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Philosophizing through Moving-Image Artworks: An Alternative Way Out*

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ABSTRACT. Noël Carroll has claimed that there is at least one film —*Serene Velocity* (1970)— that may be said, unequivocally, to be an example of doing philosophy through film, even if he does not think that this is the only example. Simultaneously, he has stood for the possibility of a genuine philosophical interpretation (that is, the interpreter does genuine philosophy) by fine-tuning the conceptual analysis initiated through certain artworks, as *Serene Velocity*.

In order to defend the genuine philosophical nature of this kind of interpretations, Carroll compares it with the task of the historian of philosophy and with the task of being an interpreter of a literary “philosophical artwork”. I would hold the claim that there is a conceptual gap between both members of the comparison that can’t be fulfilled by means of Carroll’s strategy.

In his attempt to answer the question ‘can motion pictures do philosophy, and not only ever illustrate philosophical ideas?’, Carroll appeals to a very restricted notion of philosophy when he stipulates that, in order to be a piece of “original philosophizing”, something has to be *philosophical* “in the strong sense of being an original addition to the fund of philosophical knowledge”. Nevertheless, there is a biased answer tainted by the presuppositions of the previous question. If we try to rethink Carroll’s main question in the light of a broader notion of philosophy, the field of answers may be interestingly enlarged: for example, borrowing the Wittgensteinian idea of philosophy as a way to respond to “aesthetic perplexities” and the “dimensional” structure of understanding.

There are two questions in the primary background of my paper. The first question is “Is it possible to do philosophy through films?” The second

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question is “Can interpretations of motion pictures ever be authentically philosophical in their own right?”

I will take as a main reference of my paper the answer to those questions offered by Noël Carroll in his article “Philosophizing through the Moving Image: The Case of ‘Serene Velocity’” (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 64, No. 1, 2006).

I am convinced that Carroll’s article contributes to shedding light on these matters. Nevertheless, my aim is to criticize some aspects of his answers and, subsequent to those criticisms, to claim for an alternative way (or maybe complementary way) of putting the answers in a framework.

In his “Philosophizing through the Moving Image: The Case of ‘Serene Velocity’”, Noël Carroll challenges the question ‘can motion pictures do philosophy, and not only ever illustrate philosophical ideas?’ The answer for him in this paper is that there is at least one film —*Serene Velocity* (1970) by Ernie Gehr— that may be said, unequivocally, to be an example of doing philosophy through film, even if he does not think that this is the only example. *Serene Velocity* is a significant example of minimal experimental filmmaking, a silent film of 23 minutes. The filmmaker positioned his tripod within a corridor and then proceeded to alter his zoom lens every four frames “like the slide on a trombone —moving it forward and backward at a regular pace—“ says Carroll (Carroll 2006, 178). And, following again Carroll’s words, “As a result, the different focal lengths of the zoom shot are juxtaposed at uniform intervals to each other, resulting in different phenomenological effects. For example, when slightly dissimilar segments of the zoom shots are adjacent to each other, the screen becomes animated and the hallway appears to give birth to the impression of movement” (Carroll 2006, 178). Carroll does not think that *Serene Velocity* is the only example of doing philosophy through film, but he thinks that “one example is enough to quell skeptical misgivings about the possibility altogether of producing philosophy by means of the moving image” (Carroll 2006, 174). In fact, at the end of the article Carroll concedes that “I have relied on the experimental cinema to build my argument. I do not believe that this is the only place when one can find philosophizing through the moving image. It may occur in the mainstream narrative cinema”.

Naturally, Carroll distinguishes between motion pictures doing philosophy (philosophy through film) and motion pictures just illustrating or re-

counting philosophy (philosophical questions, philosophical authors, etc.) like when we use films as educational resources for philosophy. Derek Jarman's film *Wittgenstein* or a filmed discourse by Arthur Danto on the transfiguration of the commonplace are good examples of the first kind, but there philosophy "has not really been made *by means of* the art of the moving image — namely, by means of the characteristic expositional devices of the various motion pictures genres, including their recurrent visual, audio, and narrative structures" (Carroll 2006, 174).

In order to overcome skeptical arguments, Carroll avoids the films putting forth or illustrating or instantiating philosophical ideas with cinematic élan (psychoanalytic ideas, for example, in the case of W. Pabst's *Secrets of a Soul*), but not conveying a general belief "to warrant the sort of general claims that are the stuff of philosophy" (Carroll 2006, p. 175). Thus, Carroll focuses on conceptual films, rather than empirical ones (either narrative or experimental ones), such as *Serene Velocity*. Gehr's film can easily be classified as a minimalist film because it pursues reflexivity through reduction (as minimal art generally does). *Serene Velocity* is a kind of meta-cinema and invites the viewer to reflect on the difference between photography and cinematography (as *moving* images).

Serene Velocity is philosophical in the robust sense assessed by Carroll in front of the skeptic. It means that *Serene Velocity* is a genuine instance of philosophizing through moving images because "[its] topic, the nature of the motion picture, is unquestionably philosophical. This is surely not the only question that a philosopher may ask of motion pictures, but it is undeniably one of them. Moreover, *Serene Velocity* proposes its answer to that question by means of the art of the motion picture — by the juxtaposition of settings on the zoom lens. Indeed, the film and its argumentative purport is entirely an affair of visual invention, thoroughly without words, except for the title." (Carroll 2006, 179).

Nevertheless, there is a second possibility (the less-robust one, we could say): the question of whether interpretations of motion pictures (not just the motion pictures themselves) can ever be authentically philosophical. In other words, *Serene Velocity* is an example of philosophizing through the moving image because it is a piece of conceptual analysis to the effect that movement is a necessary condition of film. But an interpretation of *Serene Velocity* can go beyond the conceptual analysis implicit in Gehr's film

(and that interpretation may also involve a contribution to philosophy) because “he did not merely identify a necessary condition of the film medium, but found an essential, defining feature of the larger art form of which film is but a part” (Carroll 2006, 183). For Gehr, says Carroll, “cinema was film; the motion picture was celluloid based. Since 1970, the proliferation of different technologies for producing moving images, however, has grown and continues to grow. Now it is possible to make movies without film; the prospect of completely computer-generated moving pictures is in the offing.” (Carroll 2006, 183) Of course, a genuine philosophical interpretation is possible not only concerning philosophical films (in the robust sense, as in *Serene Velocity*), but also concerning non-strictly-philosophical films, and even non-filmic artworks.

So, a second challenge in Carroll’s article is to stand for the possibility of a genuine philosophical interpretation (that is, the interpreter does genuine philosophy) by fine-tuning the conceptual analysis initiated through certain artworks. In this regard, an interpretation of the significance of *Serene Velocity* may also involve a contribution to philosophy by refining and adjusting the conceptual analysis implicit in Gehr’s film in philosophically pertinent respects. My first criticism concerns Carroll’s strategy devoted to defending the possibility of a genuine philosophical interpretation by fine-tuning the philosophical significance of an artwork (what I called the second challenge of his article). In order to defend the genuine philosophical nature of this kind of interpretation, Carroll makes use of two kinds of comparisons. On the one hand, he compares it with the task of the historian of philosophy —“who in reconstructing the arguments of a past master, Kant, Leibniz or Plato for instance, fills them out in ways that go beyond the letter of text but arguably not beyond its spirit. For instance, identifying and supplying the premises an Immanuel Kant or a G.W. Leibniz neglected to articulate in an argument in order to make the argument go through, or clarifying a concept that a Plato left ambiguous in a way that puts his theory back in the game” (Carroll 2006, 182)—. On the other hand, Carroll compares the interpretation of *Serene Velocity* with the task of being an interpreter of a “philosophical artwork” (p. 182) such as Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. I quote Carroll’s text:

“For example, Pirandello, through the voice of the Father, in the ‘outside’ or philosophical part of the play, says that stage characters have ‘more life than people who breathe and wear clothes.’ Here, the interpreter needs to gloss what Pirandello could mean by ‘life’ here. Where the interpreter helps out by finding an interpretation of his highly suggestive, intriguing, but somewhat obscure observation that is philosophical true —such as that fictional characters are more vivid because they are more unified in that they are tailored expressly for the stories in which they are found— the interpreter is obviously doing philosophy. That is, both Pirandello and the interpreter are cooperating in discovering a philosophical insight; Pirandello by initiating the thought, albeit imperfectly, and the interpreter by fleshing it out.” (Carroll 2006, 182)

I would hold the claim that Carroll’s comparisons are quite unfair to the extent that they presuppose the philosophical label of Kant’s texts or Pirandello’s work whereas the philosophical label of artworks such as *Serene Velocity* is not presupposed. There is, then, a conceptual gap between both members of the comparison that cannot be fulfilled by means of Carroll’s strategy. For the challenge here is to justify that interpretations of a film (or of an artwork) can be philosophical in their own right. Carroll chooses unequivocal labelled second terms of the comparison in order to equate the first term with the second one. Nevertheless, Carroll makes a good effort to underline the philosophical root of the interpretative task by pointing to the “going beyond”, “clarifying”, “identifying” or “supplying” in all the compared cases. Carroll could maybe adjust downwards the telescopic sight of his shotgun, instead of upwards, in his comparison. I agree with him when he says that the conceptual analysis of *Serene Velocity* that he proposes as interpretation is a genuinely philosophical one, but why is it not also a most basic activity, for example to catch the right way to understand an introduction in a musical piece, or to catch the right way to understand the role of colour on a canvas or in the complete work of a painter? For me, it is very clear that there is a conceptual moment in very quotidian (even if not continuous) experiences in which, for example, the apprentice musician is unable to understand the right way to play a score and is invited by his teacher to see something in a certain way (that musical phrase as an introduction, for example), or he is invited to compare or to

contextualize it in a certain way; sometimes the matter is just to be able to catch the expressive gesture on a hand (of an orchestra's conductor); in those situations, I feel myself called to interpret something in a way, that is, to find myself settled in a new dimension of understanding. I do not need to think in "historians of philosophy who recast certain theses of Baruch Spinoza in a way that illuminates contemporary debates about materialism" (Carroll 2006, 183). It seems to me that Carroll would have chosen a less extreme example (even aiming his shotgun upwards) without needing to appeal to clearly labelled ones. In fact, no artist can foresee all the interpretations of his work (not even Cervantes), but it does not turn every interpretation in a philosophical one. Maybe Cervantes would be a much labelled example in terms of "philosophizable" literature. But not even a pulp writer such as Eugène Sue could foresee how *Les mystères de Paris* would be read by a European reader of the XXIth century. In a similar vein, all artworks contain gaps which have to be filled in or completed by the interpreter in his cooperative task. It also seems to me that Carroll would have chosen a less labelled interpretation than that of a historian of philosophy: indeed, when a historian (not necessarily of philosophy) has to reconsider what it is 'to make history' in front of a perplexing text or historical fact, he is doing philosophy in a relevant sense.

In fact, the previous quotation by Carroll saying that the nature of the motion picture is a philosophical question, though "this is surely not the only question that a philosopher may ask of motion pictures" (Carroll 2016, 179) gave us a clue about the narrow scope of Carroll's concept of "philosophical" here. In other words, it seems as if, for Carroll, something could be 'philosophical' just if it is a question made by a philosopher (and not by an artist or a spectator, for instance).

My criticism leads us to the core of Carroll's article, concerning the problem of how to recognize the genuine philosophical nature of a conceptual activity —moving images *qua* philosophy—. In his attempt to answer the question 'can motion pictures do philosophy, and not only ever illustrate philosophical ideas?', Carroll appeals to a very restricted notion of philosophy when he stipulates that, in order to be a piece of "original philosophizing" (p. 179), something has to be *philosophical* "in the strong sense of being an original addition to the fund of philosophical knowledge" (p. 174). Thus, there is a biased answer tainted by the presuppositions of the

previous question. Indeed Carroll's claim for a strong sense of *philosophical* is very appropriate in order to get away with some obstinate *clichés*: showing actors mouthing the classic doctrines of dead philosophers onscreen, or getting some living philosopher to present their cutting-edge ideas to the camera, are not genuine examples of philosophizing through moving-image artworks. Other films (such as Pabst's films or Woody Allen's films quoted by Carroll) can be considered to put forth some elements of philosophical theorizing, or may succeed in crafting a counterexample to a philosophical claim, but all those cases are far from being said to *do* philosophy in a genuine sense. To that extent, I agree with Carroll's strategy and I am convinced that it is really valuable in order to clarify the discussion.

Naturally, Carroll is aware of the deep implications of his particular answer to the question about philosophical interpretations. After having ruled out a too controversial Hegelian conception of philosophy ("in which tracking the state of society in terms of the play of dialectical forces is philosophical, then interpreting the interaction and mutation of such factors as manifested in a motion picture will count as philosophy"[Carroll 2006, 182]), Carroll says:

"Perhaps a less contentious view of philosophy is that conceptual analysis is at least an important part of philosophy, even if philosophy *tout court* involves more than just conceptual analysis. If this is granted, then perhaps we can get a leg up on answering our question by investigating whether a film interpretation can ever contribute to conceptual analysis." (Carroll 20106, 182)

I agree with Carroll's assessment that "philosophy *tout court* involves more than just conceptual analysis". Nevertheless, I am not sure that I agree with him in what he means by "more than just conceptual analysis", because Carroll plays here with an implicit ambiguity. Of course, finding Friedrich Nietzsche's myth of the eternal return embedded in the film *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) "is not philosophical in terms of creating original philosophy" (Carroll 2006, 182), even if it is a conceptual analysis of the film. "More than just conceptual analysis" here is precisely the originality lacking in that interpretation. And "originality" refers at the same time to *philosophical* "in the strong sense of being an original addition to the fund of philosophical knowledge" (p. 174) and to the "going

beyond” characterizing the cooperative task of the interpreter. It seems sometimes as if Carroll would subsume the second sense under the first one, that is, the creative task of the interpreter has been necessarily (or automatically) assimilated as a contribution to the fund of philosophical knowledge. And then it is quite easy to know what interpretation “would be worthy of the sobriquet of ‘philosophy’” (Carroll 2006, 182). We have enough academic criteria (reviews, books, conferences, syllabus, etc.) to look into it.

The problem—in my opinion—is that, by following this line of argument, we would probably lose an essential sense of philosophy: the sense in which philosophy points to an activity, a moment of the cognitive process—not exclusive to academic specialists or professional philosophers, of course—and not just to a theoretical *corpus of knowledge*. If we try to rethink Carroll’s main question in the light of a broader notion of philosophy, the field of answers may be interestingly enlarged. For example, if we borrow the Wittgensteinian idea of philosophy as a way of responding to “aesthetic perplexities” (*Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, chap. IV), and the “dimensional” structure of understanding (*Philosophical Investigations*, II, XI), the philosophical activity looks very similar to the act of putting on the table the plans of my home’s electrical circuits. At this moment, we stop using the switches and plugs as we usually do and the concept is considered *as* a concept, that is, isolated from its usual cogwheel in language (in the usual *language games*) and is now in its related place connected with other concepts. This kind of activity plays a very significant role for authors, audiences, historians, critics, and not just for philosophers.

Ultimately, ‘can we do philosophy through moving-images?’ The answer is obviously ‘yes’, for we can do activities of conceptual clearing up, of viewing a thing in a new comprehensive dimension, an *übersichtliche Darstellung* where the previous perplexity loses its itching effect, through films, pieces of film or kinetic experiments, as well as through words, still images (such as photos, paintings or drawings) or sounds (music or a particular voice inflection). In fact, we are doing that when a painter needs to stop painting (he is maybe just stopping painting a canvas or he is maybe stopping his entire career as an artist: it is not relevant here) and to seriously consider the question ‘what does it mean to paint?’ in order to change

one's style, or when somebody is able to appreciate an artwork, a part of an artwork or the whole work of an artist as being really valuable (or understanding it in the right way) from a new angle or perspective provided by a gesture, a good analogy or a new context. And then, the question of the philosophical status of a particular film (such as *Serene Velocity*) or a specific film genre (such as *avantgarde* or experimental films, fiction films, etc.), even if it remains to be seen as a pertinent one, looks at a new range of relevance, or, at least, looks at the issue in a more balanced way.

Nevertheless, *philosophy* as a moment, as an attitude —not just a thing, like a film or a text— is compatible with a sense of *philosophy* in which there may exist a territory of those philosophical activities that can be specially or specifically characterized by means of a philosophical tradition, some 'theoretical credentials' (p. 184) or an academic protocol.

My suspicion is that Carroll's argument has ignored (firstly) what could be called 'the *protocol* factor' in his approach to the main question, to bring it back (secondly), in an underhand way, when he claims for the original philosophical status of cases such as *Serene Velocity* by comparing them with other examples of philosophical works.

Carroll is right when he notices that, in order to be "philosophical", the thing has to be made by means of the art of a medium (and not only to illustrate or bring up a philosophical topic). He is right also when he notices that a "philosophical" interpretation means a certain "going beyond" related to the object of that interpretation. But "going beyond" does not exclusively concern philosophy understood as a corpus of knowledge (governed by the protocol factor). The "going beyond" may also concern the personal and everyday task of clarifying and gaining access to new dimensions of understanding (in art, in science, in history and even in everyday life). I have faith that the Wittgensteinian idea of 'seeing aspects' (going beyond the starting point of perceptual situations) has something relevant to tell us in that sense.

Of course, my criticism far from ruins the contribution of Carroll's article, but it could help to relocate it in a richer perspective. At the moment, to finish, let me just pose some additional questions and try to answer them providing an alternative way out.

Firstly, is it possible, then, to build a catalogue of philosophical films, in Carroll's robust sense of 'philosophical'? Perhaps yes, despite the fact

that Carroll himself insists on a very restrictive criterion, especially with reference to the avant-garde tradition: “I still do not believe—for the reasons expressed in my earlier work—that there are as many of these works as some commentators on the avant-garde appear to believe, but now I concede that there may be some, whereas earlier I was more skeptical.” (Carroll 2006, p. 184 n.1) Nevertheless, in my opinion, the actual utility of such a catalogue is less probable than the utility of a catalogue of non-strictly-philosophical films similar to the tacit catalogue that all we usually use in our philosophy courses or classes.

Secondly, is there some relationship between the philosophical character of the object-film and the philosophical character of the interpretations aroused by this object-film? Is the first status dependent on the second status and deepness? I think that *Serene Velocity* contains in its intrinsic qualities all the potential power of the further philosophical interpretations, regardless of Gehr’s initial awareness of it.

Finally, maybe the most important question is not whether there are (or not) philosophical films (or even philosophical moving images), but rather what ‘philosophical’ means in this context. Indeed, we are constructing a genuine philosophical experience, after Carroll and after the film, in practising the exercise of questioning. In other words, the really interesting question is how the features of the ‘philosophical’ can appear in artistic and creative products (regardless of the artistic medium: film, painting, music...) but also in the interpretations of artistic and non-artistic objects, as well as in other wide-ranging human activities.

So that is why I claim for a tension between a notion of philosophy as a corpus of knowledge (more or less subject to protocols), and a notion of philosophy as a moment of the thinking process, a very particular and characteristic movement of thinking not exclusive to philosophers at all, even if as Wittgenstein said, the philosopher is used to seeing flowers or berries in the forest where the man “who is not used to searching in the forest for flowers, berries, or plants, will not find any because his eyes are not trained to see them.” (Wittgenstein 1998, 29)

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