matter – were published in popular philosophy anthologies (four by Open Court and the other by Wiley-Blackwell) and may thus have escaped the attention of academic readers. Whether aimed at an academic or non-academic audience, the papers follow a familiarly rigorous format: Carroll first articulates a problem, then surveys two or more solutions to the problem, follows his survey with a critique of the unsatisfactory solution/s, and concludes with a convincing argument for the favoured one. There are several themes which cross the boundaries of both the section divisions and art forms, two of which I found particularly interesting: the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral value of art (“The Ties that Bind: Characters, the Emotions, and Popular Fictions”, “Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy”, “Sympathy for Soprano”, “Consuming Passion: *Sex and the City*”, and “Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*, or The Justification of Literature”) and the analytic engagement with continental philosophy, in this case psychoanalysis (“Psychoanalysis and the Horror Film” and “The Fear of Fear Itself: The Philosophy of Halloween”). I do not have space to comment on each paper in the collection, so I shall discuss two, one selected from personal interest and the other as a development of Carroll’s previous work.

In “Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy” (first published in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* in 2010), Carroll examines the link between popular art and emotional arousal on the one hand and film and morality on the other, arguing that ‘the moral emotions are one of the important, if not the most important, levers available to moviemakers for recruiting the mass audiences that movies are designed to enlist’ (85). Carroll begins by noting that the basic emotions are ‘arguably nearly universal’ and that an art form which appeals to these

emotions is thus likely to appeal to mass audiences (86). This is followed by a demonstration that films are criterially prefocused – by means of narrative structure, visual framing, and the diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the soundtrack – to produce emotive uptake by audiences (89-91). Carroll then characterises the moral emotions as a sub-category of the emotions which ‘enlist, so to say, the non-moral emotions for moral purposes’ (92). He cites recent research by John Haidt which offers evidence that a large proportion of moral judgements are intuitive and thus emotional, and claims that while the moral emotions may combine intuitive and rational elements, the former appear to be the most significant. In a similar manner to that which the basic emotions are near universal, Carroll argues that the moral emotions are cross-cultural. He identifies four global domains of ethical concern which prompt emotive uptake: harm, justice, the ethics of community (the relations between the individual and the family, society, and institutions), and purity (94-99). Returning to the question of criterial prefocusing, specifically that of what directors should foreground in order to secure positive reactions from audiences, Carroll maintains that protagonists are created ‘in such a way that the audience will recognize them to be, broadly speaking, morally good’ (101). He is well aware of the potential objections to this claim and in “Sympathy for Soprano” (first published as “Sympathy for the Devil” in *The Sopranos and Philosophy* by Open Court in 2004), he argues that the audience’s uptake of a pro-attitude towards Tony Soprano is engendered by him being the least morally defective character in the cast (242).

Carroll’s position is persuasive, although it is likely to draw criticism at two stages: first, his sentimentalist approach to morality; and, second, the relationship between the four areas of ethical concern, which do not appear to be accorded equal weight across different cultures and may conflict within a single culture. I nonetheless found myself in broad agreement despite my autonomist sympathies, which opens up an intriguing possibility. If Carroll is

correct and popular films are essentially moral despite their reputation for decadence (104), then a bridge may exist between Carroll's three-dimensional (or "instrumentalist") approach to art and the autonomy thesis of which he is so critical. If one accepts that there are two distinct meta-categories of art – one designed for mass appeal and consumption and the other designed for consumption by a more restricted audience – like George Dickie's *artworld public* – then moral value may be part and parcel of the aesthetic value of the former, but not the latter. Carroll would likely see this as a return to Charles Batteux's flawed conception of the *fine arts*, but the potential intersection between his approach and that of some of his critics is worth exploring.

"The Grotesque Today: Preliminary Notes toward a Taxonomy" (first published in Francis Connelly's *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, by CUP in 2003) is an ambitious paper, seeking to establish a taxonomy of what is 'from a merely statistical point of a view [...] one of the leading formats of mass art today' (304). It is, of course, the statistics which make the task of establishing an informative and meaningful taxonomy so difficult, but Carroll succeeds admirably. In "The Nature of Horror" (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 [1987], 51-59), he defined the horror genre as consisting of works designed to produce a compound reaction of the emotions of fear and disgust. Disgust is produced by impurity, which is the grotesque element of horror: 'the grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order' (308). The grotesque is thus the horrific minus the frightening – which is why the grotesque can be horrific (when combined with fear), comic (when combined with amusement) or literally *awesome* (when combined with the miraculous). In *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Carroll explained the popularity of horror at the end of the twentieth century by proposing that the genre was an expression of the "postmodern condition", the

anxiety over the idea that values are relative rather than absolute and concepts created by human beings rather than reflections of things-in-the-world. As accounting for the element of horror which produced revulsion at the defiance of cultural categories, the grotesque was crucial to this popularity. Commenting on his earlier work, Carroll notes that ‘we live at a time when our standing categories appear buffeted from every direction’ (320). In my own contribution to popular philosophy, “The Mystery of the Horrible Hound” (in Josef Steiff, ed., *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy* [Chicago: Open Court, 2011], 67-76 ), I extended Carroll’s analysis back to the modernist era, proposing a link between the classic gothic horror fictions – *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Dracula*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – with the collapse of certainties heralded by the work of Marx, Darwin, Saussure, Nietzsche, Frazer, Durkheim, Freud, and others.

Carroll questions his former association of the grotesque with the radical changes of the postmodern by pointing to the popularity of the format in the Dark Ages, where such change was absent. He concludes with the suggestion that the contemporary taste for the grotesque is more likely the result of mass technologies and mass markets than mass anxiety: ‘Almost by definition, it is a departure from the ordinary and, therefore, a natural target for development as the entertainment industry expands exponentially’ (321). If Carroll’s conjecture is in fact accurate, then his revised conception of the popularity of the grotesque appears to commit him to revising his conception of the popularity of horror, combining the grotesque with the frightening as it does. The two claims could, however, be compatible. Perhaps, for example, modern horror developed in response to a *fear* of rapid and radical change in the nineteenth century which replaced a mere *fascination* with change which had always been present. Alternatively, the development of modern horror could be explained in terms of the

prototypical mass media of the nineteenth century, the large-scale production and wide-scale distribution of newspapers, periodicals, and novels. Carroll identifies the issue as the potential subject of a future paper and one can only hope that it is forthcoming.

A review would be incomplete without *some* criticism, so I shall close with two quibbles.

First, several of the papers provide rather brief treatments of their respective subjects. This is particularly evident in the five papers aimed at non-academic audiences mentioned above and the two papers from the *Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (edited by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga and published in 2009). In the case of the former this is an inevitable consequence of the collection's status as a hybrid of popular and academic philosophy. Second, the Philosophy on Broadway section, consisting of two papers on theatre, does not sit well with the rest of the contents. Neither play (Yasmina Reza's *Art* and Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*) seems aimed at the same kind of mass audience as the rest of the artworks discussed in the collection. More importantly, the art form of theatre – even popular theatre – differs from the mass art form of film because, in Carroll's own terminology (18-19), a play is a type whose token performances are generated by an interpretation (which is a type) rather than a template (which is a token). Plays are only works of mass art when they are recorded for mass consumption on either television or cinema. Notwithstanding, both of these papers are of great interest and thus warrant the departure from the focus of the volume. *Minerva's Night Out* may well be something of a mixed bag, but the mix is in the variety rather than the quality, and the collection makes a nice complement to two of Carroll's most successful previous publications, *The Philosophy of Horror* and *The Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998). The combination of his well-deserved reputation with the subject-matter will ensure that the volume has a

widespread appeal, from academic philosophers to students of popular culture and the consumers of mass art.

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