

Do We Need Film Theory?

Introduction

As a lover of film, you might think you know enough about movies without needing to analyze basic concepts that are implicit in your experience of film. Yet if you were to see a film that violated all your expectations of what film is, you would need to think about the basic question, “What makes this a film?” Take, for example, *Weekend*, French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard’s film about middle-class life *circa* 1968. The plot of this film is hard to follow, the editing is unconventional, the music often disrupts your concentration of what you see on screen, and the film includes a ten-minute scene – which seems to last for an eternity – that depicts an immense traffic jam as Parisians flee from the city for a weekend holiday. After seeing *Weekend*, you might well need to figure out just what makes this a film. Film theory – the study of the basic concepts that are inherent in the experience and making of film – would help you address your puzzle.

Film critic Roger Ebert has been quoted as saying, “Film theory has nothing to do with film.”¹ Ebert’s comment was directed against what he sees as a pernicious tendency in contemporary film theoretic circles to use “occult and arcane” language that is hard to follow and seems to have nothing to do with the experience of film. This criticism raises the questions of what exactly film theory is, how it is related to our experience of film, and what is to be gained by doing it.

The three chapters in this Part – two by philosophers and one by a film studies scholar – address these issues. The first two essays – by Noël Carroll and Malcolm Turvey – debate the nature of film theory and its resemblance to scientific models of theorizing about the natural world. Chapter 3, by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, examines more specifically the relationship between the cinema and philosophy and why this pairing of disciplines makes for a fruitful partnership.

Philosopher of film Noël Carroll targets for critical discussion what he sees as a pernicious trend in the discipline of film theory over the last 20 years or more. This is a certain way of approaching theorizing about film, which he calls film Theory, with a

capital “T.” When practitioners engage in film Theory, they think of creating a grand, unified set of answers to “just about every legitimate question you might have about film.” The application of Freudian psychoanalysis to the cinema – a prominent strand in contemporary film studies – is one such grand Theory, according to Carroll. Here, psychoanalytic film theorists seek to use psychoanalysis to explain a wide variety of issues relating to film, including the pleasure that viewers take in *all* genres of film, in terms of pre-existing psychological patterns at work in an idealized spectator.

Carroll argues that the methodology adopted by grand theorists inhibits productive theorizing about film. For one thing, there is no reason to think that the questions film scholars pose should be answerable in terms of a monolithic theory, such as psychoanalysis. Instead this question might be more fruitfully approached through a variety of disciplinary frameworks, including economics, anthropology, and narrative theory. For another, the questions that grand Theory investigates are posed at a very general level of abstraction. Yet inquiry into film, like other areas of knowledge, takes place at a certain historical time and place, and so must pose questions that are context-specific and historically sensitive. Carroll concedes that it is possible to work up to asking larger-scale questions as film theorizing proceeds, but before reaching that point we must first constrain ourselves to asking and answering “middle-range” questions related to film.

Carroll appeals to what he calls a “post-positivist” model of scientific theorizing to explain how film theory should proceed. Film theory is most likely to advance to the truth when it engages in dialectical competition with other theories addressing the same question, and appeals to sound standards of evidence and reasoning. Carroll concludes his essay by showing how this approach to film theory can help us decide between the answers presented by psychoanalytic film theory versus those offered by cognitivism, a theoretical orientation in film studies pioneered by Carroll and David Bordwell that seeks to describe the actual cognitive processes viewers undergo as they watch movies.

In chapter 2, Malcolm Turvey, a professor of film studies, takes issue with Carroll’s suggestion that doing film theory can be analogized to models of scientific theorizing. Turvey argues that film studies, as a discipline in the humanities, has a subject matter that is distinct from the phenomena examined in the natural sciences. He develops this idea to call into question the idea that theory-building in the physical sciences gives an appropriate model for *all* the kinds of questions that film theorists tackle.

Scientific theorizing aims to discover natural laws of which we have no prior knowledge, Turvey says. Typically, scientific laws are formulated through a process of induction – generalizing from observed instances – or deductively, through proposing universal hypotheses and deducing observable consequences that will either confirm or disconfirm the postulated laws. As such, the laws of natural science are falsifiable claims about physical phenomena we can discern through our senses. But Turvey argues that film theorists seldom test their theoretical claims, such as “Cinema is montage,” against any empirical “data.” This is surprising if film theorists seek answers that are like the laws governing natural phenomena.

Turvey argues that the fundamental task of film theory is not theory building according to the natural sciences; rather, it is about clarifying the practices and concepts that

human beings already engage in and know. Most of us already know how to recognize a film in the genre of comedy, for example, yet we do not have available a general account of what comedy is, or even what is a sight gag. Or we are familiar with the distinction between fiction and non-fiction films, but we could not give a clear explanation of why any given film falls into one or other of these genres.

When we experience film, we grasp and apply *norms* that are internal to the practice of cinema – e.g. the distinction between fiction and non-fiction films. These norms fundamentally constitute our filmic practices, in much the way that the linguistic practice of speaking and writing English is constituted or governed by the norms or rules of English grammar. The task of film theory is not therefore, in general, to discover laws that hold about phenomena that exist independently of human knowledge of them: it is to clarify the concepts and norms we already grasp in our practice of film viewing and making. Turvey concludes that this consideration shows that, generally speaking, the scientific model of theorizing is inapplicable for understanding film theory.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze adopts an entirely different approach to the issue of the relationship between film and theory or, more specifically, film and philosophy. He rejects the idea that the role of philosophy in relation to cinema is to interpret or clarify the concepts implicit in our experience or making of movies. Further, philosophy does not, and should not, “reflect” on the philosophical themes implicit in cinema. The creator of cinema does not need the help of philosophers in order to understand the deeper significance of film. Deleuze says that filmmakers are themselves perfectly capable of reflecting on the meaning and significance of their films, including their philosophical significance.

What then is there left for the philosopher to do? Deleuze argues that the essence of philosophy as a practice is the creation of concepts. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, for example, introduces the concepts of “Forms” – ideal, abstract objects that serve as the reference of predicate expressions (“is beautiful,” “is just”) and are set over against the changing world of sensible things. Plato thought that our words could be understood only with the help of a suitable paradigm. The paradigm for our words “justice” and “beauty” cannot be found in the physical world, the world known by the senses. So we must supply the missing paradigm and posit the existence of ideal Forms that we have encountered in a previous lifetime as disembodied souls. Plato’s development of the concept of Forms is an example of what Deleuze takes the mission of philosophy to be: to create new concepts that help open up new possibilities for thinking about the world and our place in it. But what then is the role of the philosopher of film? It is, according to Deleuze, to explain how film itself gives rise to perceptual experiences that can alter our modes of thinking about movement and time.

Deleuze argues that what is distinctive about cinema is that it enables us to reflect on time and movement as a whole: this is because cinema allows us to imagine movement and time *itself*. Our normal perceptual experience is one in which we experience a series of successive “percepts” or sensations, such as my perceptions of the blackness and softness of my cat, for example, which my mind unites and then experiences as unified wholes. Put otherwise, our everyday experience is of unified things *in* time; it is not of time itself. Yet Deleuze argues that modern cinema, in particular the filmic

practices embodied by European directors such as Jean-Luc Godard or Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, alter our modes of perception. The devices of modern cinema as practiced by what Deleuze regards as cinema's best directors enable us to perceive time itself.

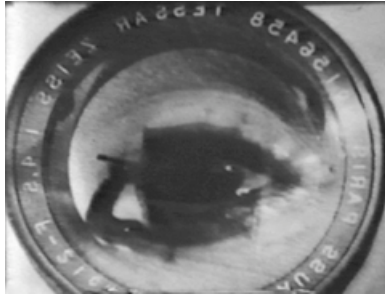
Films employing these techniques give rise to what Deleuze calls the "time-image." This is achieved through the use of editing practices that make illogical cuts and juxtapositions. For example in, Godard's *Weekend*, mentioned above, there is frequently a separation and discrepancy between sound and image – e.g., images with a disturbing background noise that disrupts the unity of the image we are seeing. This way of breaking up what we see on screen is a perceptive force that challenges our concept of time and thereby gives rise to reflection on the flow of time itself.

The pairing of philosophy and cinema, therefore, is a productive one, according to Deleuze's theory, but not for the reasons that many philosophers typically think. Cinema is a form of art that has the power to affect and challenge our usual modes of experience by presenting new ways of experiencing movement and time. The philosophy of film, in turn, provides conceptual analysis of these new modes of perception.

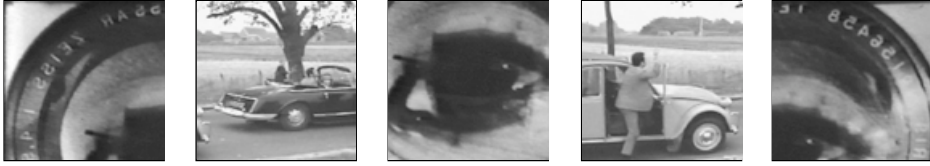
The readings in Part I present several divergent views on what film theory is, why we should do it, and on the relation between philosophy and film. But no matter which view you decide on as being most compelling, we hope that you will find that the essays open up a whole new way of looking at film and your experience of it.

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between doing film theory and doing film "Theory," with a capital "T," according to Carroll? Why does Carroll think that the methodology of film "Theory" stands in the way of productive theorizing about film?
2. What is the "dialectical" approach to film theorizing that Carroll defends? Why does Carroll think it is useful to compare this dialectical approach to film theory with models of scientific theorizing?
3. How does Carroll think we should decide between cognitivism and psychoanalytic film theory as theories of film?
4. In what way does film theory concern what human beings already know and do, according to Turvey? What are some examples he uses to illustrate this idea?
5. Why does Turvey argue that Carroll's scientific model of film theorizing is not suited to the subject matter of film?
6. Turvey assumes that the goal of scientific theory is to grasp phenomena that lie outside the realm of human experience and knowledge. Film theory, on the other hand, Turvey argues, grasps concepts that are already previously understood or apprehended, albeit in a pre-theoretical form. Do you agree with Turvey's description of the distinction between science and film?
7. What is the characteristic activity of philosophical "theory," according to Deleuze?
8. Deleuze sees science, philosophy, and cinema as human practices that are essentially *creative* in one way or another. Do you agree with the similarities that Deleuze draws between these three disciplines?



1 ■ “The director turning the camera on the audience who is watching his film,” from *Man With A Movie Camera*.



Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment

Noël Carroll

Introduction: The Theory Is Dead, Long Live Theory

The rapid expansion of the film studies institution over the last two decades in the United States was undoubtedly abetted, in one way or another, by something called film theory, or, as its acolytes are apt to say, simply Theory – a classy continental number, centrally composed of elements of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, often with optional features derived, often incongruously, from Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, and (*maybe* sometimes) Jacques Derrida, along with contributions from French cinéphiles like Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, and Jean-Louis Baudry, although generally filtered, albeit with a difference, through exegetes like Stephen Heath, Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis.

Universities regarded film studies programs as an economic boon, likely to spur demand and, in this context, Theory, so called, played an economic role in legitimating the formation of film programs. For what went by the name of Theory was surely abstruse enough to convince an uninformed administrator or a hesitant trustee that film studies was at least as complex intellectually as string theory, DNA, or hypotheses about massive parallel processing.

Whether it was necessary to enfranchise film studies in this way is an open question. Perhaps (as I tend to think) market forces alone would have sufficed to establish the institution. But, in any case, Theory appears to have played the ideological-institutional role of enfranchiser, even if the role was ultimately an epiphenomenal one. Furthermore, the expectation of gold in “them thar hills” also encouraged too many university presses to invest in film publications, especially when the arcane peregrinations of Theory facilitated their rationalization of their relaxation of their traditional role as academic gatekeepers. Hence film studies has been flooded with repetitive decoctions of the Theory in search of the same market in much the same way that consumers are confronted with so many marginally differentiated shampoos.

Interestingly, now that film studies seems ensconced in American universities – with TV studies and cultural studies queuing up behind it for legitimation – Theory looks to be on the wane. Certainly people like myself would like to imagine that this is a result of the recognition that the Theory has been soundly refuted, though even I would have to concede that more accurate explanations may be that Theory has outlived its academic utility or that it has merely run out of gas (that is, exhausted itself). But, in any case, however the demise of Theory came about, as it continues to petrify, it becomes appropriate to speculate about whether theorizing – in a small “t,” not-a-proper-name sort of way – is possible. For even if Theory is dead, one wonders whether theorizing about film has a future.

Given these circumstances, it is the aim of this essay to explore the prospects for film theory. In order to approach this subject, I shall begin by sketching [. . .] what I take to be major obstacles to film theorizing at present, many of which are legacies of the Theory alluded to above. It is my conviction that as long as these obstacles continue to grip the imaginations of scholars, fruitful theorizing about film will be unlikely.

I will also attempt, in a more abbreviated way, to provide a minimal characterization of what I take to be the most useful framework that we might employ for film theorizing today. Lastly, I will look at the consequences of adopting that framework for assessing one of the leading debates (or, maybe, one of the *only* debates) among contemporary film theorists, namely: the rivalry between psychoanalytic film theory and cognitive theory. [. . .]

Impediments to Film Theorizing

1. Monolithic conceptions of film theory. The history of film theorizing, it seems to me, has been dominated by a conception of what a film theory should be in terms of the model of a unified body of ideas with certain core propositions from which conclusions about concrete cases follow in various ways, once certain empirical possibilities are considered. Metaphorically, we might call such a construal of film theory foundationalist. It is my contention that such monolithic conceptions of film theory stand in the way of productive theorizing about film, which theorizing might be best construed in terms of producing film theories rather than Film Theory.

Film theory, as most frequently practiced heretofore, has been singular; a film theory was generally conceived to be a rather comprehensive instrument that was supposed to answer virtually every legitimate question you might have about film. This view naturally contrasts with a view of our arena of inquiry as plural, that is, a view that commends thinking in terms of film theories rather than in terms of film theory. That is, rather than theorizing about every element of film style in light of a set of limited theoretical presuppositions – for example, about the purported commitment of the medium to a realism or about its inevitable ideological destiny to suture – one might proceed by constructing local theories – for example, of film suspense, of film metaphor, of camera movement, or narrative comprehension, and even of the rhetoric of ideology – without expecting that these small-scale theories can be collected and

unified under an overarching set of presuppositions about either the nature or function of cinema.

[. . .]

This view of film theorizing conflicts sharply with certain of the most traditional preconceptions of film theory. What is often called classical film theory not only conceptualizes the activity as Film Theory, but as *Film Theory* – that is, as committed to medium specificity in such a way that whatever counts as theorizing about film must be connected to features of the medium that are thought to be uniquely or essentially cinematic. Film theory must pertain to what is distinctly cinematic, otherwise it shall not count as film theory but as something else, like narrative theory.

Admittedly, narrow, essentialist views of film theory of this sort are infrequently voiced nowadays. However, where they remain influential, as they do in the work of the psychoanalytic film theorist Christian Metz and in the conception of photography of Roland Barthes and his cinematic followers, they are impediments to film theory and need to be dismantled dialectically.

Of course, the greatest problem with essentialist film theory is that it gives every indication of being false. But at the very least, another problem with essentialist film theory is that it blinkers the theoretical imagination by limiting what questions are the correct ones to ask about cinema. Yet, especially since cinematic essentialism seems philosophically dispensable, there appears to be scant reason to abide its restrictions.

Instead of thinking of film theory as a unified, single theory, it might be better to think of it as a field of activity, perhaps like sociological theory, where many different projects – theories of homelessness in America, of generic social cohesion, of class conflict in India, of the resurgence of religious fundamentalism worldwide – of different levels of generality and abstraction coexist without being subsumed under a single general theory. Similarly, film theorizing today should proceed at varying levels of generality and abstraction.

Even if some day, film theorizing might be organized into a general theory (which seems unlikely to me), nevertheless we are hardly in a position to frame such a theory now, since we know so little at this time. And, in any event, the only way that we shall come to know more is by developing small-scale theories about virtually every imaginable aspect of film.

Film theorizing, as I have argued elsewhere, should be piecemeal. But it should also be diversified. Insofar as theorists approach film from many different angles, from different levels of abstraction and generality, they will have to avail themselves of multidisciplinary frameworks. Some questions about film may send the researcher toward economics, while others require a look into perceptual psychology. In other instances, sociology, political science, anthropology, communications theory, linguistics, artificial intelligence, biology, or narrative theory may provide the initial research tools which the film theorist requires in order to begin to evolve theories of this or that aspect of film.

[. . .]

What makes something film theory is that it is a general answer to a general question that we have about some phenomenon which we think, pretheoretically, falls into the

bailiwick of film. Such inquiry is theoretical because it is general, and it is film theory because it pertains to filmic practice. Furthermore, since we can ask so many different kinds of general questions about film, there is no common feature that all of our answers should be expected to share. Some theoretical questions about film – for example, about cinematic perception – may have answers that primarily advert to cinematic forms and structures, whereas other different answers to different questions might refer to economic forces. That is, some theories may be formal, while others may be social. Our collection of film theories may very well comprise a mixed bag. There simply is no reason to think that every film theory will have something to tell us about the same subject – such as the way in which each and every aspect of film figures in the oppression or emancipation of the film viewer.

[. . .]

A Framework for Film Theorizing

I have just indicated my conviction that criticism is integral to film theory. In this, I am not claiming film theory is distinctive, but that, like most other forms of theoretical inquiry, it proceeds dialectically. Theories are framed in specific historical contexts of research for the purpose of answering certain questions, and the relative strengths of theories are assayed by comparing the answers they afford to the answers proposed by alternative theories. This conception of theory evaluation is pragmatic because: (1) it compares actual, existing rival answers to the questions at hand (rather than every logically conceivable answer); and (2) because it focuses on solutions to contextually motivated theoretical problems (rather than searching for answers to any conceivable question one might have about cinema).

[. . .]

Speaking as a self-appointed reformer, I wish to emphasize the need for film theorizing to become more conscious of its dialectical responsibilities. Where film theory blurs into film criticism, there is the ever-present danger that theoretical premises will be taken as given – as effectively inoculated from criticism – and, once so assumed, then used to generate “interesting” interpretations. My concern is that more attention be focused on these premises, that they be subjected to intense theoretical criticism, and that alternative answers to the questions these theories address be developed and analyzed through dialectical comparison with each other.

[. . .]

Theory building builds on previous histories of theorizing as well as upon data (which may be theory-laden). Present theories are formulated in the context of past theories. Apprised of the shortcomings in past theories, through processes of continued scrutiny and criticism, present theories try to find more satisfactory answers to the questions that drive theoretical activity. Sometimes advances involve incremental improvements within existing paradigms; sometimes new paradigms are required to accommodate the lacunae made evident by the anomalies that beset previous theorizing. Sometimes the driving theoretical questions need to be redefined; sometimes they

need to be broken down into more manageable questions; sometimes these questions need to be recast radically. And all this requires a free and open discursive context, one in which criticism is not the exception, but the rule.

Methodologically, as I have already indicated, I believe that in the present context piecemeal theorizing is the way to go. In many cases, this means breaking down some of the presiding questions of the Theory into more manageable questions, for example, about the comprehension of point-of-view editing, instead of global questions about something vaguely called suture. As compelling answers are developed to small-scale, delimited questions, we may be in a position to think about whether these answers can be unified in a more comprehensive theoretical framework.

The considerations here on behalf of piecemeal theorizing are practical, not philosophical. For it is my hunch that we do not yet know enough to begin to evolve a unified theory, or even the questions that might lead to a unified theory. So, for the duration, let us concentrate on more manageable, small-scale theorizing. Perhaps one day we will be in a position to frame a unified or comprehensive theory of film. I have no argument to show that this is not possible. But whether our theories are large-scale or piecemeal, the process of theorizing will always have a dialectical component.

By emphasizing the dialectical dimension of theorizing, one concedes that it is historical. For debates will be relative to the disputants involved and the situated questions that perplex them. Thus, film theorizing under the auspices of the dialectical model does not pretend to the discovery of Absolute Truth. The theoretical answers it advances are shaped in response to the existing questions it answers and refines and to the perspectives and theoretical interests that are inscribed in those questions. Moreover, insofar as a dialectical conception of film theorizing admits that theorizing evolves over time, the dialectical film theorist must be aware that his or her theories may be open to revision as the debate matures. [. . .]

Nevertheless, in conceding the historicity and revisability of theories, I have not given up truth as a regulative ideal for film theorizing. For the fact that theorizing has a history does not compromise the possibility of discovering what is the case, since that history may involve, among other things, the successive elimination of error. Furthermore, the fact that we are constantly revising our theories in the light of continued criticism and new evidence does not preclude the possibility that our theories are getting closer and closer to the truth. [. . .] Moreover, there is no persuasive reason to concede that we cannot also craft film theories in the here and now that are approximately true.

The dialectical conception of film theory that I am advocating is consistent with trends in the postpositivist philosophy of science. It respects the Kuhnian, antipositivist emphasis on the importance of historical and social contexts for inquiry. It is also not positivist in that it conceives of the process of theoretical argumentation as situated as a debate between existing rivals, rather than as a debate between every conceivable theory, before a court of fully rational participants, endowed with full information.

[. . .]

I am presuming that what can be claimed for science may be claimed eventually for film theory. This does not mean that I think that film theory is a science, or that it

can be or should be transformed into one, though I do think that there may be certain questions of film theory – perhaps concerning perception – that may be pursued scientifically. Rather, I invoke discussions about scientific methodology in proselytizing for a dialectical conception of film theory, not because I believe film theory is a natural science, but only because the philosophy of science provides us with some of our best models for understanding theoretical inquiry.

Undoubtedly, some will dismiss my suggestions on the grounds that I am confusing film theory with natural science. Let me say now that this is a misinterpretation. What I am saying is: let us take advantage of the insights derived from reflection on the scientific enterprise in order to think about what the structure of our own practice might be. We should not attempt to slavishly imitate any of the natural sciences. We need to be alert to the special features of our own field of inquiry, and to modify our methods appropriately. And yet we may still derive some useful hints about the process of inquiry by listening to sophisticated discussions about science.

[. . .]

Nowadays, humanists, including film scholars, express misgivings about science because they claim that it parades its findings as if they were infallible. This is merely a variation on the argument from absolute truth. [. . .] The argument begins by noting, as I have, that scientific theories are historically situated and revisable. Hence, again for reasons I have already produced, scientific theories cannot pretend to absolute truth. Therefore, they are arbitrary. In effect, we are presented with a disjunctive syllogism: either scientific theories are absolutely true or they are arbitrary. They are not absolutely true; so they are arbitrary. And if they are arbitrary, why should they or the methodologies that yield them be privileged?

But as is always the case with such arguments, the conclusion depends on canvassing all the viable alternatives. And in this instance, it is easy to see that there are overlooked options. One is what is called *fallibilism*, which I would contend provides a much better framework for comprehending scientific practice than the allegation that it aspires to infallibility.

The fallibilist agrees that he or she may have to revise his or her theories in light of future evidence or in response to the implications of later theoretical developments, because the fallibilist realizes that theories are at best well-justified and that a well-justified theory may turn out to be false. There is no claim to absolute truth here. But that does not entail that the theories in question are arbitrary. For we are not open to revising our theories in any which way, but only in virtue of the best available, transcultural standards of justification, that is, ones that have a reliable track record.

The fallibilist does not believe that we can revise all our theories and methods at once. He or she accepts the possibility that any subset thereof might be revised in the appropriate circumstances, and even that all our theories might be revised, but only ad seriatim. Theories and methods are revisable. They do not yield absolute truth. But they are not arbitrary either. For they are only revisable in accordance with practices that, though themselves incrementally revisable, have a reliable record for tracking the truth. The truth, here, where we do secure it, is approximate truth, in the garden

variety sense of the term, not Absolute Truth. But if we can conceive of science in such a way that detaches it from pretensions to Absolute Truth, then taking note of its failure to deliver Absolute Truth should not dispose us to dismiss it as arbitrary.

[. . .]

I have spent so much time sparring with contemporary academic skepticism about science for two reasons: first, because in the current context of debate, any proposal, like mine, that a framework for aesthetic theorizing might profit from thinking about scientific theorizing is apt to elicit an intemperate rejoinder on the basis of one or more of the considerations I have just attempted to undercut; and second, because it is frequently alleged that cognitivism [. . .] is an attempt to turn film theory into science, and, therefore, cognitivism can be “refuted” handily by the preceding skeptical arguments about the integrity of science. But I contend that these arguments refute nothing. [. . .]

Many of these arguments begin, as I do, with an acknowledgment of the insights of postpositivist philosophy of science. However, where many humanists and film scholars often take those insights to imply the arbitrariness of science, I try to exploit them in favor of a view of science as a dialectical, incremental process for securing approximate truths through practices of, among other things, error elimination and criticism. Furthermore, this very broad conception of inquiry may be fruitful to our thinking about film theory. In order to test its usefulness and to descend from the preceding perhaps unduly rarefied stratosphere of abstraction, I shall apply this conception of the dialectical framework for film theory to a contemporary question, namely, the issue of cognitivism.

Cognitivism versus Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis, conjoined with Marxism and later blended with various other radical, political perspectives, has dominated film theorizing for two decades. In the eighties, an approach to film theorizing, labeled cognitivism, began to take shape as an alternative to psychoanalysis. Cognitivism is not a unified theory. Its name derives from its tendency to look for alternative answers to many of the questions addressed by or raised by psychoanalytic film theories, especially with respect to film reception, in terms of cognitive and rational processes rather than irrational or unconscious ones. This might involve explicit reference to cognitive and perceptual psychology or to Anglo-American-style linguistics rather than to psychoanalysis. Or the hypotheses might be more homemade.

[. . .]

Cognitivism is not a unified theory, not only because the theoretical domains cognitivists explore differ, but because cognitivist film theorists, like cognitive psychologists, may disagree about which proposals – of the competing cognitivist proposals – best suit the data. So, once cognitivists stop arguing with psychoanalysts, they will have to argue with each other. And this is why it is a mistake to imagine that cognitivism is a single, unified theory. It is a stance.

However, it is a stance that has increasingly come to define itself as an alternative to psychoanalysis in film studies. It advances its hypotheses, as diverse and as discordant as they may be, by claiming to characterize or to explain phenomena better than extant psychoanalytic theories. Cognitivists have increasingly come to conceptualize their project dialectically. Cognitivists take their task to be a matter of answering certain questions about film, especially about film reception and comprehension, most of which questions have already been asked or at least acknowledged by psychoanalytic film theorists. But cognitivists claim that they do a better job answering those questions than psychoanalytic film theorists have.

[. . .]

[. . .] Theories compel assent, at least provisionally, by demonstrating that they provide certain explanatory advantages and solutions to certain anomalies lacking in their opposing number.

This view of theory should not surprise psychoanalytic film theorists. For they should recall the way in which Freud argues for his own theory of dreams. Prior to Freud, dream research regarded dreams as purely somatic phenomena, the reaction of a mental organ veritably sunk in the state of sleep in response to environmental stimuli which partially activate it. By examining the content of certain dreams, Freud showed that this theory was not comprehensive – it did not cover a great many facts presented by the data – and that it was unable to provide any functional-biological account of why we dream. [. . .]

Freud's own theory not only supplied the wherewithal to account for the anomalies ignored by previous dream research but was also able to identify a candidate for the function of dream, namely, that it was the guardian of sleep. It has been the burden of subsequent researchers to see how well Freud's theory squares with the data and to develop alternative hypotheses to accommodate the anomalies in the data that erupt from the collision between the evidence and Freud's famous generalizations, such as the hypothesis of wish fulfillment.

Staging the debate between psychoanalytic film theory is too elaborate a task. [. . .] One reason for this is that, since cognitivism often proposes piecemeal theories, a thorough confrontation would require facing off each cognitivist theory – of narrative comprehension, of cinematic perception, of the horror film, of melodrama, of film music, and so on – with its psychoanalytic counterparts, where there are counterparts. Frequent examples of that sort of close engagement can be found throughout this volume. Nevertheless, it is still possible to offer some overarching comments about the rivalry between cognitivism and psychoanalysis. [. . .]

[. . .]

Psychoanalysis [. . .] kicks in which there is an apparent breakdown in the normal functioning of our cognitive-perceptual processing, our capacities for rational calculation and decision making, our conative and emotional behavior, our motor capabilities, and so on, which breakdowns cannot be explained either organically or in virtue of the structural features of the processes in question.

If I cannot walk because I have lost my legs in a car accident, there is no call for psychoanalysis. But if I am biologically sound, and no rational motive can be supplied

for my inaction, psychoanalysis is appropriate. If I am angry when I am mugged, *ceteris paribus*, that is a rational response, where psychoanalysis is out of place. But if I consistently explode whenever a teacher asks me a question, we think about psychoanalysis. [. . .] In short, there is a conceptual constraint on psychoanalysis; it is restricted to dealing with phenomena that cannot be explained by other means.

Moreover, this has interesting consequences for the debate between cognitivist and psychoanalytic film theories. Namely, wherever a plausible cognitivist theory can be secured, the burden of proof is shifted to the psychoanalytic theorist. For a plausible cognitivist theory precludes the necessity for psychoanalysis. The mere plausibility of a cognitivist theory gives it a special advantage over psychoanalytic theories of the same phenomenon.

It is not generally the case that the mere plausibility of one scientific theory excludes a respectable, competing theory from the field. But insofar as psychoanalysis is defined as just what explains what otherwise has no *plausible* explanation, psychoanalytic explanation starts with a disadvantage where plausible cognitivist theories are available.

Contemporary film theorists, like Judith Mayne in her recent book *Cinema and Spectatorship*, tag cognitivist theorists with the complaint that they simply bracket the psychoanalytic approach, as if willfully. What such criticism fails to comprehend is that where we have a convincing cognitivist account, there is no point whatsoever in looking any further for a psychoanalytic account. It is not the case that psychoanalysis is being unfairly or inexplicably bracketed. It is being *retired*, unless and until good reasons can be advanced to suppose otherwise.

Psychoanalytic theories face a special burden of proof when confronting cognitivist theories. For a psychoanalytic theory to reenter the debate, it must be demonstrated that there is something about the data of which given cognitivist (or organic) explanations can give no adequate account, and which, as well, cannot be explained by some other cognitive theory, which remainder is susceptible to psychoanalytic theory *alone*. I have no argument to prove conclusively that no psychoanalytic theory will ever be able to cross this hurdle. But, at the same time, I think it is also fair to say that psychoanalytic film theorists behave as though they are unaware of this obstacle and, in any event, they have failed to meet it *even once* in their skirmishes with cognitivists.

Because of this special burden of proof, the possibility of pluralistic coexistence between cognitivism and psychoanalysis is never a foregone conclusion. Confronted by cognitivist hypotheses about the perception of the cinematic image, the psychoanalytic critic must show that there is something about the phenomena that is alien to cognitivist theorizing. That is why it is not enough for psychoanalytic theorists, like Richard Wollheim and Richard Allen, to merely tell a coherent, psychoanalytic story about pictorial perception; they must also establish that there is something about the data that cognitivists are unable to countenance before them, the psychoanalysts, postulate the operation of *unconscious* psychic mechanisms like projection. For if their cognitivist competitors can frame a coherent, comprehensive account of the data without resorting to unconscious mechanisms, postulating unconscious ones is a nonstarter.

Dialectical arguments are primarily matters of shifting the burden of proof between rival theories that are grappling with roughly the same questions. Quite frequently

(most frequently?) it is difficult to find a completely decisive refutation of rival theories. That is one reason why we must fall back on the laborious processes of removing the burden of proof from ourselves and redistributing it amongst our competitors. The preceding argument has not shown that psychoanalytic theories of film will never be admissible. At best, what it may show is that the burden of proof is now with the psychoanalysts. Perhaps they will rise to the occasion.

However, if I am correct in maintaining that psychoanalytic film theorists have not yet even recognized that they have this burden of proof, then that indicates that, at present, the ball belongs to the cognitivists. Psychoanalytic film theory may succeed in countering this argument dialectically, but unless it does, the continued elaboration of the psychoanalytic paradigm, conducted in isolation from cognitivist challenges, represents an evasion of film theory, not a contribution to it.

[. . .]

Concluding Remarks

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The prospects for film theory hinge on critical debate. In the best of circumstances, the participants of that discussion will include cognitivists, psychoanalysts, and unaligned scholars. In my view, over the last two decades, film studies has squandered what may turn out to have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by effectively stifling debate between Theory and alternative paradigms. Whether film theory has a genuine future depends on its becoming truly dialectical.