This is a book about the nature of film: about the nature of moving images, about the viewer's relation to film and about the kinds of narrative that film is capable of presenting. It represents a decisive break with the semiotic and psychoanalytic theories of film which have dominated discussion over the past twenty years.

The central thesis is that film is essentially a pictorial medium and that the movement of film images is real rather than illusory. A general theory of pictorial representation is presented which insists on the realism of pictures and the impossibility of assimilating them to language. It criticizes attempts to explain the psychology of film viewing in terms of the viewer's imaginary occupation of a position within the world of film. On the contrary, film viewing is nearly always impersonal.

Gregory Currie provides a general theory of narration and its interpretation in both pictorial and linguistic media, and concludes with an analysis of some ways in which film narrative and literary narrative differ.

Image and mind

Image and mind

Film, philosophy and cognitive science

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For Gabriel Christopher, future film watcher

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one
When they combine and mingle, bring
A strong regard and awe; but speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,
And in the ear, not conscience, ring
George Herbert, *The Windows*

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> Hard is his lot, that here by fortune placed,
> Must watch the wild vicissitudes of taste,
> With every meteor of caprice must play,
> And chase the new-blown bubbles of the day.
>
> *Dr Johnson*

This book aims to place film in relation to other things: to other arts of the same and of different kinds; to modes of representation like pictures and language; to time and the representation of time; to narrative and the comprehension of narrative; to imagination and belief; to the real world. To all these things, film stands in interesting and controversial relation. Getting that relation right will mean we are on the way to understanding the medium of film.

This is a philosophical book about film, a claim that I had better expand on, lest it be written off as a vague gesture in the direction of depth and subtlety. I mean, quite specifically, that the method of this book is generalizing, systematizing, argumentative and conceptual. It aims at conclusions of maximum generality rather than a concentration on particular works, schools or genres; it aims to integrate what can be said about film with (what I take to be) our best theory of the rest of the world; it proceeds in steps, laying out premises and conclusions, indicating how we get from one to the other; it tries to provide analyses of opaque, complex and contested notions like language, image, representation and belief.

The book continues the project of an earlier work, *The Nature of Fiction*, in which I presented a basic framework for the analysis of fictions of all kinds, though I had little to say there about film. At various points in this study I draw on the theory presented earlier, but I try to enable the reader to follow my ar-

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gument without having to turn to the earlier work for help.
Also, at various points in this volume I deviate from the theory
of fiction in the earlier book. I have not in general attempted to
explain or justify the deviations, or even to indicate that this is
what they are. I have assumed that the reader will be less in-
terested in the development of my ideas than in getting a rela-
tively coherent theory. There are references to the previous book
in the footnotes to this one for those who want to follow up
certain issues in more detail.

One aspect of the relations between that book and this one
deserves mention here. At the end of *The Nature of Fiction* I noted
that almost everything in my analysis of fiction depended on
the concept of make-believe or imagination, a notion which was
itself left unexplained. The present work attempts to fill the gap.
It does not offer a conceptual analysis of imagination; rather, it
postulates a mechanism by which imagining can be understood
to work as part of the ordinary, evolutionarily adaptive func-
tioning of the mind. That mechanism is mental simulation.
Chapter 5 explains the idea in outline, an idea I hope to develop
in more detail in a further work.

While nothing is discussed here unless it is put to use in un-
derstanding film, I provide answers to a number of questions of
general artistic concern: What is a pictorial medium, and what
kinds of pictures can we call realistic? What, if anything, is spe-
cial about the photographic method of producing pictures? Do
pictures represent by convention, or by resemblance? What is
the relation between picturing and language? Can there be a
pictorial language, or a linguistic picture? By what means do we
interpret works of fiction? Is there an account of interpretation
that covers both cinematic and other media? How does imagi-
nation work, and what role does it play in our response to fic-
tions? Is there a distinctively pictorial mode of imagining?

It may be inferred from this budget of questions that the cen-
tral concepts I use are representation and imagination. Both are
general categories with special application to film; by taking
them in a connected way as my leading notions I aim to place
film within a broader framework of theorizing about the fic-
tional. One question I don't ask: what makes a film good or

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valuable? I have nothing to say here about the value of films, aesthetic or otherwise, either individually and in comparison with one another, or collectively in comparison with other kinds of arts. This neglect is not the result of indifference. With film as with other arts, questions about value are the most important ones. But they are also the hardest, partly because answering them depends on answering a lot of other questions first. Some of those prior questions are answered here.

My decision to approach film by way of a number of other, more general issues may raise the suspicion that I fail to take film seriously, or that I use it simply as a convenient peg on which to hang other concerns. This is not so, as I think I can briefly indicate.

Film certainly has not been taken seriously by most philosophers of the kind in which I place myself. With philosophers of the broadly analytical stripe, film is generally assumed to be a marginal phenomenon within that almost terminally marginalized subdiscipline, aesthetics. As a consequence, film has become almost exclusively the theoretical province of those who take their inspiration from other schools: semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism. Much has been said about the relation of cinematic ''signs'' to the signs of language, about the relations between film, dreaming and illusion, about the role of film in creating and promoting a false consciousness of self. The result has been disappointing. But there are indications – few in number but significant in content – of a growing dissatisfaction with these sorts of models for the theoretical analysis of film.[1] My aim is to develop an alternative, and to connect the analysis of film with the best work in contemporary metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and cognitive science.

It is primarily because I reject the old framework and seek a

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[1] See Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies*. See also George Wilson's *Narration in Light*, for fascinating studies of particular films in which Wilson rejects the tired categories of realism and illusionism usually trotted out to analyse ''the Hollywood Film''. Some deficiencies in the methodology of contemporary film theory are explored in depth, especially as they apply to the production of particular film interpretations, in David Bordwell, *Making Meaning*.

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new one that I have emphasized the connections between film and other things; a framework for film that bore no interesting relations to other arts and representational forms, and could not claim explanatory success in other areas, would have little to recommend it. But a framework of any merit must also help in understanding film itself. The framework I offer does so. It enables us to answer a number of specifically filmic questions: What are cinematic images? What is the nature of our imaginative involvement with film? What is the truth in the claims of so-called cinema-realism? How is time represented in film, and what are the limits of this representation? What strategies does the viewer use to interpret a film, and how do they relate to the strategies we employ to understand verbal fiction?

For those familiar with contemporary film theory, some of the answers I give will have an air of wilful implausibility. But our judgements of plausibility are determined largely by our framework of background assumptions; implausible theories can be cogent, highly explanatory, even true, and background assumptions hopelessly false. I'll say something about how my assumptions differ from those of film theory as recently practised.

The first assumption I reject is a conjunction: that psychoanalysis, or some version of it, is correct, and that it is capable of illuminating our experience of film. I happen not to believe this, since I believe that psychoanalysis is false, not just in the sense of getting a few things wrong, as relativity theory probably does, but in the sense of being wildly, deeply and unrescuably false, as Aristotle's physics is. And even if I believed psychoanalysis or some version of it to be true, I would be sceptical of recent applications of it to our experience of the cinema. Of course the experience of cinema, like that of anything else, is a matter for psychological investigation, and cannot be understood in a priori philosophical terms. But the psychology we need is not psychoanalysis – particularly not in the version of Lacan, about which I shall say a little in a moment. Contemporary empirical psychologists and philosophers of language and mind have found a way to pool their resources in the project called cognitive science. The aim is to build plausible models of the mind and its functions more detailed and specific than philosophers on their own could

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devise, and more flexible and abstract than neuropsychology alone could deliver. In contrast with the psychoanalytic program, cognitive science combines rigorous and clear argument with a commitment to the most demanding standards of empirical testability we can devise.[2]

Cognitive science is not a doctrine. While its practitioners share broad assumptions, there is no one theory of mind which all or a majority of cognitive scientists accept. The view of the mind which I adopt here as a working hypothesis has certain features I can lay out very briefly: it treats the mind as a hierarchically organized structure with levels of more or less intelligent decision making going on in it; it regards some of the systems of the mind – visual perception, for example – as operating in relative isolation from other systems and consequently unable to benefit from certain information sources; it regards the mind's knowledge of other minds as resulting not (or not only) from the possession and deployment of a theory of mind, but from the ability to make empathetic contact, an ability I shall explain in terms of mental simulation. The components of this view will receive appropriate elaboration as the steps in the argument require.

One particularly damaging consequence of the psychoanalytic paradigm has been the tendency to think of film as an essentially illusory medium, capable of causing the viewer temporarily to think of the film world as real, and of himself as occupying a place of observation within that world. Thus film theorists have expended a great deal of effort in trying to show that the point of view of the camera is usually understood to represent that of a perceiving agent – that of a character, a supposed narrator or the spectator, who is assumed to occupy the camera's position through a process of identification.[3] I shall argue in Part I that

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[2] The contrast I see here between Freudian theory and cognitive science is not accepted by everyone. See, e.g., Clark Glymore, ''Freud's Androids''.

[3] See, e.g., Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, p. 202: ''The gaze which directs our look seems to belong to a fictional character rather than to the camera.'' See also Jacques Aumont, ''The Point of View'', p. 2: ''The frame in narrative cinema is always more or less the representation of a gaze, the auteur's or the character's.''

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films are not standardly illusionistic, and in Part II that it is simply false that the spectator identifies with the camera.

The second assumption of traditional theorizing about film is the semiotic assumption: that there is a fundamental commonality between pictures and language. This is a belief that goes along with the rejection of the hopelessly old-fashioned view that, while words operate by convention, pictures operate by similarity. On the semiotic view, all representation is conventional, and the idea that pictures might in some sense be like the things they picture is part of a benighted ideology of realism. This assumption, unlike the psychoanalytic assumption, has broad support across the intellectual community. A version of it has been argued for by Nelson Goodman, and there are hints of it in the work of the art historian Ernst Gombrich and the perceptual psychologist Richard Gregory, whose views are connected to Karl Popper's idea that perceptions are "hypotheses".[4]

The semiotic assumption has seen hard times, as people have come up against awkward dissimilarities between the structure of language and the structure of visual images.[5] Yet it has shown a remarkable tendency to persist, particularly in film studies. Christian Metz, for example, recognized fairly early on that there is nothing in the cinema corresponding to "a language-system's characteristics and internal organization".[6] But he has continued to apply the categories, or at least the terminology, of linguistic analysis to film; he says, for example, that photographs lack the "syntactic components of discourse so numerous in cinema", and he describes optical effects as "clauses of speech".[7] And while the emphasis in film theory has moved

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[4] Popper is a self-proclaimed realist, but his views on perception seem to me to undermine realism.

[5] Gombrich, for example, has recently distanced himself from the semiotic relativism of Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*. But Gombrich's view that pictures can be genuine likenesses sits uncomfortably with his insistence that pictures are conventional. See his "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation", p. 12.

[6] Christian Metz, "On the Notion of Cinematographic Language".

[7] Christian Metz, "*Trucage* and the Film", pp. 158 and 165. See also Jacques Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, chapter 4.

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away from the straightforwardly linguistic to the psychoana-
lytic, the impetus for this move seems to have come not from a
rejection of the linguistic model, but from the thought that psy-
choanalytic models are themselves language-like. Thus one of
the ideas that seems to put the psychoanalytic thinker Lacan in
favour with the film theorists is his claim that the unconscious
is "structured like a language".

I am of the contrary opinion: that pictures and language are
fundamentally distinct, that there is a sense in which pictures
are able to represent by means of likeness rather than conven-
tion. But it is important not to create a false dichotomy here
between those who think that works in pictorial media are
wholly understandable in terms of perceptual skills universal
across humankind and those who think that pictures require an
act of interpretation which by no means guarantees the same
outcome for everyone.[8] If pictures appeal to basic perceptual
skills which are widely shared across communities and, as I be-
lieve, to some extent across species, there is still a good deal of
interpretive work left to be done once perceptual skills are de-
ployed. I take up issues of interpretation in the final part of this
book, where I argue for some fundamental commonalities be-
tween the interpretation of linguistically encoded works and the
interpretation of film and other pictorial media, despite the ex-
istence of the nature/convention gulf which divides them.

So film theorists have misunderstood the relation between the
symbolic and the pictorial orders, and they have failed to pro-
duce a plausible psychology of the experience of cinema.[9] But
the failures of film theory are more than failures of doctrine.

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[8] As do Norman Bryson et al., in their editorial introduction to *Visual Theory*.
[9] This failure and the ones I discuss later are not exemplified everywhere in
theoretical writing on film, though the better kind of writing tends to be
critical rather than constructive. See, e.g., Brian Henderson, "Two Types of
Film Theory". There is also some spirited resistance to the Lacanian model,
as with Raymond Durgnat: "Film watching is no more phallic, self- (mirror)
centered, or voyeuristic than any other self forgetful activity, like reading or
listening to music" ("Theory of Theory – and Buñuel the Joker", pp. 32–44).
In a review of Metz's *Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Durgnat notes that Metz
"swallows Lacan bones, feathers, fur and all" (p. 60).

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They are also failures of style and of method. The failures of doctrine cannot be fully understood in isolation from these other difficulties.

It is frequently and truly said that writing in film theory has a tendency to be obscure. There is also a great deal of unexplained jargon which is then used in so unsystematic a way that no clear meaning for it can be inferred from its use.[10] This failure of style connects with the failure of doctrine: the lack of clarity of much writing on film functions to protect bad theory from the light of criticism.

The failure of doctrine is even more closely connected with a failure of method. Film theorists have used intellectual strategies that were almost bound to lead to disaster. One of them is the casual employment of vague analogies. Profound connections have been claimed between the cinema and Plato's cave, between the screen and the breast, between the experience of movie watching and dreaming.[11] Here is an example of the film-is-like-something-else phenomenon, with Gilles Deleuze discovering some unlikely parallels between film and mathematical physics:

> Crystalline narration will fracture the complementarity of a lived hodological space and a represented Euclidean space. . . . It is in this sense that we can talk about Riemannian spaces in Bresson, in neo-realism, in the New Wave and in the New York School, of quantum spaces in Robbe-Grillet, of probabilistic spaces in Resnais, of crystallized spaces in Herzog and Tarkovsky.[12]

[10] Others see the issue of clarity differently: Vivian Sobchack speaks of the "sloppy liberal humanism that retrospectively characterized cinema studies before it was informed by the scientific methods and technically precise vocabularies of structuralism and semiotics"; Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. xiv.

[11] See also Anne Friedberg's exploration of the relations between cinema and shopping ("*Les Flâneurs du Mal(l)*: Cinema and the Postmodern Condition", pp. 419–431).

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, p. 129. See also the discussion of a "gravity-free world" in Rick Altman, General introduction to *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, pp. 3–4.

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Out of context of course, and a translation too, but at least a prima facie example of wheels idly turning. Not that we should retreat to a narrow formalism, or insist that nothing useful can be gained by comparing cinema with other things. But we must pick our analogies with care and attend to the details of their justification. We can learn a great deal about cinema, I shall argue, by comparing the interpretation of cinema with that of language and of intentional behaviour. But these comparisons cannot be implemented at the level of vague likenesses that are really nothing more than metaphors. Metaphors are useful for certain purposes; they can also be extremely misleading. That is especially likely when it is forgotten that they are, after all, metaphors, or when the investigator has lost a sense of the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical.

Perhaps the most significant failure of method in film theory has been the habit of appealing uncritically to controversial, and sometimes poorly corroborated, theories from other disciplines. This is evident in the move to connect film with psychoanalysis. It is standard for film theorists to appeal casually to Lacan's idea of the ''mirror stage'' as support for some theory about the relation between film and the viewer, remarking simply that Lacan ''has shown'' that such and such is the case.[13] When someone appeals to a theory as if it were established fact it's natural to suppose that there is a substantial body of evidence in support of the theory in question, and that this evidence is so much a part of our common knowledge that it would be tedious to explain or even to refer to it. But there is no such well-known body of evidence in the case of Lacan's claims about the mirror stage. So far as I have been able to gather, there is no evidence for them at all.[14]

[13] See, e.g., Laura Mulvey: ''Jacques Lacan has described how the moment when a child recognizes its own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego'' (''Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'', p. 807). See also Daniel Dayan, ''The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema'', p. 441; and Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 6.

[14] Jacques Aumont put it mildly: ''The metapsychological model elaborated by Metz, Baudry and others around 1975 is not easily supported by empirical evidence'' (''The Point of View'', p. 19).

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I could go on. But extended polemic is a tedious thing; con-structive theory is much more exciting. I suppose many pre-Copernican astronomers had moments of gloom when they stood back a little from the vast implausible shambles that was Ptolemaic astronomy. They probably found consolation in the idea that it was the only game in town. What is on offer in this book may not be of Copernican proportions, but it is, at least, another game.

Acknowledgements

The pleasures of writing this book have been many, and some of them have to do with people and places. A draft was written in 1991 during a year's sabbatical from the University of Otago. It began at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University in Canberra; I doubt if there is a better environment for philosophical research anywhere. The philosophers there who helped straighten out my early ideas on the subject I thank later. Here I thank Professor Tom Campbell, for the use of his delightful house and exciting car. The writing continued in Washington, D.C., and at the nearby College Park campus of the University of Maryland, where teaching the philosophy of film and talking to the excellent and friendly philosophers helped to give the idea of this book a workable shape. A first draft was completed in Cambridge, where the staff and fellows of Clare Hall made us welcome. My special thanks go to the president, Anthony Low, and to the bursar, John Garrod.

Through that year and on subsequent occasions I gave talks, based on draft chapters of the book, at institutions as far apart as Tromsø and Sydney, San Diego and Sussex. A great many people made important contributions to the discussions that followed, and I have tried to incorporate their suggestions and to shore up my position against their criticisms in this book. Among those whose contributions I recall are John Bigelow, Andrew Brennan, Neil Cooper, George Couvalis, Martin Davies, John Haldane, Jane Heal, David Hills, Robert Hopkins, Ian

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Acknowledgements

Film, 1895–1995

Film is an art of recent invention. In fact it is just one hundred years old. We know more about its early history than about that of any other medium: the technical inventions and discoveries involved, the intentions of the early pioneers, the reactions of audiences, the transitions of style and genre, the social forces which affected film and the impact of film on society. Film's development is laid out before us with a completeness that historians and theorists of other cultural phenomena must envy. Yet I believe that the nature of film is less well understood than that of any other art. If my arguments are correct, current theory is based on a serious misunderstanding of the film medium and its effects on the viewer.

The roots of that misunderstanding go back to early writers like Münsterberg, who thought that cinema was preeminently a medium of subjectivity. That error is as strongly entrenched in film theory today as at any other time. It might have been otherwise; the work of Bazin contained within it the seeds of a better view. But Bazin's "realism" was overstated, and the reaction against it was inevitable.

There is too much in Bazin that is confused or simply wrong for his work to constitute the basis of a theoretical renewal. The intellectual roots of the present work would be as foreign to Bazin as they are to most contemporary film theorists. It owes much, in spirit at least, to the linguistics of Chomsky, and nothing to Saussure; much to contemporary philosophy of mind and

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cognitive science, and very little to Freud and his followers. But the strongest influence on this work is that almost obsessional concern with realism so distinctive of the best in Australian philosophy.

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