Noël Carroll’s “Film, Emotion, and Genre”

Film and Affect

“…affect is the glue that holds the audience’s attention to the screen on a moment-to-moment basis.”[217Lt]

Affect can also seem to refer to the same things as “Emotion”, but the latter “…can be exceedingly broad and elastic, sometimes ranging … to encompass hard-wired reflex reactions (like the startle response), kinesthetic turbulence, moods, sexual arousal, pleasures and desires, as well as occurrent mental states like anger, fear and sorrow.” [217Lb]

This elasticity makes it unlikely that this common conception of emotion “captures a natural kind, like gold” and for that reason, if you want to construct “… precise, theoretical generalizations.” NC therefore decides to use the term ‘affect’ to refer to the common range of things usually referred to with the term ‘emotion’, and reserving ‘emotion’ to refer to “*cognitive emotions* (i.e., affects that include cognitive elements).

NC realizes that there are many *affective* responses that film can and regularly does evoke in viewers that do *not* have a *cognitive aspect* (i.e., affects that are *cognitively impenetrable*).

Examples of emotions as NC is defining them (those that have cognitive elements): fear, anger, patriotism, horror, admiration, sorrow, indignation, pity, envy, jealousy, reverence, awe, hatred, love, anxiety, shame, embarrassment, humiliation, comic amusement.

JP: How do these differ from the startle response, sexual response, phobic responses?

(*Answer:* they are **not mediated by thought [much at least]**)

NC wants to treat what he is calling ‘emotions’ as *emotions proper*, *core emotions, garden-variety emotions* and see what generalizations about film and its relation to these might be discoverable.[218Lb/Rt]

**Film and Emotion**

“…garden-variety emotions, like anger, fear, hatred, sorrow … are central constituents of the film experience as we know it.” [218Rt]

These core emotions *pull us forward through the story* and “[if] the characters we love to hate die too soon, there may be little left onscreen to hold our interest” (which, NC says, is one reason filmmakers usually wait until late in a film before killing of any of these people).

NC thinks it is the “’darker emotions’, like anger, hatred, and revenge [that] provide the cement that hold our attention on the popular movies we consume.”

Nonetheless, NC thinks that ‘more socially acceptable emotions can do this job as well.

JP: we should be thinking about to what extent NC’s characterization of these garden-variety emotions as underwriting our experience of most films is true.

Emotion is so pervasive in film, we often don’t notice it as it develops and forms a big part of the phenomenology of film experience.

JP: Hume thought that even when we are doing something abstract like making up a grocery list or thinking about logical relations among statements that are about neutral topics, *there is nonetheless an emotional tone that accompanies our consciousness of these activities*. If this is true, could it be that NC is ascribing emotional response as pivotal to film experience when *all experience* invokes emotional responses?

What is an emotion?

Alternatives:

#1: Emotion = Bodily-Feeling

Problem: excludes cognition from the emotional complex

#2: James-Lange Theory: Emotion = ‘perception of a bodily state’

Problem: puts cognition in the wrong place (in the *consciousness* of a bodily

state instead of in the set of thoughts, beliefs, interpretations of

events/situations that *cause* the bodily state [as in the case of the spurned

lover])… “You can’t be angry if there is no one who is the object of your anger”

**NC’s point**: while phenomenological qualia and bodily states can *attend* an emotion,

emotions are both *directed* and *have an object* **to which** they are directed (this requires

thought/propositional attitudes/beliefs/interpretations of events/situations)

To be angry at my lover I must believe/imagine my lover has wronged me, and that

belief, imagined state of affairs stands as **the cause** of my bodily state.

This puts paid to the Emotion-as-Bodily-Feeling Theory.

The James-Lange Theory says that I witness a friend being hit by a car, my body

responds and when I notice the state of my body, **I interpret them** as sadness.

Implausible.

#3: NC’s Theory: Emotion = An Affect that is Caused by a Cognition (belief or belief-

like state) and thereby has intentionality (= “is **directed at an object**”) and where the

cognition **plays a role in identifying what emotional state we are in** (e.g. the knot in

my stomach and the ache in my solar plexus is due to my having been betrayed by my

lover, which I cognize under the category of ‘wrongs done to me’ and see that I am

grief-stricken due to the disloyalty of my lover.

#3b: addendum: all cognitions associated with emotional response have a **criterion of**

**appropriateness (or subsumption under certain essentially defined categories)**

associated with them.

Anger arises in conjunction with a criterion of *wrongs done to me*

Fear arises in conjunction with a criterion of *what is harmful/dangerous*.

Pity arises in conjunction with a criterion of *suffering misfortune*

Envy arises in conjunction with the criterion *“having what I lack”*

#3c: emotions must be *temporal states that endure over a time period*.

#3d: emotions “gestalt or organize perception” (fear focuses our attention on the

dangerous/harmful object; love focuses our attention on the loved object)

In NC’s wonderful phrase: “emotions manage our attention”

#3e: in directing our attention-perception toward the elements of a situation that

support the cognition of the object of the emotion (fear) as subsumable under

the appropriate category (harmful/dangerous) **and lead us to look further for**

**more elements in the situation that are subsumable under that category**.

NC’s theory of emotion applies to film-generated emotions, but there is an **important difference between everyday-life-activated emotions and film-activated emotions**:

In everyday life, we are confronted with “largely unstructured stimuli” and it is only when our apprehension of these stimuli form a basis for **beliefs or belief-like states** that emotions can arise.

In film, the stimuli that confront us are **already structured by the filmmaker(s)**. The filmmaker(s) have already organized the scenes and sequences to establish **what features are salient among the film stimuli,** ones that normally evoke certain categories of stimuli that we already associate with familiar emotional states into which we enter as we would if the stimuli in everyday life conformed to those that are appropriate to a certain category that evokes familiar emotional states.

What are the means of these ‘structured stimuli’? They include: camera position and composition, editing, lighting, the use of color, and, of course, acting and the very structure of the script or narrative.

JP: note that this ‘predigested/sorted/directed feature of the set of stimuli designed to provoke certain specific emotions’ makes watching a film *more emotionally intense* at least in part because the signs that the stimuli properly fall under the category of *dangerous/harmful* are unmistakable, emphasized without any contrary stimuli to cause us to pause on the way to the emotion they usually production. For that reason, we are more likely to experience *fear*, and often, *more intensely* than usual (thanks to the focused emphasis of a well-made film on the things that *frighten us!* [i.e., the ‘special phenomenological glow’ that the perceptual focus that emotions produce can bring with it]).

Upshot: on NC’s account of film-provoked emotion, *criterially prefocused film text* produces the *emotive focus* of the audience.

BUT: NC knows that the **successful production of *emotive focus* in an audience** depends on something more than the existence of the *criterially prefocused film text*. What is that something more?

NC suggests that “the narrative must invest the viewer with certain concerns about the fictional characters and events (and their prospects) in the film. These concerns or pro attitudes function like the desires that are found in many everyday emotions, and when added to the mental content or conception of the object, derived from the criterially prefocused text, the combination, all things being equal, should elicit an emotional response (including emotive focus) from viewers in accordance with the criterial features of the film text that the filmmakers have made salient.”[223Lb/Rt]

Upshot: the viewer has to *care about the characters* (at least some of them).

JP: True? What about films in which one is not ‘gripped’ by **any** characters? Can we think of any examples of good films that we enjoy but which have no characters we care about? (NOTE: this amounts to the suggestion that sometimes films **do not evoke emotion** and **nonetheless are gripping** for purely aesthetic reasons [incredible images, beautiful music, a state of mind that is more like that achieved in meditation or in appreciation of, e.g., the beauty of nature]

Caveat: NC’s account is directed at a subset of possible films: “narrative fiction films” and so restricted, it may well be that the counterexamples just suggested simply are *not ‘narrative fiction films’*.

One final aspect of how audiences respond emotionally to narrative fiction films: if the ‘pro attitude’ promoted by the *criterially prefocused film text* is satisfied by how things turn out in the film, the response is **euphoria** (to some degree), whereas if things turn out in a way that conflicts with the preferences associated with that ‘pro attitude’, the response will be **dysphoric**.

JP: NC’s theory needs to be modified to take into account **preexisting audience preferences and expectations** as those often **override** or **interfere** with the effectiveness of the *criterial prefocused film text*. (Devon, who hated Tom Cruise, refused to respond appropriately to *Top Gun* even though the film is very well-made in the *criterial prefocused film text* sense!)

NC thinks that his theory can be used to conduct research into the elements of a film that promote emotional responses to refine that theory. As we see in the next section, genre films are especially good candidates for testing the theory.

**Emotion and Genre**

NC thinks that because genre films are especially good at emotive address (=the set of background information that the *criterially prefocused film text* presupposes and the audience must already posses in order to be affected by the film text in the way the filmmaker intends). For that reason, genre films are a good place to look to test his theory.

Genre films specialize in certain ‘pre-ordained’ emotions:

Tragedy specializes in arousing fear and pity.

Melodrama specializes in arousing *sadness* (crying) and *pity* through misfortunes *suffered* by protagonists, including suffering they *deliberately undergo in service of another character* thus arousing what NC calls a “compound emotion”: *sadness* combined with *admiration*. This helps to prevent a melodrama from becoming **dystopian**.

Horror specializes in provoking *fear* pursuant to threats of harm, but it also arouses *disgust* because the monsters that threaten the lives of the protagonists are “unclean, reviling, loathsome by their very nature” often because they lack features they should have (spider is too big, Frankenstein has parts from different bodies and wasn’t naturally alive, are insect-like but also humanlike, thus mixing features that normally don’t go together, etc.) (the Alien in *Alien*; the swamp monster; the Thing, etc.).

Suspense specializes in especially arresting scenes that provoke/arouse a feeling of *suspense*, which is a *future-oriented* emotion where an outcome that lies in the future *is endangered*.