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Title: Questioning the Foundations of Erotetic Narration

Abstract: Over several decades, Noël Carroll has promoted his theory of erotetic narration, which holds that most commercial films have a narrative structure in which early scenes raise questions and later scenes answer them. Carroll has prolifically expanded on this core claim, using erotetic theory to make corollary claims about audience engagement, narrative closure, narrative analysis, narrative comprehension, and film genre. Despite the theory's influence, there has been virtually no attempt to assess its theoretical consistency or evidentiary support. This article closely examines the theory, revealing numerous ambiguities and identifying its most-defensible version. It then argues that the theory, even on this more detailed account, lacks supporting evidence and makes unfalsifiable empirical claims, raising questions about its usefulness.

Keywords: aesthetics, Carroll, erotetic, narration, narrative, reception, structure, viewer

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Over thirty years ago, Noël Carroll (1984) introduced the notion that most narrative films have a question-and-answer structure that he calls "erotetic narration",¹ and he has advocated for this theory ever since. The widespread acceptance of Carroll's theory is undoubtedly due to its apparent straightforwardness and intuitive appeal. It holds that that the "vast majority" of narrative films present their stories by raising and then answering questions about the film's story world (Carroll 1988, 179; 2008a, 133).² For example, Carroll describes the opening scene of *Citizen Kane* (1941) as raising the question of what "Rosebud" means and that of *Mildred Peirce* (1945) as posing the question of "who killed the title character's husband" (2008a, 141–42). Later scenes of both movies, the theory holds, answer these questions.

Although Carroll initially presented what I will call "erotetic theory" as part of an explanation of film suspense, he has since significantly expanded, defended, and refined the theory in at least sixteen additional essays and books, demonstrating the theory's influence in film studies and aesthetics (1985, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Carroll and Seeley 2013; Seeley and Carroll 2014; 2016).³ In these works, Carroll supplements what I posit as the core claim of erotetic theory—that many (but not all) narratives are usefully described as raising and answering questions—with a number of corollary claims about related topics such as film genre, audience engagement, narrative analysis, narrative comprehension, and narrative closure.

A very brief gloss of some of these corollary claims demonstrates that the core claim of erotetic theory underlies Carroll's explanations of many narrative phenomena. He argues that erotetic (i.e., question-and-answer) structure can be used to distinguish between mass-market films and art films, as the former answer virtually all of the questions they raise, while the latter do not. He explains audience engagement using erotetic theory, stating that audiences are drawn

to a story because erotetic narration makes it clear and easy to grasp and remain interested when stories delay answers to the questions they raise. He believes the theory can be used to analyze narratives because the questions raised by films are of different scope (some answered quickly, others spanning an entire story) and are hierarchically structured. The theory explains narrative comprehension as a process in which audiences understand later narrative events because those events answer questions raised earlier in the story. And he explains narrative closure as occurring when story answers all of the major questions it poses during its presentation.

In his earlier articles, Carroll claimed that erotetic theory is "speculation" and is not based on an "academically established psychological theory" (1988, 207, 213). As Carroll has applied his erotetic theory more widely, however, his confidence in its viability has appeared to grow. Decades later, Carroll's language seems to posit erotetic theory as a fact: "audiences respond to depicted actions and events by asking questions about their causes and effects" (Seeley and Carroll 2014, 240).⁴ When discussing *Memento* (2000), he refers to "the fact that [viewers] are tracking the narrative with certain questions in mind" (2009, 139), and he claims that *Mildred Pierce* "starts off with the question of who killed the title character's husband" (2008a, 141–42), even though the film begins with an extreme long shot of a house and then shows a man getting killed but does not present any explicit questions.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its scope and longevity, erotetic narration has become a reference point in many introductions to film and philosophy (e.g., Shaw 2008; Cox and Levine 2011). Chapters on erotetic narration appear in two influential anthologies in cognitive film theory, *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies* (Shimamura 2013) and *Cognitive Media Theory* (Nannicelli and Taberham 2014). Erotetic theory also is prominently featured in discussions of narrative in the popular *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*

(Livingston and Plantinga 2008) and *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Literature* (Carroll and Gibson 2016).

More surprising is that, despite this prominence, Carroll's erotetic theory has very rarely been negatively criticized.⁵ As this article argues, however, carefully examining the ontology of its core concepts reveals several problems in this long-standing theory. The first section of this article explores numerous ambiguities in erotetic theory and identifies its most viable specification, which does not match the most common descriptions of the theory. The second section evaluates evidence and argument used to support the theory and finds that much of it supports only corollary claims rather than the theory's core claim and argues that the remainder is unpersuasive. The third section argues that the theory, as currently presented, is unfalsifiable and thus vacuous. These conclusions suggest that both erotetic theory and its related corollary claims require substantial revision if they are to continue to serve as touchstones in film and narrative theory.

Clarifying Ambiguities

As Carroll notes, erotetic theory is built on Pudovkin's suggestion that "the relation of earlier scenes and events in a film narrative to later scenes and events can be generally understood on the model of the relation of a question to an answer" (1988, 171). Since this formulation is quite vague, to evaluate the validity of erotetic theory, we must specify the details of its core claim that most narrative films raise and answer questions. Regarding the scope of the theory, Carroll emphasizes that it is not intended to apply to all narrative films, but only to what he calls "movies," which he describes as "a narrow term that refers to the kind of mass media narrative motion pictures associated with big Hollywood studios, Bollywood, and indie distribution houses that feed mainstream 'art houses'" (Carroll and Seeley 2013, 53). The term's

claimed narrowness, however, is belied by the fact that the particular categories included in this description comprise the vast majority of commercial feature films. Carroll also identifies other films as erotetic, including the formally experimental *Memento* (2009, 132) and "most . . . documentaries" (2008b, 215). In addition to claiming that the "vast majority" of mass-market films use erotetic narration (1988, 179; 2008a, 152), Carroll elsewhere identifies works in other art forms as erotetic, including popular narrative television shows (1988, 170; 2008b, 215); fiction genres such as "mystery novels, adventure stories, Harlequin romances, Marvel comics, and so on" (1985, 96); and even "William Johnstone's porno-occult trilogy" of novels, "*The Devil's Kiss*, *The Devil's Heart*, *The Devil's Touch*" (1990, 135).

Assessing erotetic theory also requires a clarification of whether it aims to characterize only major narrative events or also minor causes and effects. Although Carroll sometimes describes erotetic structure as accounting for only the "basic skeleton" (1988, 175) or "core narrative structure" (1988, 177) of a story,⁶ he more often characterizes erotetic structure as involving both macro-questions and micro-questions. Whereas macro-questions "organize large parts of the tale" or "structure an entire text" (2007b, 5),⁷ micro-questions "connect two individual scenes or a limited series of scenes and sequences" (1985, 98), operating "moment to moment" (2007b, 6) and supplying "the connectives between shifting camera positions" (Seeley and Carroll 2014, 242), which implies that they connect even individual shots. One of Carroll's examples shows the level of narrative detail erotetic theory addresses: "*The General* [1926] is unified from end to end by micro-questions: every time debris is cast on the [train] tracks, for example, the question arises whether or not there is a derailment in the offing" (2007a, 171).

Despite the centrality of the theory's claim that narration "proceeds by generating a series of questions that the plot then goes on to answer" (1990, 130), a close look at Carroll's writing

shows a surprising ambiguity in how he accounts for the specifics of this process. He often uses the passive voice to describe how questions arise, thereby avoiding attribution of cause.⁸ When he does identify a cause for questions, he does so inconsistently; in various places, he says questions are caused by represented narrative events, by the film or filmmaker, by some particular aspect of the film (such as a scene, framing, or narration), or by the viewer.⁹ Carroll's use of verbs makes his account of how questions relate to narration even more ambiguous. He rarely uses active verbs normally associated with questions, such as "asks" or "poses,"¹⁰ and sometimes employs verbs that suggest films have "made salient" (1985, 97), "put before us" (1988, 181), "intensified" (1984, 69), or "served up" (2008b, 210) questions that already exist.¹¹ Most commonly, however, he describes questions as being newly formed, but often without specifying whom or what will "raise" (1984, 67), "introduce[e]" (1985, 99), "evoke" (2007b, 10), or "generate" (2008a, 150) the questions.¹² Using this wide variety of terms, Carroll describes the process of question-raising in not only different but sometimes contrary ways, even in contemporaneous articles. In one essay, for instance, he claims that "questions . . . have been planted by the filmmaker" (2008a, 144), while in another he refers to "the saliently posed questions the narrative has served up" (2008b, 210) and in a third asks "what precisely does the spectator do" and answers "primarily, I submit that we ask questions" (2009, 138). But there are theoretical consequences to whether a question is intentionally communicated by an artist, implied by narration, or asked by an attentive viewer, so a more specific account of question formation is needed to evaluate erotetic theory.¹³

If erotetic theory's claim that narrative questions come into existence during the viewing experience is valid, it should be able to provide an account of the proximate cause for this phenomenon. Given that Carroll himself observes that questions are rarely explicitly stated by

films in text or dialog, claiming that "movie footage, minus dialogue or intertitles, does not ask questions or issue commands" (2008a, 148), erotetic theory cannot rely on an account in which questions are asked by or through films. Rather, questions raised by a film must be the result of the film's prompting viewers to ask narrative questions in their own minds. Yet there is an obvious objection to this aspect of erotetic theory, one that Carroll himself notes: viewers' subjective experience of watching films does not include frequently asking questions. As Carroll grants, viewers "are not introspectively aware of framing questions" (1990, 133), and thus he concedes that he "must say that such spectators frame narrative questions tacitly, and that they subconsciously . . . expect answers to them" (1988, 172).¹⁴ In other words, erotetic theory holds that viewers create macro-questions and micro-questions as they watch films but are not aware that they are doing so. Although Carroll rarely describes the erotetic process in terms of viewers' causing questions, that appears to be the only viable interpretation of the erotetic notion that narratives regularly raise questions.

Nonetheless, Carroll seems to resist explicitly describing viewers as asking questions, and in fact warns his readers not "to confuse having a question—which may be an implicit and tacit matter—with performing a self-conscious operation. Not all mental processes can be equated with consciously performed processes; nor are all mental states—such as having a question—to be equated with performing a mental action such as that of internal question-posing" (1988, 173). Yet this comment conflates two issues: first, whether having a question is a mental action, and second, whether viewers are conscious of their mental actions. Even if we grant, for the moment, that viewers might have questions non-consciously, Carroll's use of the passive phrase "having a question" elides the fact that viewers can have questions (consciously or not) only if those questions are created at some point by some cause. Given Carroll's

admission that films rarely ask explicit questions, erotetic theory appears to require that viewers most often create the narrative questions they have. Thus, even if Carroll is right that having a question is not a self-conscious operation, viewers' questions must be mentally created by viewers themselves, and forming a question for which one wants an answer can be fairly called asking a question. Therefore, erotetic theory's claim that films raise questions can be defended only on the more specific account that films cause viewers to ask themselves questions, sometimes consciously but most often non-consciously (or in Carroll's terms, tacitly).¹⁵

Carroll's description of questions as tacit, however, is at odds with his frequent characterization of films as raising questions in a forceful, assertive, or emphatic manner, saliently posing questions, or making questions salient.¹⁶ However, since films do not pose questions, they cannot pose questions forcefully or in any other manner. A film can vividly or assertively present events, perhaps, but not questions. Further, the notion that narrative questions are salient in viewer's minds contradicts the account that viewers ask questions tacitly and are generally unaware of them. A scene cannot be described as both causing viewers to ask questions tacitly and as bringing "well-structured possibilities to the forefront of our attention" (Carroll 1990, 32). Any plausible version of erotetic theory, therefore, must eschew the notion that questions are forcefully asserted or are generally salient for viewers.

Yet even the more specific claim that viewers ask themselves tacit questions is ambiguous because the very concept of "question" is unclear in Carroll's work. A close reading of his writings supports three different notions of question. One is the ordinary-language notion of a question as a linguistic construction, much like a sentence, that solicits information. Carroll consistently uses ordinary questions in his examples, such as "will z draw his gun?" (1984, 68) or "will she find the ring?" (Seeley and Carroll 2014, 245). But erotetic theory cannot rely on this

notion of literal questions for two reasons. First, although films do prompt viewers to initiate mental processes, Carroll provides no reason to believe that these processes typically have an erotetic structure. Second, erotetic theory involves tacit (i.e., non-conscious) questions, and the notion of tacitly generating questions in their ordinary-language sense is, I propose, incoherent: as linguistic constructions, questions are created by combining words (even if only internally in consciousness), and this process of linguistic construction is not one that can regularly occur non-consciously in audience members' minds.¹⁷

Carroll appears to anticipate this concern by stating that tacit questions are no less coherent than tacit beliefs (1984, 67), a point that also fails to stand up under scrutiny. A tacit belief (more commonly referred to as an implicit belief) is generally understood not as a stored, non-conscious mental representation but as a set of behavioral dispositions to act in certain ways given certain circumstances (Schwitzgebel 2015).¹⁸ A tacit belief that my keys are in my right pocket, for instance, consists of a disposition to (among other things) reach into my right pocket when approaching my front door; a tacit belief that my keys are in my left pocket consists of a disposition to reach into my left pocket in the same circumstances. These dispositions can cause behaviors without my ever becoming conscious of the related tacit beliefs, and the differences in these behaviors correspond to the differing content of the underlying beliefs. But there is no parallel way to characterize tacit questions in terms of behavioral dispositions. One might argue that tacit questions are behavioral dispositions to anticipate or seek out possible answers. But if tacit questions are like tacit beliefs, we should be able to identify how the behavioral dispositions composing a film viewer's tacit question "Where does that door lead?" differ from the dispositions composing the tacit question "Where is that door located?" Yet both are dispositions for the viewer to behave in a similar way: attend to the film. The only possible dispositional

differences (such as different responses to the question "What are you wondering about now?") require the viewer to be made aware of the (no longer tacit) question. Since "Where does that door lead?" is different from "Where is that door located?" these questions can be said to exist tacitly only if we can clearly identify ways the dispositions that constitute them can tacitly lead to different behaviors, and Carroll provides no way to do so.¹⁹

Perhaps recognizing that erotetic theory cannot rely on the ordinary-language notion of questions as linguistic constructions, Carroll provides a second notion of question, often writing as if questions were unproblematically substitutable with other concepts, such as expectations. He states, for example, that "earlier narrative scenes raise questions, issues, or possibilities that are answered or actualized by later scenes" (1984, 67); claims that narrative events cause "certain problems to be raised or questions to be asked" (2008b, 208); and describes how "narrative movies can evoke questions" by causing viewers "to wonder what will happen" (2008a, 140).²⁰ Elsewhere, Carroll describes the act of "raising questions" as "arousing curiosity" (Seeley and Carroll 2014, 241). Together, the many similar constructions in his articles imply that asking questions is essentially equivalent to being curious, having expectations, or making predictions. This view that erotetic narration does not rely on viewers' asking literal, linguistic questions is also supported by his claim that that viewers have "subconscious expectations which we can represent as questions" (1988, 173), which suggests that, in his view, there is little consequence to whether viewers' mental states take actual erotetic form.

Although the view that asking questions is functionally equivalent to arousing curiosity is a better match for viewers' subjective experience than the ordinary-language option, this view creates other problems. First, this view makes it very difficult to specify what it means for a scene to answer a question. On an ordinary-language understanding of questions, an answer is

that which supplies the requested information. Perhaps Carroll thinks that a viewer's question "will Bob draw his gun?" is equivalent to the viewer's being curious about whether Bob will draw his gun. But curiosity need not be so specific.²¹ A viewer's curiosity about a story may simply be a desire to know more about the narrative's causes, effects, or situations. Therefore, if asking a question simply means being curious about the narrative, then any scene that provides story information could count as a partial fulfillment of that desire to know more about the story, and thus as a partial answer to the earlier scene.²² But an account in which nearly every scene answers questions prompted by nearly any previous scene would be wholly uninformative and should be avoided. Further, erotetic theory as set forth by Carroll overlooks important distinctions between questions and expectations, predictions, or curiosity. For example, questions cannot be correct or incorrect, but answers can.²³ Predictions are the opposite: predictions can be correct or incorrect, but outcomes cannot. Questions also do not admit of degree—they are either asked or not asked—but there can be a wide variety in viewers' levels of curiosity, degrees of confidence in predictions, or the specificity of their expectations. These contrasts are additional reasons to not equate questions with these other concepts.

More viable is Carroll's third notion of question, which holds that asking a question means considering the range of possible answers. Carroll claims that "the questions a story poses delimit the range of what can happen next" (1990, 132) and describes viewers as "tacitly projecting the range of outcomes as subconscious expectations which we can represent as questions" (1988, 173). On this view, scenes raise questions when they cause viewers to project what I will call "possibility ranges" and answer questions when they show which possibility in this range is actualized in the story. Carroll states that these ranges are tacit; he says viewers do not have "an array of concrete possibilities" in mind but that "earlier events open a range of

possibilities and when later events arrive, we recognize that they fall into that range" (2001, 131). The answers provided by a narrative, therefore, "progressively narrow down the field of possibilities until the occurrence of one set of events sates our animating curiosity" (Carroll 2007b, 9).²⁴

As with the notion of question, however, Carroll describes the breadth of viewers' possibility ranges in ways that have incompatible connotations. On his narrowest account, such ranges can be described in terms of very limited options. For example, in the description of one story, he says that a character robbing a bank "raises two well-structured possibilities: he will be caught/he will not be caught " (1984, 67); in a description of a murder mystery, he says the story raises "as many available alternative answers to the ruling question—whodunit?—as there are available suspects" (1990, 132). Yet Carroll fails to explain why the possibility range in the former example would be "structured" in such a way that included just two possible outcomes. Since narrative events are generally portrayed in more detail than in Carroll's abstract descriptions, the possibilities are numerous: the character in the first film might be seen by the police and chased, but not physically restrained; physically restrained but not arrested; or arrested and tried but not convicted. As for the murder mystery, the possibility range includes not just the number of suspects but the many ways in which they might have killed the victim and the reasons they could have had for doing so.

Elsewhere, Carroll characterizes viewer expectations as constituted more broadly by "the likely range of what can happen next" (1990, 132), but if possibility ranges include only likely events, this raises the concern that erotetic theory cannot account for surprise, which seems to require that the narrative contain unlikely events. Carroll's response to the concern about surprise is that possibility ranges include all possibilities, even if they are consciously recognized as such

only after the fact: "This does not mean that we are not often surprised by subsequent events in a narrative. I was surprised when I learned who the culprit was in the movie *The Usual Suspects* [1995]. . . . However, once the culprit was revealed, I recognized that he fell into the range of possibilities opened by earlier scenes" (2001, 133). Given that possibility ranges include all possible outcomes and that Carroll provides no reason to think that micro-questions and macro-questions are ontologically distinct, possibility ranges also would seem to encompass micro-questions as minor as the angle at which the debris hit by the train in *The General* will "fly away"—a question with a vastly large possibility range. For these reasons, Carroll's description of viewers tracking only a very limited number of possibilities is misleading.²⁵

Although erotetic theory claims that most films prompt viewers to ask themselves narrative macro-questions and micro-questions that are answered in later scenes, the most plausible specification of this claim is not the intuitively appealing notion that viewers sometimes think "which one of those characters is the killer?" and then learn the answer. Rather, it is the non-intuitive account that viewers continuously and non-consciously project ranges of all possible narrative outcomes as they learn story information and that scenes narrow these possibility ranges as certain outcomes are shown to occur in the story world of the film. Having specified this account of erotetic theory allows us to more accurately consider next whether it is supported by evidence.

Evaluating Observable Evidence

As Carroll himself notes in his criticism of the "suture theory" proposed by psychoanalytic film theorists in the 1970s and 1980s, "Before one goes on to theorize about the nature of internal changes in spectators, one should produce some evidence that the spectators are undergoing some sort of transition. That there are changes in the stimulus does not indicate a

corresponding change in the spectator" (1988, 188). As this section demonstrates, however, erotetic theory fails to meet this eminently reasonable standard.

Since Carroll grants that film viewers are generally not introspectively aware of having questions as they watch films, he uses viewer behavior as evidence to support his core claim that film viewers regularly ask questions. Behavior can reveal implicit expectations, he suggests, as in his example of reaching "for a glass, without reflection, only to be surprised that it is no longer there; obviously, we tacitly thought it was there, and our expectation is manifested by being implicit in our behavior" (1990, 133). Similarly, he claims that viewers' continuing attention to a film's story demonstrates an implicit expectation that they will receive answers to their questions—or, in his passive construction, that viewers' "expectations of answers to these questions often remains implicit in their following the story" (1990, 133). Yet these two examples are not analogous. While one can fairly infer that a person who reaches for a glass implicitly expects the glass to be there, the phrase "reach for a glass" presumes a motive that is essential to inferring that person's expectation. But viewers' motives for continuing to watch films is the very fact in question; Carroll cannot simply assume that they do so because they are expecting answers to questions. Viewers might continue to watch films for many other reasons; for example, they may be waiting to see if a boring film becomes more entertaining. So by itself, continued viewer engagement does not seem to provide supporting evidence for erotetic theory.

Carroll offers another example of viewer behavior as evidence supporting erotetic theory when he argues that the theory "can be confirmed by turning off the projector as the last reel of the movie is about to wind onto the screen. Irritated, the audience will jump up and demand to know, for instance, whether the baby was rescued" (2008b, 211).²⁶ Although it is unclear whether Carroll intends that readers understand this claim literally or as a rhetorical flourish, the

frequency with which he has made this argument (1984, 68; 1988, 173; 1990, 133; 2008a, 144; 2008b, 211; 2009, 145) suggests that we should take the claim at face value. Even if he were to provide actual evidence that a screening interruption can cause audiences to demand answers to narrative questions,²⁷ such a fact would not support the notion that audiences are tacitly asking themselves questions during a typical, uninterrupted screening. Similarly, if you spilled a drink on me in a darkened theater, and I shouted, "Oh no! Is that soda or water?" my sudden explicit question would not imply that I had, up to that point, been tacitly asking myself what you were drinking.

Taking a different approach, Carroll argues that "further support for the question/answer model might be gained by using it, not to analyze, but to develop movie scenarios," which he claims offers "a very serviceable guide for producing stories that strike one as typically 'movieish,' especially in their economy" (1988, 179–80). Yet even if erotetic theory could inspire a useful method for generating successful commercial films, such a fact would not establish a correct account of viewers' mental processes during film viewing. It is also hard to imagine how one would establish non-circular criteria for being "movieish."

In two recent essays co-authored with William Seeley, Carroll has offered new psychological evidence to support erotetic theory that had not been available when he first proposed the theory (Carroll and Seeley 2013; Seeley and Carroll 2014). Yet this evidence, at best, supports only particular specifications of corollary claims, not the theory's core account. The research on the visual identification of real-world objects that the authors cite to explain how viewers recognize objects and sequences within a film (2013, 59–62), for instance, is not relevant to the viability of a question/answer account of narrative. Similarly, the authors' assert

that viewers' mind-reading of characters' intentions is relevant to erotetic structure (2014, 244), but mind-reading activity neither confirms nor disconfirms the core claims of erotetic theory.

Carroll criticizes suture theory for more than its lack of evidence of changes in viewers' mental states. He also argues that its predictions of changes in viewers' minds must "be correlated with something about" observable data, such as facts about the films themselves, because "without such constraint, there would be no rational way to decide the difference between explanations that postulate fifty changes in the spectator of a shot/reverse shot exchange and ones that postulate three, forty, a thousand, or none at all" (1988, 188). Yet the examples of individual films that Carroll uses to support erotetic theory also fail to provide any way to decide if a given shot or scene prompts viewers to ask three, forty, or a thousand questions, and it is unclear what kind of data could allow one to decide which of these possibilities is most accurate.

Identifying Falsifying Circumstances

Carroll describes erotetic theory's view of narrative structure as empirical (in his words, an "inductive characterization" [1988, 174–75]), and empirical theories are generally accepted only when their claims are falsifiable—that is, if it is possible to identify circumstances that would disconfirm those claims. Carroll himself has explicitly argued that unfalsifiable theories are "vacuous" (1988, 197). Yet a close examination of Carroll's disconfirming examples for two empirical aspects of his theory—the claims that most, but not all, films are erotetic and that erotetic narration is a "distinctive form of narration" (1985, 96)—cast additional doubt on the viability and usefulness of erotetic theory for understanding narrative films.

Carroll implicitly addresses the issue of falsifiability by proposing three categories of films that he claims are non-erotetic: modernist films, fantasy films, and episodic films. Modernist films such as *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and *India Song* (1975), Carroll claims,

are not erotetic because they "are all questions with no answers" (Carroll 2008a, 152). Discussing films with psychological or supernatural fantasy elements such as *All That Jazz* (1979), Carroll argues that the film is non-erotetic because the "apparitions of Death in *All That Jazz* could not plausibly answer any questions any spectator could have as the film proceeds; they are there to signal the egocentric view Bob Fosse has of himself as a special someone in touch with an eruptive, exclusive, transcendent reality" (1988, 176). Carroll also identifies two sub-categories of films that he claims are episodic rather than erotetic: art films such as "*The Tree of Wooden Clogs* [1978] or *Amarcord* [1973] in which scenes are generally linked, for realistic effect, by principles of rough temporal contiguity and often geographical propinquity, rather than in terms of questions and answers" (1988, 175–76) and chronicles such as a home movie about going to the beach, "where none of the early scenes raised any questions, and where none of the later ones supplied any answers" (1985, 96).

On examination, these examples are unpersuasive. Consider the modernist films that Carroll claims are all questions and no answers. First, if these films do not actually present a coherent narrative, it is not clear that they are in fact narrative films rather than films with ostensibly narrative sequences. Second, the claim that modernist films provide no answers to their questions may be accurate based on the conventional understanding of questions and answers, but not on Carroll's understanding of questions as tacitly projected possibility ranges. It is far from clear, for example, that *Last Year in Marienbad* portrays events that fall outside of most viewers' tacit possibility ranges, since viewers' expectations are guided by schemas based not only on their knowledge of the real world but also on their prior exposure to artworks. Consequently, competent viewers of modernist films will know, at a minimum, that art films sometimes boldly subvert the norms of mass-market films by presenting incompatible narrative

events. As for fantasy films like *All That Jazz*, Carroll's claim that "the apparitions of Death" in that film "could not plausibly answer any questions any spectator could have" (1988, 176) overlooks that the film's erotetic status does not depend on the apparitions of death *answering* viewer questions. Rather, the apparitions need only fit into an overall erotetic structure, where they might certainly prompt viewers to ask themselves questions such as whether someone in the film is going to die soon or, even more plausibly, to tacitly project possible outcomes or effects.

Similarly, it seems remarkable that Carroll should suggest that in a home movie about a day on the beach, "none of the early scenes raised any questions" and "none of the later ones supplied any answers" (1985, 96), given the broad range of film elements that he claims can cause viewers to ask themselves questions. These aspects include not only "narrative scenes" (1984, 67) but also "declarative sentences" (2008a, 149), photographs or images (2008a, 149), "causal inputs, broadly construed" (2008a, 150), and "received information" (2007b, 8). Since a home movie about a day on the beach would include some of these question-prompting elements, erotetic theory would seem to predict that a viewer would tacitly project possibility ranges upon seeing such content as a person walking on the beach or building a sand castle and that later scenes in the film would provide answers by narrowing those possibility ranges.

Elsewhere, Carroll suggests that erotetic theory can "be proven" if you "turn on your TV, watch old movies and new ones, adventure series and romances, TV domestic films and foreign popular films. Ask yourself why the later scenes in the films make sense in the context of the earlier scenes. My prediction is that you will be surprised by the extent to which later scenes are answering questions raised earlier, or are at least providing information that will contribute to such answers" (1985, 96).²⁸ This method, however, poses four significant problems. The first of these is that erotetic theory's core claims involve narration (the process of delivering story

information over time) rather than just narrative structure. But a *post-hoc* process is a very poor method for inferring how story information might have caused viewers to ask tacit questions during their initial encounter with film scenes, especially considering the risk of cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, hindsight bias, and illusory correlation.

The second problem is that although Carroll's proposed process provides a method for finding confirming evidence, his notion of erotetic structure is so broad that it is hard to imagine how this process could identify disconfirming evidence in the form of scenes that do not fit into an erotetic structure. Carroll's view is not that "every scene or event" in an erotetic narrative "can be described as a simple question or answer" (1988, 174). Instead, he argues, erotetic narratives also include establishing scenes that raise no questions, sustaining scenes that "continue" questions or suggest incorrect answers, scenes that provide partial information that contributes to an answer (1984, 69; 1990, 134; 2008b, 211–12), and scenes that merely "prolong . . . the delivery of the answers to our questions" (2008b, 211). Furthermore, it is unclear what Carroll means by his claim that scenes can sustain questions—in one case, he describes this function as "keeping our questions aloft" (2008b, 211)—especially as he appears to view sustaining questions as a matter of degree, with some scenes "not sustaining questions as much as they might have" (1984, 86). But in any case, sustaining questions cannot be a matter of making viewers consciously aware of questions, since erotetic narration is said to be a largely tacit process. Given the permissiveness of his definition of erotetic structure, it is hard to imagine any film scene that could not reasonably be said to perform one of these erotetic functions to some degree, particularly if we understand questions as tacit projections of possibility ranges.

A third problem in identifying disconfirming circumstances for erotetic theory stems from Carroll's failure to provide an account of the level of detail in the projected possibility

ranges that constitute questions. Vagueness on this issue precludes a clear description of what it would mean for these questions to be answered. Take, for example, the *Mildred Pierce*'s opening shot of a car outside a house, which, according to erotetic theory, causes viewers to tacitly generate a possibility range. Answering the question means narrowing the possibility range by actualizing one or more possibilities. If we learn in the next shot that that the house has a fireplace, has a micro-question been answered? Given a narrative setting, literally anything that is portrayed, including this information about the house, will narrow the range of possible subsequent outcomes. Therefore, it is not clear that there are any circumstances that could disconfirm Carroll's claim that "micro-questions structure small sections of a story and macro-questions structure large parts of a story." If such circumstances cannot be identified, then erotetic theory cannot be falsified.

A third obstacle to identifying disconfirming circumstances for erotetic theory is Carroll's view that erotetic films may have an unspecified number of non-erotetic scenes. He claims that there are no "clean demarcations" between erotetic and non-erotetic films and notes that "most films will mix elements of different narrative types" (1984, 70). Further, he states that many erotetic films contain "digressions" that lie "outside the network of questions and answers" (1988, 175), some of which are common enough that they are "*de rigueur* in certain genres and subgenres. So it makes no sense to suggest that digressions are anomalous in popular fiction" (1990, 135). He provides examples of digressions that seem to be clearly demarcated, such as musical numbers (1985, 100), sex scenes (1990, 135), and scenes providing historical background (1990, 135), but provides no theoretical basis for limiting the notion of digressions to clearly demarcated scenes as compared to scenes that are simply not part of a claimed erotetic structure. Skeptics might therefore claim that *Last Year at Marienbad* is erotetic despite its

unanswered questions, arguing that scenes with inconsistent narrative information are a common form of digressions in art films or noting that even in erotetic theory's most plausible account, no narrative can answer all or even most of the questions it raises, given the vast number of possibility ranges that viewers tacitly project.

Conclusion

Carroll has been and continues to be one of the most influential modern philosophers of art, and his prolific insights and the wide intellectual range of his work may partially explain why the underlying ambiguities and evidentiary gaps of erotetic theory have been largely overlooked. Nonetheless, a close examination of arguments of his many writings on this topic reveals that erotetic theory, in its most defensible form, has intuitive appeal but tells us little about actual films. Upon reflection, describing stories as raising and answering questions seems to provide a general description of one aspect of viewers' subjective experience of film rather than a conceptual framework for understanding narration and narrative structure. Considering the various ways Carroll describes what it means to raise questions, what questions consist of, and what evidence would prove his theoretical claims makes clear that the most plausible version of erotetic theory is unsupported by evidence and is unfalsifiable. This finding calls into question not only Carroll's theoretical claims about narration and narrative structure but also related claims regarding such topics as narrative comprehension, narrative closure, and audience engagement and suggests that the search for a definitive explanation of such phenomena is still far from over.

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¹ Erotetic literally means "pertaining to questions."

² There is a risk that in assessing a theory that has been discussed repeatedly over many years a critic might falsely claim that one version of the theory contradicts another, when in fact the theory has merely been refined or improved. For this reason, I will sometimes cite several places in which a claim appears to show that it has been maintained over time. Any quoted terms or phrases followed by multiple citations appear verbatim in all cited sources.

³ This list excludes reprints.

⁴ I credit Carroll with the claims in his co-authored works for grammatical simplicity.

⁵ The only negative critiques I have found of erotetic theory's core claims are contained in two reviews of Carroll's *Mystifying Movies* (Buckland 1989; Hammett 1992). Two other sources (Cox and Levine 2011; Berliner 2017) criticize his corollary claim that erotetic theory explains intense viewer engagement with films.

⁶ See similar claims at (1984, 69; 1988, 176; 1990, 130, 135).

⁷ Carroll sometimes makes a distinction between macro-questions that structure large parts of a story and those that structure an entire story, calling the latter "presiding macro-questions" (2007b, 5), but this distinction is unimportant for the present argument.

⁸ Passive voice is used in (1985, 97, 99; 1988, 181, 207; 2007b, 12; 2008b, 210).

⁹ Represented narrative events (effects, events): (1985, 97; 1988, 181; 1990, 130; 2001, 130; 2007b, 12); film or filmmaker: (1984, 67; 1988, 171, 206; 1985, 99); unspecified aspect of film (scene, narration, narration, framing): (1985, 97; 1988, 171; 1990, 130; 2008a, 145; 2008b, 210); viewer: (1984, 67; 2008a, 145; 2009, 138).

¹⁰ These verbs occur only four times (1985, 99; 1988, 206; 2008b, 210; 2009, 138), twice in scare quotes.

¹¹ More verbs suggesting pre-existing questions are used in (Carroll 1984, 67; Seeley and Carroll 2014, 241).

¹² More verbs suggesting creation are used in (Carroll 1988, 171, 206; 2001, 130; 2007b, 12).

¹³ One might respond that I am taking Carroll's use of the term "question" too literally and that he is using it simply to refer to a general state of curiosity, interest, or anticipation. I address this concern shortly.

¹⁴ "Tacit" has other potential meanings, such as "not expressed in words," but Carroll is clear that he uses it to refer to awareness of a thought or question.

¹⁵ Feagin also interprets Carroll in this way (2007, 19).

¹⁶ Carroll uses this description at least twenty times, saying questions are: made salient / posed saliently (1984, 68; 1985, 99; 1988, 174, 180, 181, 206; 1990, 132; 2007b, 1, 5; 2008b, 145; Carroll and Seeley 2013, 61; 2016, 287); assertively or emphatically presented / introduced / put before us: (1985, 98, 99; 1988, 180, 191; 2008b, 211); presented / advanced forcefully: (2007b, 12; 2008b, 210); posed vividly: (1988, 211); presented as important: (1984, 86).

¹⁷ Creating a question by conjoining words can occur non-consciously only in unusual circumstances such as sleep-talking.

¹⁸ Carroll might hold the unconventional view that tacit beliefs are stored representations that can be accessed non-consciously, but such a view would require a positive account to be persuasive.

¹⁹ Carroll attempts to avoid this objection by suggesting that a tacit question is equivalent to a viewer's tacit belief in a disjunctive claim (1988, 173). In other words, he suggests that the question "Who opened the door?" is equivalent to the belief that "Either X opened that door, or Y opened that door...etc." But tacit beliefs in such claims are subject to this same objection since the number of sub-claims in the disjunction would be immense and thus the corresponding behavioral dispositions could not specify different questions.

²⁰ The context of these quotes makes clear that in these examples he is referencing one concept using different words, not delineating exclusive options.

²¹ At least, erotetic theory does not provide an account of curiosity or wonder that excludes general interest about the future rather than interest in learning specific information.

²² The discussion of scene functions later in the article makes clear that Carroll would allow that scenes in erotetic narratives can partially answer questions as well as fully answering them.

²³ Questions can be grammatical or not, and they can be based on true or false premises, but questions themselves cannot be false.

²⁴ Carroll make similar claims in (2001, 130; 2008a, 149; Seeley and Carroll 2014, 241).

²⁵ Understanding questions as projected possibility ranges provides another reason to question Carroll's description of questions as being asked forcefully or assertively; it is not clear how a possibility range could be asked forcefully.

²⁶ Carroll also uses this argument in relation to readers having their book stolen from them (1990, 133).

²⁷ Having experienced this actual situation three times in commercial theaters, I can say with confidence that when the screen goes black, audiences do not jump up and demand answers to narrative questions. They sit quietly until someone musters the energy to inform theater staff that the film has stopped.

²⁸ Carroll makes the same suggestion elsewhere, worded differently (1988, 134; 1990, 179).