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Theorizing the Moving Image brings together a selection of essays written by one of the leading theorists of film over the last two decades. In this volume, Noël Carroll examines theoretical aspects of film and television through penetrating analyses of such genres as soap opera, documentary, and comedy, and such topics as sight gags, film metaphor, point-of-view editing, and movie music. Throughout, individual films are considered in depth. Carroll's essays, moreover, represent the cognitivist turn in film studies, containing in-depth criticism of existing approaches to film theory, and heralding a new approach to film theory.

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NOËL CARROLL
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Dedicated to My Brothers
Hugh Felix Carroll III
and
Patrick Joseph Carroll



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FOREWORD

by David Bordwell

“Classical” film theory, usually taken as spanning the fifty years or so before the rise of semiology in the mid-1960s, was often concerned to define film as an art. Theorists such as André Bazin, Rudolf Arnheim, and the Soviet Montage directors sought to isolate distinctively cinematic principles of representation and expression. These were investigated with an eye to the artistic qualities of films and the aesthetic experience of audiences.

Yet in recent years, the film-as-art approach has seemed to many a dead end. Semiologists often saw no reason to distinguish between aesthetic and nonaesthetic sign systems; psychoanalytically-inclined theorists treated the art/non-art distinction as irrelevant to the study of cinema’s relation to the unconscious, and theorists pursuing ideological critique often charged that the very concept of aesthetics was a heritage of “bourgeois idealism.”

Today much of this reaction looks shortsighted. Many objectors understood aesthetics as a batch of ahistorical speculations on art and beauty, and this notion, quaint even then, can no longer be seriously sustained. It has become clear that aesthetics, conceived as an open-ended inquiry into the problems surrounding the arts and art criticism, has much to teach film studies – not least in serving as a model for what energetic, enlightening theorizing might look like.

Over some twenty years, Noël Carroll’s

work has displayed many of the benefits which the aesthetic mode of inquiry offers to scholars in the humanities. What we have in this first collection of his essays is a positive, wholly up-to-date effort to make progress in some problems around cinema.

This progress is marked, initially, by a position of skepticism. Contemporary film scholars often want to believe in some theory or another, with the consequence that they accept many theoretical claims uncritically. Carroll starts with the assumption that any theory, from the most intuitively obvious to the most flagrantly uncommonsensical, should be able to summon rational arguments on its behalf. Most famously, Carroll’s skepticism has led to the scrutiny of 1970s and 1980s film theory carried out in *Mystifying Movies* (1988). Here, through painstakingly close reading and analysis, Carroll shows that much of contemporary film theory rides on equivocation, overgeneralization, misplaced analogies, and sheer appeal to authority. If the influence of this strand of contemporary theory is waning now, Carroll’s book is one major cause.

Carroll’s skepticism toward current developments is not a conservative reflex. He displays no nostalgia for the good old days. *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988) scrutinizes three major traditional thinkers (Arnheim, Bazin, and V. F. Perkins), and it finds each position problematic. “We must start again”: The last line of *Mystifying Movies* is no less appropriate as Carroll’s verdict on these classical theories.

For this reason, perhaps the strongest initial impression left by Carroll’s first two books is his skeptical rejection of major positions. But his third book, *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), examined a cluster of problems around the structure, effect, and social functions of “art-horror” fictions. Here the critique of alternative theories throws into relief his own solution to the problem of the design and appeal of such

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tales. In the course of his investigations of the horror genre, he also confronts and makes progress on such general matters as suspense and character identification.

The collection you now hold is similarly balanced between criticism and theory-building. Although some pieces undertake demolition jobs, most are devoted to constructive theorizing. And the breadth of inquiry is striking. Carroll takes on several issues that crop up in the traditional literature – medium specificity, visual metaphor, the realism of documentary. But he also addresses issues which post-1980s film theory put on the agenda. He asks how films function ideologically, whether an avant-garde film can proffer a theory, how film theorists can engage with feminism, how a political theory of cinema might become viable.

As we might expect, Carroll sets forth some fairly unorthodox views. He argues that ideology, rather than involving depth-psychological processes such as “subject-positioning” and “identification,” is better considered in the light of the folk wisdom of maxims and the practical reasoning mobilized by informal rhetoric. He proposes that the “images-of-women” research tradition rejected by some feminists is in many ways more tenable than the view that patriarchal power is exercised through the look. He suggests that a promising model for politics-based theorizing can be found in Hans Richter’s work. He argues for the view that documentary films can, in significant respects, be objective and yield knowledge.

Many of these arguments will be attractive to readers beyond the narrow precincts of media studies. Yet insiders who may instinctively resist Carroll’s claims must reckon with the fact that he cannot be caricatured as the hidebound advocate of theory as it once was. He argues, for instance, that there is no “nature” or ontological essence of an art medium – that indeed the very existence of art media is radically contingent. Instead of essentialism,

Carroll advocates sensitivity to historical context. But his conception of history harbors no “grand narratives.” There are only norms, styles, and practices, each with a fine-grained causal history. And this historical sensitivity is required for all theorizing: any film theory, classic or modern, which ignores the history of the medium is likely to blind itself to counterexamples and plausible alternatives. Moreover, history is conceived not as “the facts” or sheer data. Carroll insists on the theory-governed quality of research programs.

This project, then, squarely faces the challenges flung down by contemporary theorists. If it often displays skepticism toward those theorists’ conclusions, it does so on the basis of a sophisticated conception of research and theoretical disputation. “Empiricism,” “positivism,” “scientism,” and other labels freely plastered up nowadays will not stick to Carroll’s account. (They are all due for discard anyhow.) If you doubt this, turn immediately to the essay “Cognitivism, Contemporary Film Theory and Method,” wherein Carroll spells out a subtle version of “fallibilism,” the belief in approximate, comparatively reliable knowledge as a realistic goal of scholarly inquiry. If *Theorizing the Moving Image* does nothing else, I hope it makes it impossible for film theorists to claim that a position proposing such a goal is inevitably vitiated by a faith in “certainty,” “absolute truth,” or “disinterested knowledge.”

Carroll’s conclusions, whether or not they chime with the dominant opinion of the moment, arise from a very different process of reasoning than is common in the humanities today. Much of contemporary theory in literature, art, and film consists of assembling received doctrines of vast generality, recasting them to fit one’s interests, yoking them to other (often incommensurate) doctrines, and then applying the result to a task at hand (typically, interpreting a particular art work). If the theorist undertakes analysis

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of a theory, the process usually focuses on rhetorical argument rather than logical inference. The reasoning routines of contemporary film theory warrant a separate study, but it seems fair to say that few writers engage in an activity of advancing, *for criticism and rebuttal*, reasonably well-justified conceptual analyses and inferences. There is something called Theory, to be quoted or mimicked, but not much theorizing.

Carroll does theory differently. He identifies a problem area – say, medium specificity, or analogies between film and mind, or sight gags. Instead of immediately dragging onstage a big theory on loan from elsewhere (Derrida on Kant, Freud on jokes), Carroll tries to focus on a medium-level question, such as what features of mainstream movies might lend themselves to cross-cultural comprehension.

This inquiry is not staged in a vacuum. Few theorists in any academic specialty command as wide a range of knowledge as does Carroll. He mobilizes the literature of the visual arts, theater, dance, music, and the philosophy of mind and history in order to canvass theoretical answers to the target question. He thereby surveys a wider range of opinions than one normally finds in a film essay. And there is usually a surprise. (Who else found Löker on suspense?)

Out of this survey there crystallize some alternative positions. Carroll holds the view, common enough in domains of philosophy I believe, that if knowledge is approximate and only relatively reliable, our best theories will be those which emerge as most plausible from a competitive field. Put another way, there is no perfect theory; there is only a theory which is, right now, to be reasonably preferred to its rivals.

In order to compare theories, they may need some sympathetic clarification or restructuring. It is not noted frequently enough that, before the talk turns critical, Carroll is at pains to provide quite plausible versions of some of the positions he eventually rejects. Some contemporary theorists

might even owe him thanks for making their positions more intelligible and appealing than they have managed to do.

Now comes the analysis. How informative, consistent, and cogent are the concepts informing the view under discussion? How wide is the evidence base? (Carroll makes diabolical use of counterexamples.) What distinctions need making, for example, in the concepts of “point of view” or “objectivity?” What is presupposed or implied by the theory, and is that presupposition absurd? The ideas must be *worked through*, and there are no shortcuts or free rides. This is not Theory but theorizing, and in Carroll’s hands it is exhilarating.

Part of the pleasure is that the activity stands open to all. Carroll refreshingly avoids the appeal to authority, the tactic of “My source can lick your argument,” the belief that quoting Bakhtin somehow counts as a criticism of Chomsky. (Recall the old complaint: when confronted with an objection, a Structuralist would answer with a bibliography.) Appeal to authority intimidates the interlocutor (maybe I haven’t read your source) and encourages either uncritical acceptance or unreasoning rejection. Carroll operates on a level playing field; anyone with an argument can get into the game, but then skill will be required to keep up.

Having examined the competitors, Carroll lays out their difficulties. (If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have undertaken the task of theorizing in the first place.) He then proposes a more plausible alternative. Whatever its virtues, it will at least seek to avoid the faults already diagnosed. More often, it will have a few extra values – clarity, cogency, coverage. But faithful to his fallibilism, Carroll will acknowledge the partial, approximative nature of his results. What matters is that some progress has been made, not that some new dogma has been established. Open-ended and corrigible, theories can only be provisional pause-points, moments in the activity of doing theory.

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Significantly, the result will not have to mesh with all our other beliefs about things cinematic. Carroll's account of ampliation in editing will not be drafted to reinforce his attack on medium specificity. A theory of "verbal images" will not necessarily shore up a conception of why psychoanalytic conceptions of "the look" are weak justifications for ideological critique. One of Carroll's theories might be better justified than another; they come in separate packages. Thus no one theory stands or falls by the fate of its mates.

The result is rather unexpected. If your theory consists largely of applications of one Big Theory (or an amalgam of several), then every question you pick out will have similar answers. If you have only a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. But if your theoretical work is driven by intriguing questions and nagging problems, there is no guarantee that all your conclusions will hook up into something called a theory of film. Carroll welcomes the upshot: unlike his predecessors, both classical and contemporary, he does not offer us a system.

This "piecemeal" theorizing has startling implications. What could be more unnerving, even to the most self-consciously radical media theorist of today, than the cheerful acknowledgment that if there is no Big Theory of Everything, there is no Big Theory of Everything about Motion Pictures? But it is a natural consequence of treating film aesthetics as a mode of philosophical inquiry and debate. And the reward is that, in cultivating unorthodox views and pursuing a rigorous method of reasoning, Carroll simply risks being original.

All this is set forth in a direct, often amusing prose. The style cultivated by many contemporary theorists offers evidence for Nietzsche's remark that readers often consider something deep just because they cannot see to the bottom. Carroll's style, by contrast, lives by one precept: Let each sentence be impossible to misunderstand. Not the smallest pleasure of this book is its effort to be the most lucid, unshowoffish piece of academic film writing of recent years.



This book is a collection of my essays – mostly old, but some new. They are all concerned with theorizing moving images. The term “theorizing moving images” is perhaps obscure and warrants some immediate comment. It is not just a fancy way of saying film theory. I prefer the idiom of *moving images* rather than *film* because I predict that what we call film and, for that matter, film history will, in generations to come, be seen as part of a larger continuous history that will not be restricted to things made only in the so-called medium of film but, as well, will apply to things made in the media of video, TV, computer-generated imagery, and we know not what. It will be a history of motion pictures or moving pictures, as we now say in ordinary language, or, as I recommend we call it, a history of “moving images,” of which the age of film, strictly speaking, is likely to be only a phase.

Moreover, I prefer “moving images” to “moving pictures,” since *pictures* imply recognizable representations, whereas by “images” I mean to signal that much of the art that concerns us has been and will be nonrepresentational and abstract. Many of the essays in this book were written in terms of film. But, in retrospect, it seems to me that none of the theories I advance in this book need be taken to be film-specific; they all pertain to the aesthetics of moving images. For although the artform was born in film and although when I started writing about it I thought I was merely a film theorist, I now believe that it is more

accurate for us to be thinking in terms of the broader concept of moving images.

In naming my domain of inquiry, not only have I substituted “moving images” for “film,” but I have replaced “theory” with “theorizing.” By doing this, I intend to lay emphasis on theorizing as an activity – an ongoing process rather than a product. Many of the essays in this volume bear titles like “Toward a Theory of This or That,” or “Notes on Such and Such,” or “An Outline of. . . .” These titles are meant to acknowledge the provisional nature of my hypotheses. I present them to other theorists for criticism and for comment; I admit that they can sustain refinement and expansion, perhaps by theorists other than myself. And, of course, some of my hypotheses will probably have to be abandoned once they are subjected to rigorous scrutiny. I regard these articles as contributions to a continuing dialogue, not the last word on the subject.

To say “a theory of film” or “the theory of film” has a ring of finality about it. It makes it sound as though our research is finished and the topic closed. But I would not want to leave the impression that I think that film theory has been completed between the covers of this book. Indeed, I think it’s hardly begun.

Another problem that I have with calling what I’ve been doing “a theory of film” is that it suggests a singular, unified enterprise. But I do not believe that there is *a* theory of film, or *the* theory of film. Rather, there are film theories, or, as I say, “theories of the moving image.” There are theories of film narration and of metaphor, of editing and acting. I, at least, do not proceed on the presumption that these will all add up to one theory, organized by a single set of principles or laws. Rather, my own work has been piecemeal, theorizing one mechanism of cinematic articulation or confronting one problem at a time.¹

Thus, this volume is a collection of theories, not a theory of film, nor even a theory of the moving image. Many of the

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theories are involved in isolating and explaining specific devices or structures or mechanisms of cinematic signification including erotetic narration, variable framing, modifying music, sight gags, point-of-view editing, suspense, weak and strong ampliation, verbal images, film metaphors, and so on. Some of these small-scale or piecemeal theories can be connected into larger constellations, such as my conception of the power of movies, but others are autonomous. For example, neither my account of sight gags nor my account of film metaphor is connected to a larger theoretical framework that pertains uniquely to cinema.

Moreover, the activity of theorizing herein is not simply restricted to explaining cinematic devices. I also address some long-standing theoretical questions that arise out of film practice, such as whether nonfiction films can be objective, and whether avant-garde films are theoretical. Conjectures are also offered on the way in which to talk about the ontology of film, about the film medium, and about cinematic representation. In short, there are a lot of different things discussed in this book, and they don't add up to a single, unified theory of film, or of anything else, for that matter.

This, I believe, is as it should be. Sociology is not reducible to a single unified theory. It is comprised of many different theories of different levels of generality – theories of the homeless in America, of the caste system in India, of modernization in developing countries, of socialization, and so on. My conception of film theory is similar. It is not a matter of producing a grand theory that will answer every question in our area of study by reference to a foundational set of laws or principles. Rather, it is the activity of answering a gamut of general questions about the practice of making and receiving moving images. And since these questions can be raised at different levels of generality – how do films make metaphors? what is a documentary? – we should expect to find a range of different

kinds of answers, many of which may not segue into one neat story of the sort previously called a theory of film.

For me, film theorizing involves posing general questions – such as how does point-of-view editing work? – and then attempting to answer them. I have called this piecemeal theorizing, and this book is a collection of the piecemeal theorizing I've done for nearly twenty years. It is my opinion that this approach to theory is rather different than the kind of work done by the classical film theorists, like Arnheim, Kracauer, and Bazin, on the one hand, and by contemporary film theorists, like Heath and Silverman, on the other hand. Both classical film theory and contemporary film theory strike me as grand theory, the attempt to ground a comprehensive perspective of film on certain foundational principles, whether those concern the ontology of the cinematic image or subject positioning.

Classical film theory, of course, focused more on the analysis of the so-called film medium, whereas contemporary film theory has been preoccupied with questions of ideology. And yet both approach the subject as a unified field. Both try to isolate either an essence or a function of film. And having isolated that essence or function to their own satisfaction, these theorists go on to refer every question of cinema back to it. My own suspicion has been that film cannot be reduced to a single essence or function, and, correspondingly, I do not presume that our theories will result in a tidy package. Rather than an essence or a function of film, what we have are a lot of questions about film. Answering them will not yield a single theory, but a collection of piecemeal theories. I hope that this book will provide a fruitful approximation of some of them.

I also would like to add that I think that the piecemeal approach to theorizing is, in many ways, liberating. It is a very intimidating prospect to imagine that what a film theorist must do is to erect a totalizing theory that has something informative to say

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about every aspect of cinematic practice. It is far more practicable to proceed by posing well-defined questions about cinema. More people are likely to engage in original theorizing when the sights are lowered. More progress is likely to ensue if prospective theorists work on solving precise problems that can be answered manageably. Of course, I do not recommend piecemeal theorizing for its heuristic value; I think that the likelihood of a grand theory of film is slim. But one mustn't overlook the fact that a piecemeal approach makes theorizing more accessible at the same time that it brings theory down to earth.

Many of the theories in this volume are apt to be rebuked as formalist, insofar as they concentrate on the communicative operation of certain devices – like variable framing – without commenting on their political or ideological significance. The reason for this is that I do not believe that such cinematic devices are inherently ideological. This, of course, is an issue that sets me apart from most contemporary film theorists. However, it is important to stress that in spite of the fact that some of my analyses are what they call formalist, my overall position is not formalist, since, given my piecemeal disposition, along with the fact that I agree that some films are ideological (sexist and racist), I think that we can ask about the ways in which film and TV disseminate ideology and sexism. Indeed, these are theoretical questions that I attempt to answer in some of the essays in this volume. Thus, there is no reason to suppose that an approach to film theory like mine is antithetical to the sort of ideological research that preeminently interests film scholars in the United States and Britain today.

I do not think that all of our questions about film are political, nor do I think that all of our questions are reducible to gender. But I agree that some are of this sort, and I have even tried to begin to answer some of them. Thus, I am not a formalist; I do not think that questions of politics and gender

are irrelevant to film studies. At the same time, I do think that certain questions about the workings of moving images do not entail questions of politics. But that cannot be misconstrued as formalism, since I also believe that the ideological operation of cinema raises legitimate questions for theory.

This volume is divided into seven parts. Part I deals with questions about the nature of the film medium and the nature of cinematic representation. Much of this section is critical. It is directed against the notion that film can be analyzed in terms of its possession of a unique, determinate medium that has directive implications about what artists should and should not do. Indeed, the arguments in this section travel farther afield than film and mount a general attack of the doctrine of medium specificity across the arts. Throughout, I try to encourage a general skepticism about the theoretical usefulness of the ideas of *the medium* for aesthetic theorizing in general and for film theorizing in particular.

In this section, I also consider the case for photographic realism, the view that there is something ontologically unique about photographic and cinematic images, and I reject it. However, Part I is not completely negative. It concludes by attempting to construct an account of the moving image, although the ontological framework that I propose is neither medium-specific nor essentialist.

In a manner of speaking, Part I represents my brief against the notion of film theory that dominates the classical tradition. That tradition attempted to organize its accounts of film around foundational conceptions of the essence of cinema, typically thought of in terms of the putative medium of film. That is, a conception of the medium/essence of film that provided theorists like Kuleshov and Bazin with the keystone that held their unified theories together. But I have eschewed an essence, a medium, and a keystone, and, with them, the promise of a unified theory. Instead, I proceed by answer-

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ing questions, loosely organized under headings that pretend to neither exhaustiveness nor exclusiveness.

That is, for organizational purposes, I begin by accepting the traditional, rough-and-ready distinction of film into different modes: the movies, avant-garde film, and the documentary. Part II is a group of essays concerned with movies, under which rubric I include not only mainstream fiction film, but also commercial, narrative TV fiction. In this section, I offer theories of movie suspense, point-of-view editing, movie music and sight gags. Each of these is a piecemeal theory. At the same time, in Part II, I also offer an overarching theory about what makes certain devices appropriate to the movies, given the intention of movie makers to command mass audiences. This provides one way in which to organize our thinking about movies. But I don't think that all our theoretical questions about movies can be assimilated into this framework. For instance, my discussion of sight gags in this section isn't subsumed under the larger questions that I deal with under the label of "the power of movies."

Despite the fact that much of the discussion in Part II revolves around film, I mean it to apply to mass market TV as well. And the essay on soap operas, of course, deals directly with TV. I also suspect that many of the devices that I discuss in this section will also figure in CD-ROM and other computer-imaging technologies, where their operation will be accountable pretty much in the ways that I've suggested they already work in film and TV.

Part III concentrates on avant-garde film and the documentary. This is a traditional way of carving up the field and I've followed it. Nevertheless, I admit that this may not be the best way of proceeding. Avant-gardists and documentarists often complain about being segregated in this way. But I, at least, have no ax to grind here. This grouping is purely a matter of tactical convenience; it is

not my point to marginalize or ghettoize these modes in any way.

This section comprises a mixed bag of concerns. On the one hand, it addresses certain perennial questions raised by these modes, namely, can nonfiction films be objective, and are avant-garde films really theoretical? My answer to the first question is *yes* and to the second question, it is *no*. I suspect that neither of these answers corresponds to received wisdom. Perhaps they will serve to reopen the debate.

The rest of Part III is involved in isolating and analyzing several mechanisms of figuration in motion pictures, including what I call ampliation, the verbal image and film metaphor. I have included them in the section on the avant-garde because figuration is often associated with the avant-garde and because many of my examples of these cinematic figures come from avant-garde films. But, of course, this grouping is a bit arbitrary, since the devices in question can also appear in movies and in documentaries as well. And, of course, many of the narrating strategies that I've discussed in the section on movies can also appear in avant-garde and documentary films. So, as I've already indicated, the division between Part II and Part III is a matter of convention, not theory.

During my career, I have gained a reputation as a dogged critic of contemporary film theorists. But now let me say one (brief) kind word about them. Even though I think their theories have been consistently misguided, many of the topics that they have put on the table for discussion are good ones. Many of my own theories about the movies, for example, were developed in response to questions that they raised for which I sought better answers. In no other section of this book than in Part IV am I more indebted to contemporary film theorists, since without their persistent concern with ideology and gender I might not have appreciated the urgency that led me to initiate my own theories about these issues. In Part IV, as

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always, I am very critical of contemporary film theory, but even I must acknowledge the contribution involved in placing these items on the agenda. I should also add that the essays in Part IV are somewhat programmatic, sketching research which I intend to amplify in future writing.

Part V is devoted to essays on the history of film theory. It comprises essays on Hugo Munsterberg, Hans Richter and Hollis Frampton. Perhaps because of my background in philosophy, I have always tended to read theorists from the past as part of a continuing dialogue. Thus, in the essays on Munsterberg and Richter I have tried to locate issues in their theories that are relevant for contemporary discussions. And, I have addressed their theories critically, as I might address a living theorist. The essay on the late Hollis Frampton is a different matter, since, as a practicing artist, his theorizing was not so much devoted to developing a theory of film in general as it was to theorizing his own film practice. Thus, my article on him is concerned with exposition rather than criticism; it is an attempt to reconstruct interpretively his theory from the inside, given what I take to have been his philosophical presuppositions.

Part VI includes several polemical exchanges with contemporary film theorists, or at least my half of them. Some of the articles are responses to criticisms of my previous objections to contemporary film theory. The article entitled "Cognitivism, Contemporary Film Theory and Method" tries to debunk some of the leading aspersions cast in my direction. It also sets out what I think is a decisive framework for conducting the debate between psychoanalytic film theory and cognitivism – a theoretical stance with which I am often associated, due to my tendency to defend cognitive explanations (explanations that do not advert to the Freudian unconscious) over psychoanalytic ones (especially with regard to film comprehension). However, Part IV

does not only restage old battles; I also try to provoke a new one by criticizing Kaja Silverman's theory of the acoustic mirror.

As a coda, in Part VII, I have included some of my earliest attempts at film theory. Since I am no longer satisfied with them, my first thought was to exclude them from this volume. But at the urgings of anonymous readers, I have incorporated them, since they are still quoted in the literature and since the publications where they originally appeared are hard to come by. I hope that the reader will be able to discern the progress I've made since these early writings. If not, I'm in trouble.

Preparing these essays for republication has been an exercise in autobiography for me. Most of that is of no importance for the reader. However, there is one aspect of my public biography that may merit comment. I began my academic career in film studies in the seventies, but in the eighties I moved into philosophy. And probably, my allegiance to philosophy, especially what is called analytic philosophy, is evident in these pages. However, one would be mistaken if one regarded this text as primarily philosophical. For in spite of the fact that some of the essays are philosophical and even though there are philosophical arguments throughout, the bulk of the text is film theory, not philosophy, where by film theorizing (or theorizing the moving image) I have in mind the activity of proposing substantive hypotheses of a general empirical nature about motion pictures (and images). I do not wish to draw a hard-and-fast line between philosophy and theory; philosophy has a role to play in theory as I conceive it. But at the same time, it should be clear that this volume is not, first and foremost, a series of exercises in conceptual analysis – however much conceptual analysis it contains – but is rather preoccupied most often with developing broad empirical conjectures (substantive theories) about moving pictures (and images).²

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As well as being identified as a philosopher, I am also often identified as a cognitivist. It is a label that has several senses. As I understand its application to me, the label does not characterize a specific theory. It does not mark my commitment to a determinate body of ideas. It does not mean that I am what is called a cognitive scientist. It does not signal that I am a connectionist. What it indicates is my fixed opinion that many of our questions about film – especially concerning comprehension and reception – can be answered without resorting to psychoanalysis. This is, I believe, the major bone of contention between me and most current practitioners of film theory in the United States and Britain today.

My opposition to psychoanalytic film theory rests on my understanding of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, it seems to me, is a practice that concerns the breakdown of rationality or of ordinary cognitive processing. Thus, psychoanalysis is only appropriate when there is a discernible breakdown in rationality (that is not attributable to somatic malfunction). The domain of psychoanalysis is the irrational. Therefore, if we are able to explain some behavior or some mental phenomena in terms of rational psychology (or somatic malfunction), then there is no pressure to search for psychoanalytic explanations; there is no conceptual space for psychoanalysis to inhabit. It is my diagnosis that a great many (I suspect most) of the questions that film theorists have about film comprehension and reception can be answered in terms of rational or cognitive (and perceptual) psychological hypotheses, or, at least, many of the questions raised by contemporary film theory can be so answered. Thus, in my view, psychoanalysis has been as inappropriate in recent film theory as it has been popular. Indeed, one can read an implicit argument running throughout this book. For every time I launch a theory based on a psychological conjecture in virtue of some rational or cognitive processes, I am in effect arguing

for the redundancy of psychoanalysis in the domain in question.

Another point of tension between many contemporary film theorists and me has to do with style. One of the reasons that I left film study for philosophy was my frustration with what I experienced as the predominance of obscurantism in contemporary film theory. Theories were written in a style that was so impossible to understand that it made it difficult to evaluate the claims theorists were advancing. Thus, in my own writing, I have attempted (not always successfully) to be as clear as possible and to outline what I take to be the context of the discussion. I do not think that clarity proves my points. Rather, I think that by being clear, I can make it easier for others to find my errors. For my own conception of theorizing is that it involves a constant process of dialectical criticism and exchange in which the elimination of error is one important, if unspectacular, source of progress.

These essays span nearly two decades. Thus, there are some minor inconsistencies in them, since my views have changed (I hope they've matured) on some issues over time. In some cases, I speak of the medium or of resemblance in ways that diverge from my present views. I also sometimes refer to unconscious processes in the nontechnical, nonpsychoanalytic sense – something I would not do today. However, I have left these minor inconsistencies in the text. Where the reader finds them, she may take my considered view to be generally the one found in the later articles.

I think that, to a large extent, I have been regarded most frequently as a critic of theories, rather than as a constructive theorist. The reason for this is twofold. Some of my best-known articles have been critical; and many of my constructive theoretical pieces have been scattered in small-circulation journals or in journals outside the precincts of cinema studies. Thus, I welcome this opportunity to collect my theorizing in one place. For it provides an

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occasion to show that my inveterate naysaying to contemporary film theory does not spring from mean-spiritedness, but from my conviction, based on the research in this volume, that there are better ways of doing theory. With that research assembled in one place, others may now judge for themselves whether my cause has been justified.

Notes

1. Because, as will become evident shortly, I eschew the use of the term “cinematic” in an essentialist or medium-specific manner, I should be specific about what I mean when I use locutions like “mechanisms of cinematic articulation” or “cinematic devices” or “film structures.” For me, a cinematic device or mechanism or structure or strategy is simply a device or mechanism or structure or strategy that is used in film. Adjectival modifiers like “cinematic” or “film” carry no implication that the devices, structures, mechanisms, strategies, and so on are unique to film, essential to film, specific to film, peculiar to film, etc. A cinematic device is merely one that we recognize to be in use in film practice. Phrases like “cinematic devices” or “cinematic mechanisms” imply none of the theoretical baggage that go with theories of the peculiarly or uniquely cinematic nature of the film medium. My use of the term “cinematic” in such cases is simply historical. It picks out devices commonly associated with film while acknowledging that similar or parallel devices may also play a legitimate or central role in artforms other than film.
2. By asserting that this volume is primarily theoretical and not philosophical, I mean to be drawing a contrast between it and something like Gregory Currie’s immensely interesting and important book *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).