A NEW HOPE: THEORY, RHETORIC, AND THE CONVERSATION OF CINEMA

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THEORY, RHETORIC, AND THE CONVERSATION OF CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis illustrates how both film theory and film criticism rely upon rhetorical devices which produce convincing arguments to ground their claims. By expanding Bordwell's rhetorical model of film criticism to film theorizing, it is hoped that we might rid the conversation of cinema of its more staid and dogmatic elements.

Without foundational truth as the regulator of discourse, totalizing theory can no longer be recognized as a healthy or adequate stance within the conversation of cinema. Carroll and Bordwell's respective projects do not rely upon foundational truth as a starting ground for analyses, criticisms, and theories of film.

With its competing uses of similar truth 'cues', the theoretical and critical conversation of cinema is governed by pragmatic uses of rhetorical structures to make claims that are convincing to the reader.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"This is not a draft. It is perhaps the draft of a draft."
Dr. B. Allen, commenting upon my first submitted version of this thesis, 1998.

"This whole book is but a draught -- nay, but the draught of a draught.
Oh Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!"
Herman Melville, MOBY DICK, 1851.

This document is the product of some 4 official drafts, 18 or so major reworkings, 6 topic changes, and three years of thought. Over that time, I've had the opportunity to receive the kindness and support of many individuals.

I first of all would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, professor Barry Allen, who suffered through my early writings, and provided a level of excellence that took me over a year to achieve. While his comments often lacked subtlety or finesse, they were certainly accurate and to the point. In the end my success is due to the direction he encouraged me to take.

This project came out of studies I did under the kind supervision of Prof. Graham Petrie in the summer of 1997. Thanks to him, I was introduced to the writings of Carroll and Bordwell, and it is entirely due to his efforts that this thesis takes the primary focus that it does. I am eternally grateful for his patience and guidance, and for opening my eyes to some of the best writings on film.

My thanks go out to my friends, especially Jason Cormier, Emily Singer, Blair Smith, Claudine François, Phillip Daniels, Cheryl and Jeffy Parsons-Sheldrake, and Brian Hendrix, who tolerated my many rants, and continued over all this time to provide encouragement. More importantly, they have all been dragged, often more than once, to a film that they didn't want to see, strictly, perhaps, to appease me. Love and thanks as well to my father, who slept through *Star Wars* when I was five, though I've almost forgiven him for that. After all, he did take me to many other films, some of which he stayed awake for.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to three individuals without whom it would never have been completed: to Dr. Carlos Prado, a scholar and a friend who first showed me what philosophy could be, only to smash such Cartesian conceit with Foucault a semester later; to Justin Busch, who first yclept this thesis 'Salvageable!', and more then anyone else (excluding myself, of course) is responsible for its final good bits; and to my mother, who for the last twenty-seven years has given me more love and support than any philosopher rightly deserves.

Thank you all, and please stay and enjoy the rest of this thesis.

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Introduction

> It must be the nature of American academic philosophy (or of its reputation), together with the nature of American movies (or of their notoriety) that makes someone who writes about both, in the same breath, subject to questions, not to say suspicions.
>
> - Stanley Cavell

This thesis, broadly speaking, is a philosophical look at film theory and criticism. I borrow Cavell's view of philosophy in order to make sense of this claim: philosophy involves thinking "undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about."[1] For those who cannot help but think about things around them, about the examined events that make life worth living, films are certainly ripe for philosophical investigation.

There are numerous questions to be asked about movies, the more obvious ones being about cinema's technical characteristics and aesthetic criteria. There are many people involved in what may be called the "conversation of cinema", a wide-ranging discourse that talks about all things to do with movies. There are, of course, technical and professional limitations upon the conversation. These limitations are particularly manifest in academic forms of cinema discourse, with fairly rigid conformity to particular ways of

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[1]   Cavell, Stanley. "The Thought of Movies." In *Philosophy and Film,* edited by Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, 13-32. New York: Routledge, 1995., p. 18

speaking, including pre-set forms of argumentation and a rampant use of jargon. In short, cinema studies has joined the highly political fray of humanities departments in North American universities. There exists broadly a varied conversation that asks many differing questions about movies and our appreciation of them, while certain more 'professional' allegiances conform and restrict this conversation.[2]

Cavell points to the human willingness to allow for questions that cannot be obviously answered with satisfaction. Cynics, he claims, may find that questions without definitive answers are "empty." Dogmatists are those who have claimed to have already found the right answers. Somewhere in between are philosophers. Cavell and I share the belief that "while there may be no satisfying answers to such questions *in certain forms*, there are ... *ways to think*, that are worth the time of your life to discover."[3] The philosophical investigation of the conversation of cinema examines the ways of thinking and the questions that get asked within this varied discourse.

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[2]   In this sense the conversation of cinema is not dissimilar to the conversation of philosophy, with the divide between amateur "lovers of wisdom" and those philosophizing as part of the professional, academic apparatus.

[3]   Cavell, Stanley. "The Thought of Movies." In *Philosophy and Film*, edited by Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, 13-32. New York: Routledge, 1995., p. 17

The claims of the cynics and dogmatists have become louder in recent years in the conversation of cinema. In response there has emerged a group of thinkers calling for a renaissance in cinema studies. In chapter one, I examine the work of two members of this group – Noël Carroll and David Bordwell, thinkers who in a similar fashion decry certain contemporary directions of film theory and criticism, advocating a new beginning for the conversation. They successfully debunk the Grand Theorizing that dominated the conversation of cinema through the 70's and 80's. They show how totalizing critiques[4], most notably psychoanalytic theories developed from the work of Metz and Lacan, have become dogmatic, repetitive and uninteresting. While Carroll and Bordwell provide a strong argument for continuing the conversation of cinema, I argue that they do not go far enough in illustrating how it is persuasive rhetorical gestures, which must be invented and developed by the critic, rather than foundational truths, which exist independently awaiting discovery by the critic, that govern the acceptability of both theoretical and critical positions within the conversation. Indeed, each rhetorical gesture itself must be made within contexts created by previous rhetorical gestures; in the conversation of

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[4]   Noël Carroll defines a Totalizing theory as an argument that "attempts to answer all our questions ... in terms of a unified theoretical vocabulary with a set of limited laws ... that are applied virtually like axioms." Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 8

cinema, the "facts" under discussion and the means of carrying out the discussion are, for the most part, identical.

Noël Carroll and David Bordwell have remarkably compatible projects. They share similar dissatisfaction with second-wave theorists, and both advocate a new beginning for film studies. Their concentrations do differ slightly. While Carroll writes often about specific theories and theorists, the bulk of Bordwell's writing has to do with the role of the critic and the history of writing on movies. They share credit on their "Post Theory" volume, and also share the same university at Madison, Wisconsin. Of the two, Carroll may be seen as more broadly "philosophical."[5] However, I feel that Bordwell's analysis of the rhetorical structure of film criticism is both highly philosophical and patently useful for articulating the operations that govern both critical *and* theoretical movie talk.

Bordwell illustrates how the act of criticism rests upon conventional tropes and heuristics. Criticism is "pieced together":by an artisan (the critic) out of various pieces, only one of which, properly speaking, may be called

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[5]   If departmental choice is an indication of philosophical versus critical drive, it should be noted that Carroll is a Professor in the department of Philosophy, while Bordwell is a professor in the department of film studies at Madison.

"theory". My conclusion is that film theory shares the same method of rhetorical construction, and may be viewed as simply criticism extended in a more rigorous fashion. The sheer number of elements involved in making and viewing even the simplest film leads to a variety of simplifications for theoretical purposes. As a result, both the film (supposedly) under discussion and the means used for that discussion are seen in particular ways, and the elements not under consideration or use are ignored or forgotten. This leads easily to an approach whereby the element or piece at hand is taken for the whole, with the further result that appeals to that piece are presumed to be appeals to a unified entity ("the film itself" or "the theory of x") which does not in fact exist. Only one of the pieces that the theorist appeals to may properly be called "truth", and what *counts* as truth for the critic is itself part of the process of theory building. In other words, there is nothing outside the conversation of cinema that may be appealed to as a pure or foundational ground for sweeping theoretical claims. When talking about cinema, the conversation's all you've got.

This is not at all to limit the force or impact of theorizing. I hope to show that in the field of cinema studies the conclusions of theorists and critics may be properly recognized as the products of a pragmatic rhetorical interaction, rather than the results of a scientific uncovering of truth. I am, in

short, extending Bordwell's idea of the rhetorical structure of criticism to theorizing itself, suggesting that theory itself may be understood as reflexive criticism by another name.[6]

This view rests upon the conclusion that "truth", the traditional virtue claimed for theory, is for film theorists equivalent to a "cue" exposed through a critical interpretation. Just as a particular line from one actor cues a specific scripted response from another, or eerie music cues the audience to expect a fateful event, certain types of information about the film being discussed are supposed to evoke specific and predictable critical responses. But unlike the scripted line, which is, within reason, invariable, these "film element" cues are quite vague. The critic builds his or her interpretation by selectively deciding upon relevant cues, or individual scenes or episodes of the film, in order to provide a coherent analysis. What *counts* as a cue is entwined in the history of criticism as a whole. What has been allowed as part of the discourse to serve as an *appropriate* cue has shifted with the political, ideological, philosophical

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[6]   Film criticism is notorious for being inconsistent, with critics one week slagging a film, only to jump on the proverbial "band wagon" as soon as awards (or tenure) time comes along. However, this does not mean that the supposed methodological "purity" of theory sanctifies the practice as being "closer to" or "on the right track" to solving the questions of cinema. It is reflexive insofar as it reflects back on its own process of methodology more so than film criticism, but it remains, as I will show, a rhetorical exercise rather than an uncovering of foundational truths.

and aesthetic movements that characterize the first hundred years of cinema. The appropriateness of, say, sound or costume as a valid focus for the critical gaze has been determined, it seems, by the conditions of rhetorical argument. Similarly, to appeal to film itself as a vehicle of truth bespeaks of a similar pattern – what is at issue is what is convincing or interesting at a given time. The theorist appeals to truths the way that the critic appeals to cues in the film, and the regulation of these practices – that is, the decision regarding what cues are taken to be foundational – is itself a product of the conversation.

Theory, insofar as it relies upon an interpretive structure in order to provide its theoretical claim, depends on the same tropes and heuristics that Bordwell describes as "making meaning." It becomes, even at the "high" level of theory, an exercise in identifying significant cues, and developing ideas from these cues. What *counts* as a cue shifts with theoretical presuppositions. Similarly, critical interpretations and the attribution of meaning to a movie or scene depend on different interpretations of what appears to be the same cue.

What governs the discourse is not the cue itself (the way that nature supposedly guides science), but the acceptance or rejection of the relevance of given cues. In other words, those arguments that are convincing (rhetorically) provide what we take to be a true or knowledgeable theoretical claim. The practitioners of scientific disciplines such as biology and chemistry can appeal

to nature (or, for some, Nature) as arbiter of their claims because their claims are, at base, about nature; they are not overtly judgmental or interpretive. The same is not true of film theorists; it is one thing to claim that x *is* the case (evolution occurred, say, or *Citizen Kane* was released in 1941) and quite another to claim that because x is the case it *must mean y*, where y is not a further observed or observable fact (that evolution occurred must mean that morality is relative, or that since *Citizen Kane* was released in 1941 it must mean that the film is a covert metaphor for Hitler's march to power).

Bordwell and Carroll think that the conversation of cinema may be more properly steered towards a historically sensitive, consistent, dialogical and diverse discourse. I hope to strengthen this position. I understand film discourse to be a diverse exercise in pragmatic rhetoric. I believe that film theory, like criticism, relies upon the conditions of rhetoric in order to govern the acceptance or rejection of claims. However, this view leaves open the possibility that unwanted theories may bog down the discourse without foundational truth as a final arbitrator to sweep away dogmatic or stultified writings. To combat this, I argue that totalizing theories are unhealthy for the cinematic conversation. Views that seek to close debate through systemic application of a short list of theoretical presuppositions, resulting in a ceaseless and dogmatic repetition of party-line argumentation, are unhealthy and

unproductive. While Bordwell and Carroll's conclusions open up the conversation to many diverse and compelling views, totalizing critics narrow the debate so tightly as to strangle both its diversity and its interest for those who differ from the accepted dogma.

In order to rid film discourse of its totalizing elements, I must elaborate upon the distinction that Bordwell and Carroll draw between film "critics" and "theorists". Specifically, I suggest that poor criticism, as outlined by Bordwell and Carroll, is similar in kind to poor theorizing – similar failed attempts at creating a consistent or convincing rhetorical claim. Similarly, what makes for good criticism, and in turn good theorizing in the field of cinema, are the same qualities that Bordwell suggests for clear, open rhetorical construction. Utilizing novel or tightly argued heuristics and tropes, identifying cues that appear evident or interesting, and a logical justification that seems either natural or novel results in compelling conversations. The more interesting the claim, the more likely its acceptance as a valuable contribution to the discourse.

I will begin my second chapter with perhaps the most unlikely of sources – a "popular" review from one of the most public of critics, Roger Ebert. Drawing from this single source, I will highlight the rhetorical and structural

interplay that his criticism presupposes, utilizing the devices identified by Bordwell. From here I will illustrate my conclusions regarding film theorizing in general, using the example of *Citizen Kane* and the multiplicity of competing "readings" of that film. Specifically, I wish to analyse the theorizing of this seminal film, regarding notions of realism, technique, authorial intention, as well as arguments surrounding the collaborative nature of film. I suggest that the questions raised in these contexts are themselves indicative of the way that multiple cues may be read in multiple ways, generating multiple acceptable theories of a single film. What remains problematic is not the apparent floundering on the part of critics to find the one, true solution, but of those theorists who suggest that the solution or the true interpretation has been found, and that therefore there are no more questions to be asked.

Noël Carroll and David Bordwell conclude that "film studies is at a historical juncture which might be described as the waning of Theory."[7] They suggest that the conversation of cinema has become burdened with its own methodology, and must be restarted in order to provide a compelling and effective investigation of cinema. This situation results from the cooption by

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[7]   Carroll, Noël and David Bordwell. "State of the Art." In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 1-2. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996., p.1

academic theorists of burdensome theoretical apparatuses borrowed from other disciplines. As cinema studies became entrenched in the academy, the discipline became less concerned with movies themselves, and instead became directed towards the social and psychic functions of cinema.[8] This type of question has led to a burdensome and repetitive methodology that treats all elements and instances of cinema as being equally susceptible to, in this instance, identical ideological investigation.

The division between "old" and "new" schools of critical thought roughly corresponds to the period before and after 1968, when North American educational institutions became centres for the study and debate of cinema. Carroll divides these two eras into the "Classic" and the "Contemporary" modes of theorizing. In order to avoid confusion with vague and relative temporal terms such as "contemporary," I characterize these two periods as "waves" of theorizing. The first-wave, so-called Classical theory, concentrated for the most part on questions of the medium of film itself. These early theorists "referred all their analyses back to the unique nature" of film,

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8   Bordwell, David. "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory." In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 3-36. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996., p. 6

speaking often about "the essence of cinema."[9] André Bazin, Rudolf Arnheim, and Sergei Eisenstein, for example, made attempts to "isolate distinctively cinematic principles of representation and expression."[10] The second-wave, so-called Contemporary theory, corresponded to the post-Bazinian interest in questions of latent meaning and the ideological investigation of movies. These second-wave theorists, with writers such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, "think of film in terms of a central function or role," linking "every analysis of a device or cinematic structure back to the ideological function of cinema."[11]

The first-wave, characterized by the Bazinian question *"qu'est que c'est le cinéma"*, is literally an examination of the limitations and characteristics of the medium itself. By contrast, the second-wave focussed on the effects of films upon the individual or society, asking "what are the social and psychic

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[9] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 257

[10] *Ibid.,* p. ix

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 257

functions of cinema?"[12] Carroll and Bordwell, in effect, advocate a third wave. They call for a new beginning for film scholarship, putting behind it the pretensions of Grand Theory. They argue that key theoretical and critical strategies of second-wave theorists, which rely upon unquestioned allegiances with weakly appropriated theoretical structures borrowed from other disciplines, are inevitably totalizing, and are to be rejected on that ground. Carroll and Bordwell advocate a "middle-level" form of theorizing, a post-Theory set of theories that embody what they believe are more appropriate strategies for useful cinema scholarship.

Calling for radically new beginnings is not new in philosophical or theoretical thought. A purging of contemporary methodologies is often needed when a particular intellectual task is thought to be off track. Certainly philosophy has a long record of demanding new beginnings; indeed, modern philosophy itself is erected upon the Cartesian demand for complete methodological skepticism as a means of avoiding errors of assumption. Thus,

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[12] Bordwell, David. "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory." In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 3-36. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996., p. 6

in order to understand what it is that Bordwell and Carroll are reacting against, it is necessary to place them within their appropriate historical context.

In chapter one, I shall briefly describe the historical development of film theory and criticism, showing how the so-called "second wave" has led to a stultification of the conversation of cinema. I examine in detail the positions of Bordwell and Carroll, as they trace in similar yet distinctive ways their projects for a reinvigoration of film studies.

In chapter two, I begin to develop my idea that film theory shares similar rhetorical machinations as compared to Bordwell's rhetorical model of film criticism. I examine a specific, contemporary review by Roger Ebert to illustrate the more populist form of film discourse. I then analyse competing views of *Citizen Kane*, showing how these forms of film discourse depend on competing uses of the same "truth cues."

In chapter three, I explicitly tie Bordwell's critical model to film theorizing. I also address the "Dostoyevskian" dilemma of film theory; that is, if there is no foundational ontology "outside" of practice to *regulate* practice, what is to stop the most corrupt or idiotic claim to be accepted as acceptable? In short, by abandoning foundational truth as a regulator for film theory, is it not simply a situation where "Anything Goes?" I argue that totalizing theories, insofar as they are detrimental to the continuation of the conversation, are

unhealthy for the conversation. By attempting to silence through dogmatic repetition and closing of the debate, totalizing critiques collapse under their own guidelines.

I conclude that film theory and critical practice are part of a rhetorically driven conversation of cinema that appeals pragmatically to cinematic or theoretical cues in order to create a convincing argument. The "meanings" of these cues are flexible, and competing uses of these truth-cues are as diverse as the multiplicity of film commentaries. The discourse, then, is regulated not by foundational truth but by the conventions of rhetoric. At the same time, theories that are totalizing are unhelpful for they place undue restrictions upon the flourishing of this conversation.

A NEW HOPE:
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ONE
BREAKING THE WAVES

Chapter 1: BREAKING THE WAVES

1. Two Generations of Film Criticism

The first-wave of film writing, the so-called 'classical' phase that occupied roughly the first 50 years of cinema, centred around debates concerning the medium itself.   As Carroll describes it, "most of the conversation of what might be called [first-wave] theory gravitated toward securing the artistic value of film by means of identifying its essentially cinematic capacities."[13] Seeking to distinguish film from other arts (notably theatre and photography), many thinkers devoted their time to the question of medium specificity – what was it that films *did* that made them their own thing?   The tacit presupposition of many of the first-wave theorists was that film's formal and foundational elements equated to what it did best (what it *could* do was what it could do *best*, and thus *should* do). The technique of film production blurred with aesthetic criteria for evaluation, as particular techniques began to define what was to be considered aesthetically good.

Early on, the Russian formalists, a group of theorists and filmmakers that included Eisenstein, pointed to the organization of images as the fundamental

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[13]   Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 275

structure of cinematic expression. Eisenstein succinctly suggested that the highest form of art was film, and the basic elements of film were shot and montage.[14] As Eisenstein explicitly claimed, "cinematography is, first and foremost, montage."[15] Understanding montage itself was more difficult, and occasioned much debate. It certainly was not mere editing, but had more to do with the interaction of adjoined "movement pieces", or "shots." The simple composition of a given frame became secondary to the ways in which a sequence of separate compositions took on a life of its own. Montage, the so-called "nerve of cinema," is not simply "a means of description by placing single shots one after the other like building-blocks", but a more complicated theory that examines how images placed "on top" of one another can produce dynamic emotional resonance.[16] Bazin describes Eisenstein's montage theory as "the reenforcing of the meaning of one image by association with another image not necessarily part of the same episode."[17] Like Japanese ideograms that

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[14] Eisenstein, Sergei. "Film Form." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gerald Mast et al., 127-167. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929., p. 140

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 127

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 141

[17] Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967., p. 25

have combined meanings with superimposition of isolated characters, so too could cinema create complex meanings through shot-to-shot organization and presentation.

The details of montage are not at issue; the point is that the technique was considered a pure element of cinematic expression, a requirement for the possibility of cinema itself.[18] Hence a significant critical trend emerged in the 20s and 30s which claimed that orthodox cinema was, at its foundation, strictly an example of montage. As Carroll says, "to be cinematic was to exploit the unique features of the medium – to use film as film."[19] For Eisentein, montage *was* the ultimate example of using film as film, exploiting the unique qualities of the medium to create rather than simply record (or re-create) theatrical presentations. As he explains: "Murder on the stage has a purely physiological effect. Photographed in *one* montage-piece, it can function simply as *information*, as a sub-title. *Emotional* effect begins only with the reconstruction

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[18] Eisenstein refers to "the specific problem of cinema." There is little evidence over the history of the conversation of cinema that there is one, specific problem to be solved, nor is there any indication of what that question would begin to look like that would be acceptable to the discursive community, let alone what a solution would or could be.

[19] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 1 *See also* Perkins, V.F. *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies.* Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972.

of the event in montage fragments, each of which will summon a certain association – the sum of which will be an all embracing complex of emotional feeling."[20] For Eisenstein the highest level of art was cinema, and cinema at its heart was montage. Movies that did not utilize montage to its full extent were seen as simply inferior, theatrical, or gratuitous – in short, they were not cinematic.

Challenges to montage theory came with the advent of new camera and sound technologies. By the time of the 1940s, cinematography had progressed to the point that the moving images could be captured with what was called "deep focus" photography – a process that allowed for clear, crisp, high-contrast images where there were multiple layers of action. Characters in the foreground, middle, and background could all share the same focal space with equal clarity. With deep focus and the advent of sound, there was a suggestion (from Bazin, among others) that what cinema did best was realism – the literal capturing of reality as it is. Expressionism, the primarily German movement of the 1920s and 30s that produced such explicitly stylized and non-realistic films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, was for Bazin an absolute "heresy". Bazin

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[20] Eisenstein, Sergei. "Film Form." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gerald Mast, et al., 127-167. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929., p. 149

thinks we should "agree, by and large, that film ought to give the spectator as perfect an illusion of reality as possible."[21]

No longer was montage the fashionable critical concept – editing in general became more laboured due to the considerations of sound recording, where quick cuts were sacrificed for sonic coherence. While debate raged regarding the realist/montage schools of thought, the role of the individual artist in the process of filmmaking was also thoroughly examined. It was suggested, again by Bazin *et al.*, that for most films the director was simply a *metteur en scene*, literally the person who placed things into the given scene. As suggested by this nomenclature, the *metteur* was merely another technician, an employee of the studio system. There were those artists, however, who had the artistic will to overcome these limitations and infuse their works with personality and originality. What was remarkable about the canon of "great" directors that began to be idolized in the 1950s was that they had this will, and infused their works with a consistent and, most importantly, *personal* vision. They were not just technicians, but *auteurs*, creators, artists in their own right, conducting an orchestra of technicians to create a work of art.

[21] Bazin, André. *What is Cinema? Volume II.* Translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971., p. 26

While the first-wave concentrated on the medium itself, the second-wave

concentrated upon the hidden ideological qualities of film. As described by

Carroll, "the leading hypothesis amongst [second-wave] film theorists is that

film is an instrument of ideology, and their research program is a matter of

identifying the relevant levers of ideological manipulation that cinema

affords."[22] Following Lacan and Althusser, theorists in literature and

philosophy departments utilized Freudian psychoanalytic methodology to get

"underneath" the text to the ideological subtext. They generated a new wave

of critics interested in analyzing the underlying structures of filmmaking.

Dissatisfied with such supposedly simplistic ideas as auteur theory, these critics

attempted to illustrate that even the author could not be fully aware of all the

subconscious elements of his or her work. Film, more than ever, became a

work to be *read*, to be analyzed and deconstructed.[23] These meanings could be

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[22] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 275

[23] While early participants in the conversation of cinema privileged the visual metaphor, often comparing cinema to painting and still photography, later theorists and critics often employed textual metaphors - "reading" the "text" of the film. This broadened both the critical opportunities for constructing interpretations, and the methodological reservoir from which pre-existing theories could be drawn and applied to cinema. After all, considerable time has been spent developing sophisticated interpretive strategies for exegesis and analysis of the written word. By changing the metaphor from the visual to the textual, participants within the conversation were able to have their theories and opinions mesh with those claims already being made in literature and

manifest and superficial, or they could be latent, perverse, or ideological. Psychoanalytic critics treated film and filmmakers as patients to be psychoanalyzed, and their conclusions would be the source of Bordwell and Carroll's most extreme frustrations. Carroll and Bordwell's analysis of these two traditions of film discourse provides the basis for the third wave, initiated by their call for a new beginning for film theorizing.

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other humanities departments within the academy.

Chapter 1

2. *David Bordwell - Prospects for a Poetics of Cinema*

The projects of Carroll and Bordwell cover similar historical ground, and, as mentioned earlier, are conveniently compatible. However, they do look at similar events in the history of the conversation of cinema in slightly different ways. I am drawing from multiple perspectives upon the same historical critical event, in order to claim that each thinker holds a similar yet distinctive view of the issues that have occupied cinema studies.

Both Carroll and Bordwell distinguish between film criticism and theory. Criticism, broadly speaking, has to do with the evaluation of a specific film or group of films. The conventional critic is the newspaper columnist who evaluates a given film and provides justification for seeing or avoiding it. A theorist, by contrast, is concerned with the "big picture", a wide-ranging view about film in general. As Bordwell defines it, "a film theory consists of a system of propositions that claims to explain the nature and function of cinema."[24] While the critic is concerned with the specific, the theorist is concerned with the general: what ties groups of films, or even *all* films,

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[24] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 4

together? Critics often point to theoretical claims to bolster their point, while theorists engage for the most part in critical attacks upon their opponents and colleagues.

David Bordwell's *Making Meaning* analyses the underlying structures of film criticism, suggesting that critics, regardless of theoretical stripe, use similar strategies and conventions to create their own interpretations. His claim is that "to interpret a film is to ascribe implicit or symptomatic meanings to it."[25] In other words, film interpretation is an *active* move exercised by the critic, rather then a purely *re-active* move implied by one "reading" a text. As traditionally understood, the interpreter need not bring any of him or herself into the interpretation – the interpretation, instead, is governed by the text *itself.* Interpretation is ideally to be seen as the discovery of the validity of certain critical claims in light of the framework supplied by a given film itself.

Bordwell concentrates upon a historically-centered analysis of the transitions that occurred during the last century of discussions on film. He draws interesting connections between the seemingly disparate first and second-waves of theorizing, based in part on his close analysis of the structures

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[25] *Ibid.,* p. 249

of rhetorical argument that both critical parties employ. Bordwell demonstrates that both criticism and interpretation divide roughly into two types, each corresponding to the two waves of theorizing already discussed. As he describes it, the first-wave of critical writings was explicatory in nature. While the theorists were concerned with medium specificity, critical practice for the most part "rest[ed] upon the belief that the principal goal of critical activity is to ascribe implicit meanings to films."[26]

Bordwell describes the second wave as symptomatic, corresponding to the theoretical interest in latent structures and psychoanalytic theorizing. He shows the second-wave to be a "hermeneutics of suspicion", a scholarly debunking, a strategy that sees apparently innocent interactions as masking unflattering impulses."[27] While the explicatory critic is interested in uncovering the meaning of the text, the symptomatic critic is interested in uncovering the ideological and subliminal meaning of the text's meaning. While first-wave auteur theorists idealized the filmmaker's personal role in creating a film's meaning, the second-wave theorists looked to society to see how it informed the underlying fears and desires that the film expresses. The

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[26] *Ibid.,* p. 232

[27] *Ibid.,* p. 72

second-wave's insistence upon a latent ideological content to all film developed

this hermeneutics of suspicion into a pathological act. It became almost

impossible to accept the image on the screen for itself; quickly forgotten was

Freud's reputed comment that "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." The result

was a plethora of interpretations of even the most trivial elements of many

films, such that any hope of deciding among them (and therefore of

determining the "proper" understanding of the film concerned) was lost.[28]

Bordwell suggests that after the Second World War, the character of first-

wave theorizing changed. The trend was toward genuinely novel and

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[28] A minor but illuminating contemporary example of this may be found in the varying views of the character of "Jar Jar" in *Star Wars Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* that emerged soon after the film's release. Conceived by George Lucas as "comic relief," the computer-generated character has spawned a broad mix of positive and negative reactions. Many have suggested tacit or subconscious racist or homophobic characteristics on the part of Lucas. Spike Lee, noted African-American filmmaker, refers to Jar Jar as the "computer Steppin Fetchitt" (a character actor in the 20s and 30s whose bumbling style became a stereotype for Black actors), while Richard Goldstein in the *Village Voice* attributes anti-Jar Jar sentiments (and the multiplicity of "Jar Jar must die" websites) to gay bashing, suggesting that the extra terrestrial amphibian is in fact a "cosmic queer" and the "genuinely futuristic child" of a "free-to-be-you-and-me" galaxy. Campaigns against Jar Jar, Goldstein argues, are fueled "more by homophobia than it is by racism or liberal indignation." Meanwhile, another synthespian, the blue-skinned, bat-winged, elephant-nosed "Watto," has been compared to stereotypes of Arabs, Italians, and/or Jews. The fact that there are: competing views of these stereotypes, and that there are critical arguments about *which* stereotype is most being exemplified, illustrates how a certain cue, namely a character in a film, can provoke widely divergent and conflicting interpretations. Little mention is given to the *actual* African-Americans and Jews who portray characters in the film, or that Jar Jar is orange, not Black, and Watto is blue-ish, not Jewish. Arguments can be made, and can be made sufficiently convincing given the particular circumstance (in this case, a newspaper article), without the incessant need to be consistent or precise.

persuasive *interpretations*. The Art Cinema of post-war Europe prompted the co-option of literary forms of exegesis to explicate the meanings of cinematic works. As well, the *auteurist* model prompted what Bordwell refers to as a "cluster of assumptions and hypotheses that permit particular interpretations to come into being."[29] Auteurism, like the realism of Bazin, was not a theory "to be evaluated for its logical rigour," but a stepping stone for a multiplicity of novel commentaries and critiques. Bordwell's suggestion is that critical methodology, from the beginning of film studies, has been less concerned with issues of truth, plausibility, and consistency, and more interested in novel and persuasive criticisms. The assumptions underlying auteurism, for example, were not to be closely examined, but the theory could be used to provide a vocabulary of ready-made elements useful for criticisms and analyses of many films and filmmakers. Bordwell's claim is that the auteurist critics committed no error by their own criteria, since the goal of critical practice is to produce convincing interpretations within each piece of critical writing, not to be methodologically consistent over a wide body of work. This fact – that different auteurist critics, under different circumstances, offered criticisms widely at variance with each other, or even with other writings of their own –

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[29]   Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 44

does not illustrate a shortcoming of criticism, but rather that "the criteria governing [critical] practice ill-accord with the conventions of another one, that called theorizing."[30]

Bazin's writings of the 1940s provided the methodological foundation for what would become one of the most influential sources of the explicatory interpretational ideal, the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema*. Bordwell claims that *Cahiers* "fulfilled the classic function of an intellectual review – proposing and promulgating opinions too "serious" for journalistic reviewing but more speculative and idiosyncratic than academic research would tolerate."[31] *Cahiers* not only became influential, it also strongly encouraged the idea "that films, like novels and plays, harbour layers of meaning, and that the sensitive and trained critic should be prepared to reveal them."[32] Utilizing the techniques of detailed explication, the *Cahiers* writers made the director and his films the

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[30] *Ibid.,* p. 252

[31] *Ibid.,* p. 47

[32] *Ibid.,* p. 47

centre of the critical investigation.[33] Only later, with the adoption of more politically sensitive, ideological and psychoanalytic analyses of film, could the role of the *auteur* as the grand-*ecrivan* of the film be challenged.

Bordwell argues that the debates surrounding the explicatory criticism of the 1960's were not theoretically oriented. The methodologies were useful for specific critical purposes – that is, as largely unfounded assumptions used to buttress particular judgements – and their importance was pragmatic and rhetorical rather than rigorously theoretical. Nonetheless, there were some clear indications and presumptions regarding the form and meaning of film. The explicatory critic could uncover the referential meanings that lay beneath the film.[34] By engaging in an interpretive task, the film critic shows "that texts mean more than they seem to say."[35] Bordwell suggests that the explicatory

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[33] It did so complete with its own manifesto that appealed in a totalizing way to foundational truth: "In direct continuity with political practice, ideological practice reformulates the social need and backs it up with a discourse. This is not a hypothesis, but a scientifically established fact." Comolli, Jean-Luc and Jean Narboni. "Cinema / Ideology / Realism." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by:Gerald Mast, et al., 682-689. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969., p. 685

[34] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 47

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 65

critic relies on the view that "the text does not say outright what it means because implicit meaning, in art or in life, can produce greater economy, subtlety, or force."[36]

For the auteurist critic, the disparate elements of the film's production – actors, cinematographer, gaffers, etc. – all serve toward creating the unified "meaning" inscribed by the director alone. The great films by the great personalities are such because the director overcame the forces set *against* a unified stylization, and set out his own vision on the screen. Unity is central to the explicative critical enterprise, as a director of unified action, and a unified, inscribed meaning are the foci of explication. The *auteurist* presupposition demands that meanings are consciously or explicitly available in the work. The director is seen as the creator of the film's meaning, using the camera as an instrument of writing (*camera stylo*) in order to produce a text that may be explicated.

By contrast, the symptomatic approach is meant to uncover *hidden* drives or structures that are cathected by or linked to underlying desires or cultural/ideological forces. Symptomatic criticism looks towards the *implicit*

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 65

drives and desires that serve to dictate behaviours and motivations, rather than

concentrating on the *explicit* actions of the director. Not only does the auteur

lose his or her privileged status for the symptomatic critic, but the director

need not be considered at all when evaluating the cultural and psycho-social

elements that the film presents. As *expression*, as a cultural production, film

exemplifies these implicit, symptomatic elements, which may, with

appropriate care, be teased out of the film. For the second-wave critic, the

interesting things about cinema are the forces, desires, and social-structures

that shape film production.[37]

Bordwell points to the importance of the introduction in the late 60's of

"structuralism" as the dominant mode of symptomatic interpretation. Derived

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[37] I do not wish to underestimate here the distinctions found *within* each wave of the film conversation. Montage and *auteur* theories are quite different, and promote different types of questions. The break from the technical considerations of the film to the personality of the filmmaker certainly was a key to providing a foundation for second-wave psychoanalysis of both film and filmmaker. However, I am following the division articulated by Carroll between Classic and Contemporary modes of theorizing, a division between those who looked at the films (or directors) themselves, versus those whose interpretive interest lay more with the implicit psychological content or hidden ideological ramifications of a given work. While the projects of Bazin and Eisenstein may differ greatly, both thinkers share a conviction that they were uncovering the nature of the cinematic art and process, whereby thinkers like Metz seem more oriented towards uncovering our own responses towards this given medium. Bordwell's work is effective in showing how the break between first and second wave thinking was not nearly as radical as it first may seem, softening the methodological divisions between the supposed *avant garde* and more traditional writers. The divisions are in the end arbitrary, but they are effective (rhetorically, of course) in showing the changes over time in the focus for the more celebrated or fashionable participants of the discourse.

from the anthropological theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, cinematic structuralism holds that implicit in the film's production are "inherited conventions", common links that form a structure of shared production motifs. The structuralist critic "may be considered to have constructed the implicit meanings of which the social actors are unaware."[38] The critic, being schooled in Lévi-Straussian structuralism, could know even more than the *auteur* the implications and important elements of the film.

As Bordwell tells the story, "structuralist theories offered a way for a new generation – many allied to political movements of the 1960s – to distinguish itself from its auteurist predecessors."[39] He charges that structuralism and other second-wave theories of film were not grounded in solid theoretical arguments. The persuasiveness of their claims "came not from abstract reasoning and argument – that is, theorizing – but rather from [the theory's] application to particular bodies of films."[40] Bordwell suspects that the interest of these second-wave critics did not lie in a "rigorous employment of theoretical

[38] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 81 .

[39] Bordwell, David. "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory." In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies,* edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 3-36. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996., p.5

[40] *Ibid.,* p.5

concepts" but in an ambivalent co-option of a trendy critical practice.[41] Structuralism was to remain "thematic", a type of criticism rather than a detailed, philosophically coherent approach to criticism. Bordwell suggests that "after structuralism [was introduced], the catch phrase "a -----ian reading of X" came into film study. At the same time, theory became streamlined; its complexities and nuances were often ignored, and it served to fuel ordinary interpretive activity."[42] This streamlining of the theoretical practice characterized the (often) philosophically incoherent application of sophisticated theories in order to bolster the critic's interpretive exercise. Theory is misused as a form of academic zealotry, allowing the critic to worship from a particular sect, be it Structuralist, Lacanian, Marxist, Phenomenologist, or Postmodernist.

What is particularly interesting in Bordwell's discussion of the historical differences between symptomatic and explicative interpretation is their *shared* presuppositions and critical intentions. Despite their differences, both symptomatic and explicatory critics are intent on "uncovering" a text's meaning. Thus the ironic tie that unites the first two waves of film criticism

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[41] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., pp. 81-82

[42] *Ibid.,* p. 83

– the second-wave, in trying to usurp the dominance of expositional criticism, in fact continues to rely upon such standard (read: unifying) notions as authorial intention, literary devices (e.g. irony) and narrative.

As Bordwell explains, "the film's diegesis [extra-filmic referent] cannot be *wholly* other than the world we know. It should thus come as no surprise that the critic must posit some text-world relations in the course of building and interpretation."[43] Given the multiplicity of relations between the film, the film's audience, and the critic (who cannot assume agreement with her views on the part of either the film's audience or even her own readers), the critic must posit, or assume, connections between the film and the world as presumably experienced by those reading the criticism. These connections seem to undermine the radicalness of the separation between the isolated, projected image and the realistic world view to which the critic must inevitably appeal. The critic must posit some verisimilitude in order to *comprehend* the film in question, preventing any real sense of break between the film's artificial world and our own quotidian processes of understanding. Thus, no matter how radical the break between critiques is meant to be, they share, in

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[43] *Ibid.,* p. 134

Bordwell's view, fundamental connections to our shared ways of seeing the world.

Bordwell wishes to make it clear that he does not argue for this verisimilitude on "ontological or epistemological grounds."[44] His concern is instead with the institutional and rhetorical structures that produce the *impression* of verisimilitude. His claim is that critical practice "requires the interpreter to draw upon schemata and procedures built up in the context of situations outside [of] film, and indeed outside any film."[45] By "making meaning" – Bordwell's phrase to describe the process of interpretation – *all* critics, "regardless of their philosophical or ideological commitments", create particular "text-world correspondences."[46] This view differs quite explicitly from the genuine call for realism that Bazin advocates, as well as from the break with realism proposed by psychoanalytic theorists. On Bordwell's view, then, it is impossible to be truly or essentially realist *or* anti-realist. Rather, the filmmaker and the critic both work within expectations on the part of their viewers/readers; if the work produced is too far from those expectations it will

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[44] *Ibid.,* p. 135

[45] *Ibid.,* p. 135

[46] *Ibid.,* p. 135

be dubbed "meaningless." This description, however, is merely a way of reaffirming the validity of the expectations.[47]

Bordwell thinks that the veracity of theoretical claims does not play a significant role in their use in film criticism. Instead, the critic employs theoretical hypotheses and interpretive schemata as a "mediated process", a selection of critical ploys that are conditioned more by current academic training and fashion rather than by the requirement for stringent arguments or theoretical consistency. Once a critic is trained "in the proper assumptions, hypotheses, schemata and routines", it requires "no master of theory" to play the game of interpretive criticism.[48] Bordwell thinks that is why the cooption of theoretical positions is practiced so haphazardly. These positions, seemingly so crucial to the criticism offered, are in fact superfluous. They are merely devices utilized in order to produce a convincing critique of a given film, and are superfluous insofar as they may be abandoned or substituted without a substantive change in the conclusion of the critique. Of course, the nature of what is convincing will vary according to the predispositions of the audience

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[47] The process is circular: "This film is meaningless because it fails to conform to x; x is a legitimate criterion because it allows us to recognize what is meaningless."

[48] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 135

to be convinced. Phrases which will have academic readers nodding sagely will leave ordinary readers shaking their heads in frustration[49]; a good writer will, first of all, know the expectations of her target audience. The appeal to theory on the part of certain critics is a way of impressing the sort of reader who thinks that theorists know more about how one ought to react to a certain film than one does oneself. The justification of such an appeal is that it works; in being convincing, it entrenches the claims of the theory being used that much more soundly. This, though, no more proves the truth of the theory than the fact that the voters of Ontario re-elected Mike Harris proves that his views on any given issue are correct.

Bordwell observes that in order for criticism to be considered appropriate, the critic must subscribe to a series of conventions and particular methodologies. There exists, of course, a diversity of such methodologies. However, this diversity is not simply a reflection of the vast possibility afforded

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[49] The frustration could also be shared by the filmmakers themselves. Certainly film theorists have found significance within a particular movie that the creators of this film would find either trivial or downright inaccurate. However, in the conversation of cinema, the filmmaker is only one voice among many, and the privileging of his or her voice over the audience/interpreter is to already, rightly or wrongly, presuppose that the creator has a heightened access to the work "itself." Psychoanalytic theorists have perhaps the most entrenched tool to get around this sentiment, suggesting that it is impossible for the director to know her or his own latent, subconscious motivations. This, of course, creates even more tension between the members of the artistic community who create the films, and the critics and theorists who write about them.

cinematic *creation;* it equally is a reflection of the multiple ways in which critical methodologies may be employed. Bordwell understands that it is not theoretical or philosophical rigour that dictates the appropriate uses of these critical strategies, but more a socially and institutionally licenced concern to generate a certain sort of discourse – in other words, the restrictions on the conversation have to do with issues of persuasion rather than appeals to truth.

Bordwell's general claim is that film interpretation consists of the description of a film's implicit or symptomatic meanings in a novel and plausible way. This is accomplished by operating with broad assumptions and hypotheses, mapping semantic fields onto cues that the critic selects. The identification of these cues depends upon whatever conventions are currently *en vogue.* Using "schemata", or structures of knowledge, with "heuristics", or inductive inferences, the critic illustrates "pertinent semantic values."[50] In contrast to the theorist, who "proposes, analyzes, and criticizes theoretical claims", the critic works as an "artisan", crafting a novel analysis using the materials at hand.[51] Bordwell suggests that theory works as a "black box", a

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[50] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 249

[51] *Ibid.,* p. 250

pragmatic instrument that doesn't need taking apart in order to fulfil its use for the film critic.

Bordwell turns to Aristotle as a model of critical behaviour. He advocates a new *"Poetics"* of cinema – a rigorous, precise methodological foundation for writing on film.[52] While it is debatable whether Aristotelian poetics amounts to a totalizing theory, it is clear that Bordwell wishes poetics to be used to open up debate rather than close it off. His hope is that through a more sophisticated, nuanced, and consistent application of historical precedent and careful critical articulation, a reformed film criticism might be rescued from sterility, repetition and dogmatism. Bordwell conceives of this poetics as "the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects."[53] The model for such a poetics is to be found in the writings of the "classical aestheticians" (e.g. Aristotle), as well as in the Russian formalists and Bazin. Bordwell thinks that his approach, which incorporates *both* the study of style/form *and* hermeneutics, is more promising than either first or second-wave theorizing.

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[52] *Ibid.,* p. 264

[53] *Ibid.,* p. 266

The task of interpretation is to assign specific and pertinent semantic fields to a given film. Bordwell divides these fields into those distinguished by substantive features ("reflexivity", for example) and those distinguished by internal structure (clusters of similarity, oppositions, hierarchies, etc.) The film critic maps semantic fields onto the given film, utilizing hypotheses regarding textual unity, narrative coherence, and so on. Certain cues are identified as relevant, with the identification of these cues governed by "schemata", or those elements derived from conventional knowledge-structures, and "heuristics", or "inductive inferential procedures."[54] The critic employs these heuristics and schemata in a way that satisfies traditional rhetorical application, namely "ethical, pathetic, and pseudological proofs, familiar patterns or organization, and stylistic maneuvers."[55] In this way, elements are extracted from the film and organized in line with traditional forms of rhetorical presentation.

Bordwell distinguishes the role of interpreter from the role of the "poetician", suggesting that while both "make the film interpretable, the poetician may also display the film as intriguing or challenging, perhaps

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[54] *Ibid.,* p. 249

[55] *Ibid.,* p. 250

because its operations lie beneath or beyond interpretation."[56] A poetics of cinema discusses the historical conventions that drive particular modes of cinematic expression. Further, poetics "focuses on the *work* – the film as an object, but also the regulated effort that produces and uses it."[57] This poetics rests upon an "inferential model", where "the perceiver uses cues in the film to execute determinable operations, of which the construction of all sorts of meaning will be a part."[58]

Bordwell recognizes his presupposition that interpretive writing differs from theoretical writing. Theoretical writing, as mentioned earlier, is concerned with proposing and analyzing theoretical claims. While the critic traditionally adjudicates a single film or small group of films, the theorist is thought to be constructing a general set of principles that may account for certain universal (or at least common) cinematic phenomena. For Bordwell, the critic is seen to be "Making Meaning" by engaging in a rhetorically governed interpretive task, while the theorist is more concerned with the "big

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[56] *Ibid.*, p. 271

[57] *Ibid.*, 268

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 270

picture" of comprehending and appreciating movies. Where Bordwell describes a rhetorical approach to critical and interpretive writing about movies, my claim is that film theory itself should be conceived more rhetorically, rather than epistemologically. Its proper aim is not theoretical truth but persuasion.

Bordwell's argument makes the sweeping claim that "interpretive rhetoric, as a vehicle of the reasoning process characteristic of interpretation, forms the permanent basis of public critical activity."[59] The goal of the critic, as rhetor, is to make her conclusions accepted generally. Bordwell understands rhetoric to be "an instrument for rendering the conclusions of critical reasoning attractive to the interpreter's audience."[60] Furthermore, he illustrates ways in which "theory" is used as a rhetorical device by critics, as a "topos" or "stylistic appeal" to a general argument. This appeal "inevitably [contains] a persuasive component", a component that "resembles other rhetorical procedures."[61] Bordwell's central conclusion is that "defining critical rhetoric as the persuasive use of discourse has the advantage of recognizing the

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[59] *Ibid.,* p. 34

[60] *Ibid.,* p. 35

[61] *Ibid.,* p. 223

comparatively small role that rigorous logic and systematic knowledge play in

film interpretation."[62] Furthermore, the study of film criticism "requires us to

analyze interpretations for their characteristic argumentative, organizational,

and stylistic maneuvers."[63] Bordwell suggests that "rhetoric, classically

conceived, is concerned only with persuasion, not truth.[64] More modern

adherents argue (rhetorically) that in our age we cannot so easily consign the

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[62]   *Ibid.*, p. 39

[63]   *Ibid.*, p. 35

[64]   An obvious argument that may be raised is that if something is *true*, then it is
rhetorically the most convincing argument. The understanding, then, would be that
the closer to the truth a theory or argument gets, the more persuasive the claim. This,
however, presupposes not only a singular, foundational truth upon which the one,
accurate argument is to be erected, but that this truth can be known *a priori* in order
for the argument to be convincing in the first place. I am arguing that the elements
derived from movies, the *truths* that are used in order to generate a criticism or theory,
do not *in themselves* provide the methodology for determining adequate or appropriate
uses, nor do they appear to have a static and universally accepted meaning. There are
a multiplicity of conflicting interpretations of these cues, and the acceptability of one
truth over another is, I am arguing, a process of rhetorical argumentation. One truth
does not consistently trump another, and an argument can be convincing even if its
opponent claims a more staunch or "scientific" sense of truth. For example, the
psychoanalytic critic will not be dissuaded from his or her convictions simply because
someone has actually asked the set designer, or camera operator, or director, what they
were thinking while shooting a given scene. Deciding between conflicting analyses of
untestable "truths", such as claims regarding the unconscious or ideological
motivations of a given scene, makes the challenge of deciding between these truths
even more complicated. Style and eloquence, then, become strong tools in
encouraging the acceptance of a given argument, masking possible methodological
inconsistencies (inconsistent in relation to other forms of rhetorical discourse, not
inconsistent-in-and-of-itself), making it possible to delineate between arguments that
are relatively persuasive.

establishment of truth to the exact sciences, and that the process of arriving at consensual agreement is at least a worthwhile, and possibly the only, path to such truth as is allotted to humankind."[65] Bordwell claims that his own conception of rhetoric lies closer to the classical model.

In contrast to the traditional forms of institutionalized criticism, Bordwell sees his *own* project as being theoretically sound. Where second-wave criticism has assembled a "battery of all-purpose heuristics" to drive particular analyses, Bordwell demands a more subtle, context-sensitive engagement of particular films and particular questions about film. He knows that "in many American universities film criticism is legitimated by virtue of the theory that underwrites it, not by reference to claims about the intrinsic value of cinema or even the strengths of particular interpretations. Theory justifies the object of study, while concentrations on the object can be attacked as naive empiricism.[66]

Bordwell's contribution to the third wave is a new "conceptual framework within which particular questions about films' composition and

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[65] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 34

[66] *Ibid.,* p. 97

effects can be posed."[67] Bordwell declares his poetics to be both more concrete than second-wave theory, and more wide-ranging than practical criticism. Bordwell sees his poetics "as the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects."[68] This poetics begins with the assumption that "no a priori device or set of meanings can serve as the basis of an invariable critical method."[69] Making all films conform to the same criteria ignores the diversity of movies. On this view, "no interpretive schema or heuristic can be definitively abandoned, since an open-textured poetics of film might find anything appropriate to illuminate a given film in a particular historical context."[70] In other words, this poetics of film is not one more totalizing theory that would sweep away all that has gone before. It is a way of allowing film conversation to continue and proliferate rather than guiding it to a magisterial closure.

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[67]   *Ibid.*, p. 273

[68]   *Ibid.*, p. 266-67

[69]   *Ibid.*, p. 267

[70]   *Ibid.*, p. 267

Chapter 1

3. *Noël Carroll - From Theory to theories*

Like Bordwell, Noël Carroll suggests that the bridge between the first and
second-wave of theorizing was constructed from the writings of André Bazin.
Bazin helped develop two highly influential conceptual tools – realist
theorizing, and the *auteur* theory. For the realists who followed Bazin, the
thing that cinema did best (and, accordingly, the criterion by which the best
cinema was to be judged) was provide an accurate representation of the world.
Bazin's explicit claim was that film provided an "objective representation of the
past, a veritable slice of reality."[71] Techniques which enhanced a film's
verisimilitude (for example, the 'deep-focus' cinematography characteristic of
directors like Renoir and Welles) were singled out for critical praise.

Autuerism was less a formalized theory, more a form of politics or a style
of connoisseurship. As Peter Wollen describes it, the *politique des auteurs*
developed from the group of critics who wrote for *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The
theory "sprang from the conviction that the American cinema was worth

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[71] Carroll, Noël. *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory.* New
       York: Columbia University Press, 1988., p. 3

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studying in depth."[72] These critics held that the principal way of organizing film discourse was to focus on the single creator/author.

Carroll points out that Bazin's realism and the *auteurist* idea allowed for film to be studied academically, as literature or fine art has been. By isolating a number of directors' work one could provide a canon of "classics" on the basis of which other films could be compared and studied. However, as the *auteurist* and realist ideas came under greater scrutiny, severe limitations in these models became evident.

The first major limitation was that the auteurist conception seemed to reverse the traditional understanding of what makes art great. Historically, one would ascribe the title of "great artist" to the person who created a great *piece* of art. In this instance, the critical focus is on the produced *artwork*, not on the creator. The auteurist camp, according to its critics, reversed this trend, presupposing instead that the focus should be cast upon the great *author* who then produced good works. The claim seems to assume that great artists come before great artistic creations. Meanwhile, realism began to be seen as simply a replacement for nuanced technical and aesthetic considerations. Carroll suggests that Bazin's insistence that great cinema necessarily was *realist* cinema,

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[72]   Wollen, Peter. "Signs and Meaning in the Cinema." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gerald Mast et al., 589-605. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972., p. 590

with its privileging of the "deep focus shot", ended up being no less parochial and dogmatic than the competing theory of montage.[73]

The debate over authorial intention is not, of course, restricted to cinema studies. However, in the case of an industrial medium like film, the ascription of authorial intention is more difficult than in arts such as literature, poetry, and drama. The socio-industrial context in which a film is constructed conflicts with traditional concepts of individual authorship. Even today, credit for dialogue is given to the screenwriters, while it is the producer who gets to pick up the Oscar for best picture. Yet, thanks to Bazin and others, the director is usually seen, in the ideal case, as not merely another technician crafting a film from the script or the idea of the producer. The director is an artist utilizing the *"caméra stylo'"* – writing or sketching, as it were, with the cinematic medium itself. Carroll claims that the parochial *auteur* conception spawned by Bazin's writings serves as evidence of the dogmatism that has plagued much of the conversation of cinema from the beginning. By resting on totalizing conclusions that treat all movies the same, the theoretical claims inevitably became repetitive and suspect.

[73] Carroll, Noël. *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988., p. 4

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Carroll subdivides the second-wave of theorizing into two chronological : stages, the first where Saussurean linguistics was the dominant model, and the second, more relevant for Anglo/American criticism, where "Marxism and psychoanalysis became the preferred conceptual tools."[74] The change was from a structuralist understanding of meaning towards more subtle psychological claims directed at the hidden impulses that condition how we understand or respond to movies. Like Bordwell, Carroll feels that the second-wave is characterized by theorists using hyperbole to make bold, unsubstantiated claims about movies with little regard to methodological consistency. With jargon-laden appeals to Lacanian observations about sexuality and Althusserian claims about ideology, second-wave theorists created their own totalizing critiques. While the first-wave produced totalizing theories regarding the aesthetic nature of cinema based on particular elements (montage, realism, etc.), the second-wave theorists totalized the political idea that ideology was latent in all movies.

Carroll argues that: "If the Russians argued that film was essentially : montage, [second-wave theorists] maintain that film is essentially ideological, which, for them, means that film form intrinsically possesses an ideological

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[74] *Ibid.,* p. 1

content which is to be unpacked in the light of the laws of subject positioning."[75] He accuses second-wave critics of being guilty of the "fallacy of the indigent metaphor," meaning that the metaphors and analogies of second-wave criticism "are generally so vague and abstract that they are not internally rich enough to supply us with a picture of anything."[76] Carroll further points to the "fallacy of equivocation" running through many of the second-wave theorists. His charge is that film theory as practiced during the second-wave has been "little more than a tissue of puns" – a diaphanous sheet that is placed over a medium by a critical practice intent on perpetuating its own academic and professional purposes.[77]

The puns of second-wave theorizing are quite remarkable in their methodological dexterity. Terms such as "framing" are used in every sense, from mere isolating or enclosing to literally being framed like a painting, without any consistency or regularity. Carroll finds the catch-phrases of second-wave theorizing become interchangeable: "*center* and *unity* go together

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[75] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 257

[76] Carroll, Noël. *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988., p. 228

[77] *Ibid.,* p. 229

in the same way that *gap* and *absence* could be grouped with *cold* and *gray* ...

or with *ping* (rather than *pong*)."[78]

Carroll charges that second-wave critics use pat theories as formulae, serving to "blur out" specific elements that may be of interest within the film. Their "top down" approach provides answers that are "too general; specific films, specific film forms, and specific filmic articulations are all painted with the same brush."[79] He argues that second-wave theory "is engaged in the totalizing attempt to erect The Theory of Film."[80] He understands this to be "a theory that contrives to explicate in one unified theoretical vocabulary queries into issues as diverse as the mechanism of point-of-view editing, the nature of the avant-garde, the mechanisms of movie advertising, the nature of the soundtrack ... etc."[81] In other words, a totalizing theory literally seeks to provide *all* answers to *all* elements of movies. As he describes the situation: "By the mid-1980s [second-wave] theory had become sterile through repetition.... The theory posited a narrow set of causes or functions: this film

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[78] *Ibid.,* p. 230

[79] *Ibid.,* p. 233

[80] *Ibid.,* p. 230

[81] *Ibid.,* p. 230

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or that television show always converted the Imaginary to the Symbolic or positioned the individual as a knowing and desiring subject. Everything else was details. Many ... object to this "totalizing" explanatory machinery."[82] Carroll admits that he has no way of showing that this construction of a totalizing theory is impossible. He nonetheless feels that the way that second-wave theorists go about trying to construct it is problematic. Carroll suggests that second-wave theorists adopt a theoretical claim from another discipline, say Lacanian and Althusserian ideas of "subject positioning", and then more or less arbitrarily graft these ideas onto specific phenomena of movie production and reception. The general theory is then invoked to explain any aspect of cinema that they want to delve into, from the form or effectiveness of advertisements to notions of continuity editing.

What clearly emerges from these totalizing theories is that "everything you ever wanted to know about film gets roughly the same answer."[83] All cinematic phenomena are accounted for by the same formula. Jackie Chan films can not readily be distinguished from Bergman's, as they each become

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[82] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 12

[83] Carroll, Noël. *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988., p. 230

coopted by the totalizing theoretical claims. As Carroll shows, "the explanatory bottom line turns out to be pretty much the same no matter what film, and no matter what level of filmic phenomena, is being discussed. This is not only downright monotonous, it is theoretically threadbare, if not vacuous."[84] Totalizing theories are *too* general, as specific films and specific phenomena are similarly coated with the same, wide, monochromatic brushstroke.

Carroll suggests that by framing precise questions, the critical task of cinematic theorizing may be rescued from its current state of vacuity. His final suggestion is that the language employed by contemporary theory has obfuscated rather than enhanced the discussion of film, and that academic analysis has been reduced to slogan shouting and "unexamined assumptions." His alternative is to call for "new modes of theorizing ... we must start again."[85]

As an alternative, Carroll advocates a piece-meal approach. Rather than the top-down mechanism of Grand Theory, Carroll calls for theor*ies*, multiple instantiations of critical practice that can account for the nuanced differences that occur in a diverse body of works. As he explains, "instead of searching for
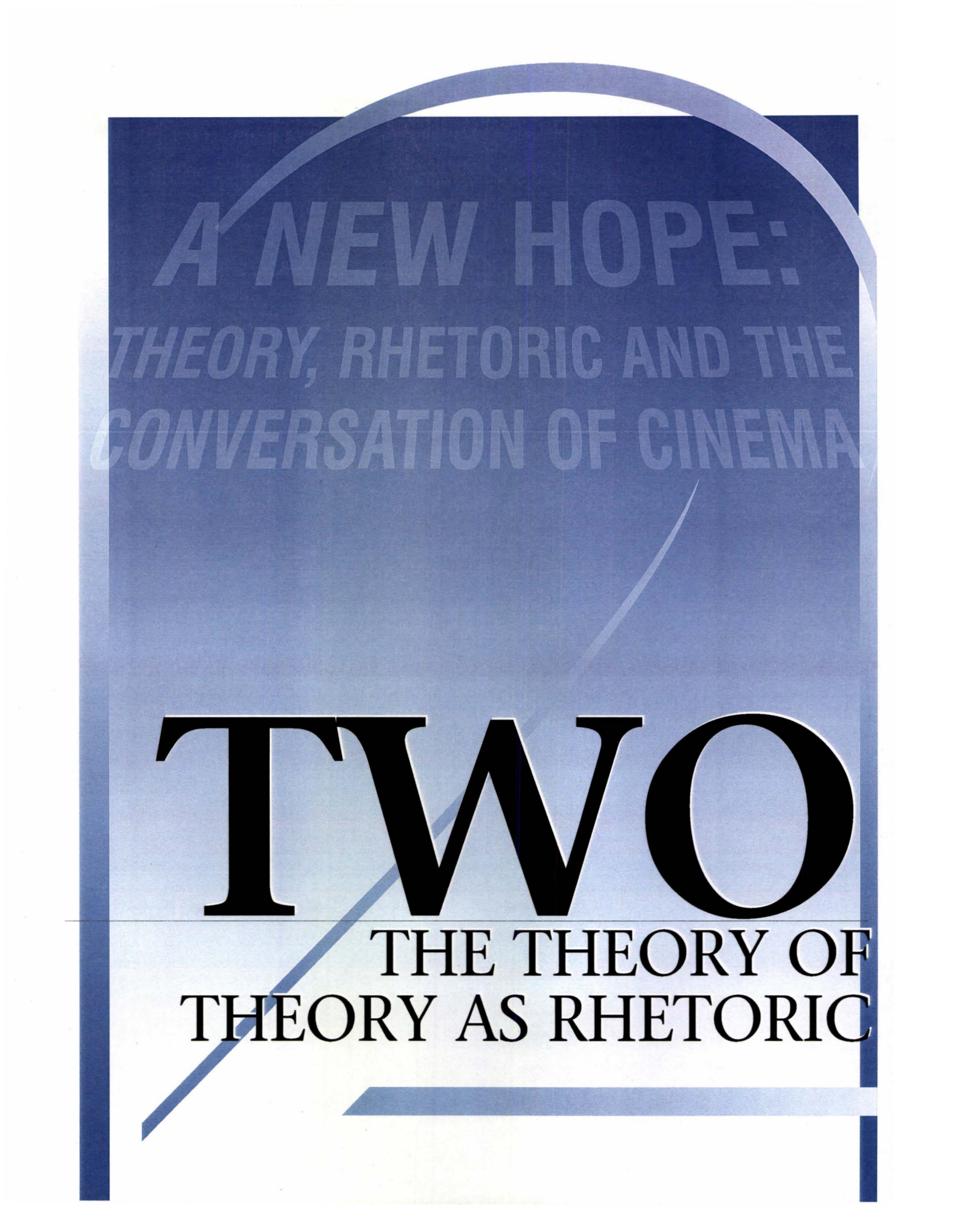
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[84]   *Ibid.,* p. 231

[85]   *Ibid.,* p. 234

the unified theory of film, we should attempt to carve out clear and

manageable questions about aspects of film ... and then go on to answer

them."[86] Bordwell argues that Carroll's "piecemeal" theory is comparable to his

own project, as it is occupied with "building theories not of subjectivity,

ideology, or culture in general but rather specific or particular phenomena."[87]

In other words, film theorizing about films, rather than the process of adopting

external theories and using films as examples to justify or illustrate theoretical

claims.

In this chapter, I have traced the two waves of theoretical and critical

writings on film, and I have sketched the respective projects of Carroll, on film

theory, and Bordwell, on film criticism. In the next chapter, I will begin to

show how Bordwell's rhetorical model describes the structure of argument for

the film critic, and I will begin expanding the model's scope to include film

theorizing as well.

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[86] *Ibid.,* p. 232

[87] Bordwell, David. "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory."
      In *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël
      Carroll , 3-36. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1996., p. 29

A NEW HOPE:
THEORY, RHETORIC AND THE
CONVERSATION OF CINEMA

TWO

THE THEORY OF
THEORY AS RHETORIC

Chapter 2: The Theory of Theory as Rhetoric

1. Rhetoric in Film Discourse

Carroll describes rhetoric as "a matter of influencing thought – a matter of persuasion, as a consequence of presenting material in a way that is structured to secure an audience's belief in certain conclusions, or, at least, their favorable disposition toward those conclusions."[88] Bordwell believes that the elements of rhetorical argumentation condition critical practice, forming the basis for judging one criticism acceptable rather than another. The critic utilizes the devices of rhetoric in order to generate an acceptable argument and the result is to convince the reader.

Many types of arguments may be utilized by the rhetor – the goal, after all, is not methodological consistency but to convince the reader of a particular point of view. Bordwell's rhetorical model draws upon a reinterpretation of classical structures identified by such thinkers as Aristotle. Critical rhetoric depends on three elements: inventio, disposito, and elocutio.

Bordwell understands inventio to be "the devising of substantive arguments." Some inventio arguments "appeal to the virtues of the speaker"

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[88] Carroll, Noël. *Theorizing the Moving Image.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996., p. 280

with jargonistic or highly technical arguments, provoking satisfaction in those

who can decode these claims. Other arguments "rely on emotional appeals to

the audience, " where the film in question is treated as news or an event, and

the claims are tied to issues of a star or director's return after a hiatus, or a

spectacularly expensive film that finally is being seen. According to Bordwell,

both sorts of argument usually take the form of a "pseudodeductive argument",

or *enthymeme*. Bordwell gives this example of the argument at work:[89]

> A good film has property *p*.
> This film has (or lacks) property *p*.
> This is a good (or bad) film.[90]

Importantly, there are only a few items that have been allowed to consistently

fill property *p*. These limitations often go unnoticed, and are therefore all the

more powerful. They are the product of a critical orthodoxy, rather than a

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[89] The term "Enthymeme" is Bordwell's; his usage thereof is idiosyncratic. The term enthymeme has at least three distinct meanings. In the older sense, as used by Aristotle, an enthymeme was an argument of probability, one grounded in rhetorical moves rather than logical structure; this is clearly the sense in which Bordwell is using the term. Cicero uses the term to indicate an even more dramatic argumentative structure, in which the argument ends with its contrary. The modern sense of the word, as used in logical discourse, stems from a misunderstanding of Aristotle; it involves the suppression of a premise within a syllogism. It should be evident that Bordwell, following Aristotle, is describing enthymemes in a manner inconsistent with contemporary academic usage; as this is a discussion of Bordwell's argument, and as his meaning is clear, I shall be following his usage in what follows. [The history of the meaning of "enthymeme" may be found in the OED.]

[90] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 37

systematic self investigation. These are the traditional elements of film meaning that the critic describes, from character to subject matter, issues of realism, messages derived from the film, and so on.

Bordwell mentions the role of the content of p only in passing, yet surely the question of what *counts* as an acceptable property for p is the heart of the rhetorical model. Totalizing theories, for example, posit that only narrowly construed and specific elements (say, montage) may serve as "property p." Yet nowhere is a justification for allowing x to count offered; or, if it is, it turns out to rest on a further assumption, usually implicit, regarding the standard practices of filmmaking or interpretation. Particular claims rest upon particular practices, but the presumption in favour of the practices is itself one among a variety of claims. These claims rest themselves upon convincing a reader one way or another, not by some sort of appeal to absolute truth.

Inventio arguments may also consist of *topoi,* or "particular stereotyped arguments that the audience will grant without question."[91] These are "evaluative maxims"; in film criticism they often appear in the form of clichés such as "if you spend the money, you should put it on the screen" or "good acting looks natural." These maxims work to effectively gloss over

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[91] *Ibid.,* p. 37

generalizations and methodological inconsistencies; that is, by directing the reader's attention to some presumably common (and inarguable) position, they bridge the gap between the conclusion and the means used to reach it. Since "we all agree that x," any argument without obvious flaws which allows w to conclude x will be found plausible; to the degree that reaching x is important, we will be more likely to ignore unexamined presuppositions and processes used in attaining the desired goal. They also reinforce those narrow options the debate allows to stand in for p in the above enthymeme. Whatever works once will be expected, however slightly, to work again. Such expectations can in themselves contribute to further "successes" – that is, to the apparently appropriate usage of a particular approach, regardless of omissions or inaccuracies – which in turn entrench the further definitions more solidly. And, most importantly, "reviewers may appeal, on different occasions, to logically contradictory examples, enthymemes, or topoi."[92] The ultimate goal of the rhetor remains simply to convince; success, therefore, is measured by the conviction produced in the reader, not in the consistency of the means used to produce that conviction.

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[92] *Ibid.,* p. 37

The second rhetorical category is *dispositio*, referring to the arrangement of the inventio arguments in an appealing way. Rhetorical moves such as opening with a summary/introduction, the development of the argument, and summary conclusion indicate the accepted guidelines for the construction of the criticism. Bordwell suggests that there are so few options available that it is nearly impossible for the critic "to create a distinct identity" on the basis of an article's organization.

Instead, the critic finds his or her own distinct voice in the third rhetorical category. *Elocutio* may broadly be understood as the *style* of the discourse. Bordwell suggests that "along with a skill in argument and a range of knowledge, style is the film reviewer's chief means of construction of a persona." The celebrity reviewer, say, Roger Ebert or Pauline Kael, is an archetypical example of this. Such critics are far better known than the majority of the films upon which they have commented. Criticism, meant to be an impersonal institution reactive to the art, cultivates celebrity through recognition of a colourful style.[93]

Would appeals to such things as logic and systematic or historical knowledge free theoretical writing from its rhetorical basis? According to

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[93] *Ibid.,* p. 38

Bordwell, the answer would be no; these appeals are merely more sophisticated or nuanced "cues" to draw upon. There are no doubt conflicting methodologies, and what counts as an acceptable argument is of course tied up within the critical discourse itself. But, most importantly, it seems that the use, accurate or otherwise, of logic and history is pragmatically beneficial insofar as it serves to convince the audience of the critic's claim. It is simply a more regimented, tested critical strategy that, while it may be placed under critical scrutiny, is still performing a strongly rhetorical task.

Chapter 2

2. Rhetoric and Ebert.

To illustrate the rhetorical structures that Bordwell discusses, I have chosen a review by Roger Ebert of the film *Saving Private Ryan*.[94] Ebert's status as a popular critic can not be overestimated – with the recent death of his partner Gene Siskel, he is now almost certainly the most famous living film reviewer. His review of the popular war film demonstrates many of the key elements of Bordwell's rhetorical model.

Ebert introduces his review with a typical gesture, summarizing what he finds to be the key plot elements. Ebert quickly demonstrates his understanding of the structure of the *Ryan*'s explicit narrative. Quoting from the film is a useful tool in producing this summary, as these lines (in this case, the key line "This Ryan better be worth it") not only demonstrate central elements of the plot, but situate the reviewer as a close reader perceptive enough to be able to recount accurately elements of the script.

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[94] The complete text of this review is included in the Appendix. All quotations are drawn from this source.

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Ebert relies upon sweeping rhetorical gestures to make his point. Appealing to "Hollywood mythology", he observes that traditionally films "turn on the actions of individual heroes." *Ryan*, it seems, has reversed this trend, making the action more in line, according to Ebert, with historical fact. By appealing to Hollywood mythology in general and the specific events of the D-Day invasion, Ebert has strengthened the plausibility of his critical claim. He has situated himself as both an expert on historical fact and a keen observer of the subtleties of cinema.

A key rhetorical move is the appeal to Ebert's vast experience with films. *Ryan*'s opening scene is, in Ebert's words, "as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen." Comparing it to another film, at this stage *Platoon*, further strengthens the critic's position of expertise without really appealing in any theoretically perspicuous way to the facts of the matter. How could his statement be falsified? By showing him another war film that's even *more* graphic? This is an effective rhetorical gesture as it reemphasises the fact of Ebert's expertise. A person who had seen a limited number of war films could make the identical claim without the same rhetorical conviction, for by citing from other films and drawing upon his recognized prestige as a critic and filmgoer, Ebert is appealing directly to his own celebrity status – that is, his expertise as ratified by the fact that "everybody knows" him to be a critic well

versed in film history – to make a critical point. Nor is this all; Ebert's appeal rests on a quantification: that he has seen *x number* (where *x* is understood to be large) of films. If someone who had seen only a dozen films, say, were to make exactly the same assertions ("*x* is as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen") it would not be taken as a strong claim, since the presumption is that such a person has not seen many war films. Yet it might well be that she has seen suppressed newsreels of a bloody battle, or was in said battle, and doesn't ever see war movies because they're not "real" enough. But this experience is not what *counts* in film reviewing, where the relevant factor is that of having viewed a very large number of films in general. Why this should be is unaddressed by a writer such as Ebert, who would probably find the matter insignificant. After all, the specifics or carefulness of the criticism's construction is, of course, entirely beside the point. Ebert's claim has to do with convincing his reader that it's a violent movie, and that he is qualified to pass such a judgement; the hyperbole only strengthens this rhetorical move.

Ebert suggests that the violence of the opening scene is "necessary to establish" the middle section of the film. Technically, this is a banal statement – he is basically suggesting that the beginning is necessary to get to the middle, because without the beginning the middle wouldn't be a middle at all. What comes across, however, is that the violence of the introduction is justified on

narrative grounds, an aesthetic claim with only rhetoric to back it up. This is

not to say that it is *merely* rhetoric, but rather that the plausibility of this claim,

and the acceptability of Ebert's argument, depends on him convincing us that

it is so. Ebert does not justify the violence by appealing to the film itself, but

rather through comparisons to other films; examined carefully, his claim is

simply a sophisticated version of the "if you liked this you'll love that" play so

common in advertising.[95] On its face it is an empty statement, but as a tool of

rhetoric used in the context of a newspaper review, Ebert's claim is highly

effective in convincing the reader to, in this case, go see the film.

After some more extended quotations and plot summarization, Ebert

identifies what he feels to be the "turning point" of the film. No real reasons

are given, but by this time in the article it has already been established that the

expertise of the critic is justified by numerous quotations and references to

other films. These multiple references should not be underestimated, as they

firmly situate both the critic's expertise and the film's own role within film

history. By being part of the continuum of cinematic expression, Ebert is

showing *Ryan* to hold similarities with other films. The relation can be due to

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[95] This is Exemplified by the oft-repeated slogan taking the form of: "You'll LAUGH!, You'll CRY!, It's better than *Cats!*", where *Cats* stands in for any contemporary successful play, film, book, or even consumer product.

genre considerations (war films), or emotional and thematic ones (*City Lights*).
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The fact remains that the critic is drawing convincing connections that strengthen his position as expert critic in order to situate this film among a pantheon of good films (the references, after all, are to already accepted "classic", or good, cinema.)

Without giving away the ending (an obvious rhetorical faux pas in film criticism) Ebert suggests that "Spielberg and his screenwriter, Robert Rodat, have done a subtle and rather beautiful thing: They have made a philosophical film about war almost entirely in terms of action." This sounds, of course, very plausible. Yet Ebert takes for granted that the notion of a "philosophical film" is a coherent one, and that it is through the narrative (screenplay) and direction (Spielberg) that this philosophy may be presented. Ebert does not, for instance, point to the costume designer, or music composer, as a contributor to the philosophical presentation. The idea that film may communicate through narrative and direction, not through (say) montage or costume or non-diagetic music, is here an unquestioned theoretical presupposition.
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Ebert claims that Spielberg expresses "even the most thoughtful ideas in the simplest words and actions." The next line claims, paradoxically, that in fact the ideas are communicated "in feelings, not words." Yet another war

film, this time *All Quiet on the Western Front*, is invoked to bolster this claim. It is left unclear what it is about this film that leads one to believe that philosophical content may be communicated visually rather than verbally. Similarly, it remains unclear how feelings may be so explicit in an actor's performance that they are central to the narrative's construction. These are unquestioned generalizations about particular elements of *Ryan* – in short, unquestioned theoretical ideals that Ebert employs to make his rhetorical point.

Ebert hyperbolically dubs Spielberg "as technically proficient as any filmmaker alive." He ties this proficiency to the director's ability to muster the resources of Hollywood, making *Ryan* the result of the vast sums of money at the disposal of the Hollywood director and the crafted art of a specific filmmaker. This view of the director exemplifies classic auteur theory, and it seems so plausible because it is repeated so effectively throughout the review.

After praising the coherence of the cinematography, Ebert speaks of the humanity of the actors' performances. Tying the experience to yet another classic, this time Chaplin's *City Lights*, Ebert concludes by suggesting that not only will *Ryan* make you weep, it will do much more than that – it will make you think.

Overall, this review of *Saving Private Ryan* is effective on many grounds. First, it invokes the powerful rhetorical structures outlined by Bordwell. The enthymeme is clear: Good films are those which are thought-provoking and realistic; *Saving Private Ryan* is thought provoking and realistic; therefore, it is a good film. The critic need not *prove* the initial theoretical claim. In the context of criticism, the presupposition is unquestioned, employed strictly for the rhetorical weight that such a seemingly logical conclusions presents. Further proof of the rhetorical construction of Ebert's review rests in his many references to other films, and to the technical considerations of the actors and cinematographer.

The layout of the article is consistent with most criticism – an opening summary, a few remarks about its quality, and a conclusion that reinforces the fact that these qualities are found throughout the film. The evaluative or advisory role of the critique should not be underestimated, as the most potent rhetorical ploy in professional film criticism, after all, is directed towards a single goal: to make the reader decide whether or not she should see the film. Perhaps the most powerful rhetorical element in the whole review is the number of stars the film received. The binary thumbs up/thumbs down made famous by Siskel, Ebert, and the audience at Roman gladiatorial matches, certainly would have made the classical rhetoricians proud. Ebert has chosen

his ground with care bred from long experience, and solidly entrenched himself therein. The review projects sufficient degrees of both authority and accessibility; the reader knows, or at least thinks she knows, *what* Ebert is saying and *why* he is likely to be right in saying it.

The choices of the elements that I draw from Ebert's review are themselves debatable. However, the claims and rhetorical gestures remain fairly consistent throughout. A different critic could illustrate different cues, extracting different elements from the same article. My purpose is to use Ebert's review to support my position; I thus choose the elements which do so; another writer, with different intentions, would approach Ebert differently. From our respective points of view, the other might appear to be wrong, but there would be nothing obvious within either viewpoint to compel acquiescence from the other. The forces propelling each interpretation might be opaque to the other interpreter, but this merely indicates the boundaries elected by each, not some external truth about the article at hand. Bordwell's conclusion from the variety of criticisms is that "knowing when to stop one's interpretation is not wholly a matter of cognitive problem-solving."[96] His claim is that the critic's "efforts toward novelty and plausibility are governed by the

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[96] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 246

hunch that one can make a good case for the reading."[97] Bordwell suggests that
novel criticisms and interpretations demand a display of *"indignation"*,
indignantly condemning previous criticisms, climbing above the fray and
momentarily declaring oneself king of the hill.

Bordwell argues that, particularly in academia, novelty is governed by
plausibility. This plausibility depends on shared assumptions and schemata,
which must be in place in order to build consensus or comprehension. A truly
novel interpretation would be unintelligible insofar as it differs radically from
the discourse to which it is responding. This leads Bordwell to the ironic claim
that "the most novel critical school is likely to be more old than new."[98] Given
the necessity of debate to adjudicate acceptability or plausibility, critics will
utilized shared assumptions, procedures and schemata to anchor these views.

These rhetorical elements are therefore utilized strategically, employed
in order to generate an accepted novel reading or interpretation. This is clearly
illustrated by not only this contemporary review by Ebert, but the seven

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[97]   *Ibid.,* p. 246

[98]   *Ibid.,* p. 247

historically differentiated critiques of *Psycho* that Bordwell analyses in *Making*

Meaning.[99]

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[99] *Ibid.,* pp. 224-248

Chapter 2

3. Enabling Kane

Citizen Kane has been the focus of much discussion since at least the

early 1950s. It has played many roles – as the definitive auteur film, the

definitive ideological film, and so on. As Norman Gambill says, *"Citizen Kane*

is the *Hamlet*[100] of film – not just because of the multiplicity of interpretations

suggested by its structure and characterization, but because it has been written

about more than any other work in its field."[101] Laura Mulvey suggests that all

this writing is akin to the search for the Philosopher's stone or the Holy Grail;

after all, with *Kane* "each generation of moviegoers, video watchers, film critics,

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[100] Umberto Eco describes T. S. Eliot's take on *Hamlet*, saying he attributed our fascination with the play "not to the fact that it was a successful work (actually he [Eliot] considered it one of Shakespeare's less fortunate efforts) but to the imperfection of its composition. He viewed *Hamlet* as the result of an unsuccessful fusion of several earlier versions of the story, and so the puzzling ambiguity of the main character was due to the author's difficulty in putting together different topoi. So both public and critics find *Hamlet* beautiful because it is interesting, but believe it is interesting because it is beautiful." [Eco, Umberto. "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage." Trans. Weaver, William. Travels in Hyper Reality. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. 197-212, pp. 201-202] I argue that this situation equally pertains to the interest shown for such "great" works of cinema as *Kane*, worshiped warts and all for a vast number of conflicting reasons.

[101] Gottesman, Ronald. *Perspectives on Citizen Kane.* New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996., p. 197

film theorists, set out in search of the bit of the puzzle that will make it all fall into place."[102] Much like the reporter trying to solve the puzzle of Kane's final word, so too do a great number of thinkers reflect upon this single film.

I take up the discussion of *Citizen Kane* in order to illustrate how theoretical writing shares many of the same rhetorical strategies as critical writing. The history of the discussions surrounding *Kane* is almost more fascinating than the story of the making of this landmark film. Literally rescued by French critics in the 1950s, it was to become the touchstone of academic film analysis and theorizing. All the major controversies – from auteur theory to montage theory, from psychoanalysis to postmodernist historical critique – were foisted upon this one film. It became the focus for much of the conversation of film, a focus that no doubt contributed to the recent crowning of *Kane* as the best American film ever made.[103]

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[102] Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane*. Edited by Edward Buscombe, *BFI Film Classics*. Lond: BFI Publishing, 1992., p. 9

[103] The American Film Institute listed *Kane* at the top of their 100 Greatest American Films in 1998.

If it is essentially unanimous[104] that the film is at the very least a good movie, there are several conflicting reasons why this should be the case. Bazin was instrumental in presenting *Kane* as the definitive auteur film. His claim, broadly, was that *Citizen Kane* was the product of the singular genius of Orson Welles. Not only had this artist infused the film with his own personal style, but the use of "deep-focus" cinematography opened up the possibilities of cinematic realism. Challenging those that would dismiss Welles' achievement, Bazin champions the auteur's capabilities: "Even if Welles did not invent the cinematic devices employed in *Citizen Kane*, one should nevertheless credit him with the invention of their *meaning*."[105] Bazin claims that Welles wrote in a film language, unlike the French who merely adapt literature for the screen. Welles' "way of 'writing' a film [was] undeniably his own."[106]

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[104] One notable exception is Jean-Paul Satre, who derisively thought *Kane* "an *intellectual work*, the work of an *intellectual*...unique for the United States but one which won't gain in any way by being transplanted to Europe." Even still, he shared with Bazin the understanding that *Kane* "is first of all the work of one man. Orson Welles did everything." Cited from Gottesman, Ronald. *Perspectives on Citizen Kane.* New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996. 613., p. 56

[105] Gottesman, Ronald. *Perspectives on Citizen Kane.* New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996., p. 231

[106] *Ibid.,* p. 231

The presupposition, of course, is that these qualities are good things. Tacitly, the argument runs *"Citizen Kane* is a wonderful film, and Welles a genius director, because of *X."* What is fascinating about the writings on *Kane* is that so many different things take the place of *X.* It is equivalent to what Bordwell earlier described as an enthymeme, with the debate over what counted as taking the place of *p* in "This film has (or lacks) property *p."* With Bazin the argument rests upon ideals of individual achievement and the importance of medium specificity. These are, broadly, theoretical claims, presuppositions of aesthetic or hermeneutic criteria by which the critic makes claims. These theoretical presuppositions serve as foundations for the critical claim, namely that *Kane* is a great (or not so great) film.

In contrast to Bazin's claims about Welles' singular achievement with the film, Pauline Kael[107] wrote a revisionist account of the making of *Kane* that concluded it was in fact Herman Mankiewicz who was responsible for the film's greatness. She points to the later failures of Welles after *Kane,* suggesting that with his co-workers on the film "he was a prodigy of accomplishments; without

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[107] While Kael, unlike Bazin, is not recognized usually as a "theorist" *per se,* her claims *do* offer sophisticated and developed generalizations about what films *ought* to be. In this sense, she is no less a theory-minded than Eisenstein, though less obviously "academic" than Metz, Baudry, or even Bordwell and Carroll.

them, he flew apart, became disorderly."[108] Her challenge is to the sentiment

exposed in a quote of Welles': "Theatre is a collective experience; cinema is the

work of one single person."[109] Her thesis is that the idea for *Kane* was originally

Herman Mankiewicz's, and that the credit for the film should be at least shared

with him, if not balanced in the screenwriter's favour. Kael's challenge,

interestingly, is not to the quality of the film. The argument is over who is

responsible for it. Kael's arguments fly in the face of Bazin's and Welles' auteur

sensibilities, and instead try to advocate a general view that it is through

collaboration that films are made, and a crucial part of that collaboration is the

screenwriter him- or herself.

This type of claim is, of course, theoretical. It is theoretical by being a

generalized claim that underwrites critical adjudications, providing a

foundation upon which these judgements can be made. If it is generally or

theoretically true that films are the product of individual auteurs, then Bazin

is right when he claims that *Kane* is a great film because of its personal style.

If films are rather a product of cooperative activity, then Kael's arguments are

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[108] Kael, Pauline. *Raising Kane*. New York: Limelight, 1984., 84

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 3

more appropriate. There is no debate among these thinkers about the quality of the film itself, the debate instead involves the underlying *theoretical* claims.

How, then, can one choose between these two disparate arguments? Are good films, and *Kane* in particular, the singular production of one man, or are they instead a collaborative effort spawned from the ideas of the scriptwriter? What would *count* as a solution to this problem? The difficulty arises when one recognizes that these theoretical claims rest upon foundational presuppositions regarding the nature of cinema. There is no truth that one can appeal to outside of the conversation in order to settle this debate once and for all. The empirical facts may be brought out by both sides in order to justify their positions. What is of interest is that each side will use these facts as cues in order to create their convincing argument.

The same fact may be expressed in contradictory ways by differing sides, all for the purpose of convincing the reader of a particular position. For example, both Bazin and Kael would agree with the historical fact that Mankiewicz wrote the first draft of *The American*, the script that would then, after much revision, become the basis of *Kane*. This fact, however, would do nothing to dissuade Bazin, just as the fact that Welles directed and starred in the film does nothing to dissuade Kael from her position.

For Bazin, the script is but another element, like the actor's performance or the light's luminosity, to be shaped by the auteur into her own personal vision. The script, it would seem, is another limitation in the same way that studio control was a limitation. The film had to break through, literally become something above and beyond what was on the written page. This sentiment has already been expressed in Bazin's assertion that Welles "wrote with cinema" rather than adopting traditional literary forms. For Kael, Mankiewicz's involvement becomes an overlooked element of the *Kane* saga. With the focus on the *wunderkind* Welles, too little attention was payed to the real creator of *Kane*, Mankiewicz himself. The original idea and subsequent drafts expose this fact, and illustrate that it was the collaboration of Mankiewicz and cinematographer Greg Toland with Welles that accounts for the film's greatness.

Robert Carringer takes a slightly different tack, claiming that *Kane*'s greatness comes from what amounts to the greatest collaboration in the history of film. Careful to credit both Welles' and Mank's contributions, Carringer includes the cinematographer Toland as part of the combination that created the great film. The status of the film's quality is not in question: as Carringer extols, "into the new millennium *Citizen Kane* retains its lofty position as the

ultimate achievement to which all else in film aspires."[110] What is at issue is

not aesthetic or critical adjudication, but who should be praised for the film's

success. Historical facts are presented in order to encourage a particular point

of view, namely, that *Kane* was ultimately a collaborative affair. However,

arguing that *Kane* is a collaborative affair makes sense only within a context in

which the contraposition also appears to make sense: that is, that filmmaking

is *not* a collaborative affair. As before, the argument requires a specific context

if it is even to make sense at all.

Many hundreds of people are employed in the making of a major motion

picture. The fact that technicians, actors, set designers, gaffers and all other

personnel contribute to the filmmaking is indisputable. Pointing to elements

such as the credits, where Welles placed his name on the same screen as Greg

Toland, Carringer suggests that Welles basically shared the creation of the film

with his director of photography. However, Bazin and the other auteurists

concede this fact, suggesting that the great film auteurs were able to overcome

the impersonal nature of studio film production to inject their own personality

into the production. Carringer, in contrast, suggests that three people (of the

hundreds) are responsible for the greatness of *Kane.*

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[110] Carringer, Robert L. *The Making of Citizen Kane.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996., p. 121

Laura Mulvey suggests that Carringer "does justice to all creative contributions" while putting to rest the question of "who is the true author of *Citizen Kane?*"[111] Mulvey, it seems, misses something crucial: Carringer has merely spread the creative authorship over several people, rather than having focussed primarily on the screenwriter or director. His book does not account for many of the actors' performances that contribute to the quality of *Kane*, and he certainly spends more time on Welles than he does on the boom operator or the plaster maker. The necessary claim here is that the creative direction of *Kane* is focussed on certain persons high on the hierarchy of a film's personnel roster. He has shifted the debate, but the debate still rests upon specific theoretical claims about what *counts* as a relevant fact or cue that will account for the success of *Kane*. Giving credit to two, or three, or even four individuals does not preclude the sentiments of *auteur* theory. It merely extends the implications of the theory onto a very small group of people rather than onto an individual. Although this appears to challenge the myth of the director as presiding genius, what it does is expand our concept of creativity (at least in the area of film) to include collaboration. Such collaborations have long been recognized, where the particular qualities of one person are

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[111] Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane.* Edited by Edward Buscombe, *BFI Film Classics.* Lond: BFI Publishing, 1992., p. 9

understood to require, or at least operate best, when paired with those qualities of another, and vice versa. The most obvious examples of this celebrated synergy are certain famous comedy teams (Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello, etc.), but other examples come to mind (George Lucas and composer John Williams, Joel and Ethan Coen). The problem, if there is one, is again that of *a priori* definitions, not recognized situations within the realm of cinema. These definitions may be stretched to include three or four individuals out of the hundreds or thousands of people who help make a film, but these arguments continue to be founded upon presuppositions that assume an *a priori* access to the nature of film artistry.

What underlie these debates about Kane are not hard and fast truths that may be exposed in order to create an absolute claim of veracity, but are instead the products of a rhetorical interaction. These writers are not really "raising" *Kane* the way an archaeologist would uncover a tomb. Instead, they are engaged in convincing the reader of a particular point of view, using film cues and theoretical presuppositions in order to make their claims convincing. In short, they are, on the theoretical as well as the critical level, engaged in a form of rhetoric. They are appealing to similar historical facts as cues in order to generate a convincing argument. The only way to arbitrate between these

differing conclusions is to decide which argument is the more forceful or convincing.

The irony of these multiple theories is that the narrative of *Kane* itself provides conflicting interpretations. "Rosebud", the word heard uttered at Kane's death, holds the focus for the investigator tracing the history for the newsreelmen. Theories about *Kane* seem to be so many Rosebuds, conflicting interpretations based on differing cues, presented in more or less coherent and convincing ways. Debate surrounding the meaning of Rosebud in the film is central to these kind of debates – is it purposely ambiguous? Is it the sled? If so, does the fact that the studio put the title on the sled change what Rosebud is?[112] Or does the meaning of Rosebud rely upon some extra-textual evidence, such as the suggestion that Mankiewicz knew it to be the nickname W.R. Hearst used for his mistress' clitoris?[113]

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[112] Following the film's release, Welles distanced himself from the Rosebud device, suggesting that it served as a "textbook Freud" narrative conceit. He claimed it had been introduced by Mankiewicz in early drafts as a cheap way of tying the story together. Early advertisements for Kane emphasized the mystery story line, leading some to speculate that the studio encouraged the cathartic titling optically overlayed upon the burning sled. The interpretation and meaning of "Rosebud" has remained a central focus for those discussing Kane. Various positions and conjectures may be found throughout Carringer, Robert L. *The Making of Citizen Kane*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

[113] Part of Kael's attempt to resurrect Mankiewicz's position in the production history of *Kane* is to point to his knowledge of such brazenly personal attributes of Hearst's life.

Asking for the *real* rosebud to rise from the ashes would seem to slide

away from the point -- these conflicting claims themselves rest upon differing

cues, used by the claimants in order to make what will be judged to be truthful

claims. The sled's existence in the film can be proved easily (by examining the

actual film frames, say, and agreeing *en masse* that the image is indeed of a

sled), but such a fact neither demands nor allows the impositions of a single

overriding interpretation. Similarly, the theoretical basis for choosing the sled

as an object of interest can only be placed upon the discourse itself. Issues of

intentionality are not to be resolved by the film itself, nor it seems are they to

be resolved by appeal to other historical or empirical facts. These theoretical

debates are to be decided by the strategies and schemata of rhetoric, providing

a more convincing argument at the expense of other, less convincing ones.

The search for Rosebud's meaning in *Kane* is metaphorically similar not only

to the role of the interpretive critic, but to the theorists as well.

This leads, of course, to trying to decide whether it is important to know the life of Hearst in order to understand the film *Kane*, to know the life of Welles, Toland, or Mankiewicz, or to simply apprehend the film as simply a contained work of fiction. There are many other options here, resulting in many interesting yet conflicting views of the film. The problem is not in generating interesting or convincing arguments (both Kael and Bazin are celebrated stylists when it comes to generating film criticism), it is in deciding between competing claims that use the same facts (ie., about the "real life" of the filmmakers) in order to make definitive, totalizing statements.

In the next chapter, I will address specifically how film theory, like film criticism, depends upon the structures of rhetorical conviction in order to generate persuasive arguments. I will also address the concern that when a foundational conception of truth as a regulative ideal is stripped away from film theory, one is left with an "Anything Goes" situation.

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A NEW HOPE

THEORY, RHETORIC AND THE

CONVERSATION OF CINEMA

THREE

RHETORIC, DOGMA & THE DOSTOYEVSKIAN DILEMMA

Chapter 3: RHETORIC, DOGMA & THE DOSTOYEVSKIAN DILEMMA

1. Theory vs. Criticism

Bordwell's rhetorical model seems to be a convincing articulation of the process of film criticism. As has been illustrated through the example of Roger Ebert's review of *Saving Private Ryan* and an examination of various discussions of *Citizen Kane*, the goal of both film criticism and its theoretical presuppositions is to convince a reader of a particular point of view, rather than to provide a methodologically or theoretically consistent presentation of facts. The underlying pragmatic concern, evaluation of the film in terms of its desirable qualities, is conditioned by the processes of rhetoric. This does not mean that facts play no role, but rather that their role is circumscribed by interpretive decisions.

Mere methodological consistency is no guarantee of accuracy in judgement, even in science; as I have already noted, the realm of film criticism differs from that of the sciences, in that it is concerned not only with facts (this film lasts so long and has these lines, this music in this order, etc.) but with values (this is a good film, this is a bad one). As Bordwell describes, "Unlike a scientific experiment, no interpretation can fail to confirm the theory, at least in the hands of the practised critic. Criticism uses ordinary (that is,

nonformalized) language, encourages metaphorical and punning redescription, emphasizes rhetorical appeals, and refuses to set definite bounds on relevant data – all in the name of novelty and imaginative insight."[114]   The conversation of science, so to speak, is between human beings and the natural world; errors often, though not demonstrably always, result in technological systems which do not work.[115] The conversation of cinema is between persons; errors here are much harder to detect, as even incoherence is not always demonstrably a flaw (as the early reception of Expressionist and Surrealist film by some critics demonstrates.)   In science there are broadly, though not universally, accepted methodologies of testing empirical claims; in film theory such methods are at best vague and often absent altogether.

What remains to be determined is how theoretical writings on film differ, if at all, from critical writings. I argue that, in film studies, products of cinematic theorizing, like the products of criticism, are similarly conditioned not by access to the foundational truth of the situation, but by rhetoric.

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[114]   Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 4

[115]   "Film studies diverges from the natural sciences, for in the second phase of development of explicatory and symptomatic criticism [i.e., second-wave] there is a slackening of constraints on what will count as acceptable argument within the paradigm." Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 28

Theories are accepted not because of their manifest truth-content, but because they are seen to be the more convincing and interesting. In film studies, theory, like criticism, is a product of a pragmatic rhetorical interplay.

Bordwell's central claim about the rhetorical model of criticism is that film critics use theory as simply another "cue". As he summarizes, critics end up "using theory as a *topos* and a stylistic appeal", in short, using theory as a rhetorically "persuasive component."[116] Film theorists use "truth" in a similar way, invoking it as a persuasive component in order to construct vivid and rhetorically convincing articulations of cinema in general. In so doing, they invoke truths as cues just as the critic does, as tools for the construction of a convincing rhetorical argument. Just as the justification for choosing one cue over another cannot be determined for criticism outside of the discourse, so too may it be argued that the truths which film theorists appeal to are generated by the debate itself.

The *relevance* of particular truths to a film, the very selection of one truth over another, seems to be predicated upon the same methodological structures that regulate the way cues are used in film criticism. Differing theorists may point to the same truth-cue (say, "the screen is white") and draw substantially

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[116] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 223

different conclusions from it. For other cues, the theorist will appeal to truths thought to be extradiscursive that are themselves validated as truth by the debate itself in the hopes of creating a convincing argument. Truths are cues to be negotiated, and as different ideas come to be accepted and different techniques are thought to be relevant, so too are differing truths invoked in order to provide a convincing theoretical argument.

The rhetorical model of criticism provides a basis for understanding how different critiques of given films rely upon shared assumptions regarding a film's form or style. In order to be convincing, the rhetor should appeal to elements of the film that will be comfortable to the reader. Similarly, theorists construct general arguments that operate in two separate yet complementary ways. Importantly, the theorist often provides a criticism of other theorists.[117] In this form, it is explicit how theory and traditional film criticism share similar methodologies. Just as the critic draws upon cues from the film, uncovering a "meaning" of the film, and provides an adjudication of the film's qualities, so too does the theorist perform these actions of critique upon other theorists.

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[117] "The academic film interpreter avoids dialectical confrontation with alternative positions. At a scholarly conference in film studies, a paper devoted wholly to scrutinizing another critic's interpretation will be taken as a sterile exercise." - Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 39

Noël Carroll distinguishes theory from criticism in this way: "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 questions about film, there is no common feature that all of our answers should be expected to share"[118] Carroll believes that we should "let anything count as film theorizing, so long as it involves the production of generalizations or general explanations or general taxonomies and concepts about film practice."[119] He is nonetheless quick to distinguish between interpreters of specific films who *use* theory to justify their critical claims, and those who are actually engaged in theorizing. His claim is that: "The interpretation of individual films is not theory, no matter how technical the language of the interpretation appears. For theory involves evolving categories and hypothesizing the existence of general patterns; but finding that those categories and hypotheses are instantiated in a particular case is not a

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[118] Carroll, Noël. "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment." In *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 37-68. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. , p. 41

[119] *Ibid.*, p. 39

matter of theory."[120] Theories, in Carroll's sense, are by definition general claims that will account for different cinematic phenomena. What he is disputing is the assumption that there must be an overarching, Grand Theory that will account for all movies under one unified theory. Instead, his piece-meal, bottom-up approach is meant to generate consistent and interesting theories without resorting to empty interpretation and meaningless repetition.

Carroll charges that in the hands of second-wave theorists, "theorizing becomes the routine application of some larger, unified theory to questions of cinema, which procedure unsurprisingly churns out roughly the same answers, or remarkably similar answers, in every case. The net result, in short, is theoretical impoverishment."[121] Carroll concludes that most second-wave theorists are not doing theory at all, but a form of interpretation.

These second-wave theorists proceed by reading their Grand Theory "into a film, as if the presence of subject positioning – putatively a causal

[120] *Ibid.*, p. 42 I argue that in my previous discussion of *Kane*, Kael, Bazin and Carringer, though focused on one film, are in fact demonstrating general theoretical conceptions. *Kane* in this sense is a particularly significant case – by writing about the supposedly "best film" ever, one is inevitably drawing conclusions about the aesthetic necessity of certain cinematic techniques and methodologies in general. Of course, this merely exposes the *rhetorical* presupposition that what makes one film "good" may be appealed to when describing another.

[121] *Ibid.*, p. 41

process – could be confirmed by hermeneutically alleging to find the allegory of the Imaginary retold in a selected film."[122] In other words, the interpreter looks to the films to justify their theoretical claims, rather than looking to films for a generalizeable phenomena that theory could account for. As such: "The theories that are most serviceable for exegetes will be those whose central terms are maximally vague, ambiguous, or constrained in terms of criteria of application. For such theories can be applied to the widest number of cases, if only by equivocation and fanciful association. Interpretive productivity would seem to vary inversely with the precision of a theory. Theories with the greatest "weasel factor" are more attractive to scholars concerned primarily with producing interpretations, because such theories will be applicable almost everywhere and in more ways than one."[123] Second-wave theory, in Carroll's eyes, became a totalizing exercise in theory application rather than theory building.

Carroll argues that: "Middle-level research programs have shown that *you do not need a Big Theory of Everything to do enlightening work in a field of study.* Contrary to what many believe, a study of United Artists' business practices or

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[122] *Ibid.,* p. 42

[123] *Ibid.,* p. 44

the standardization of continuity editing or the activities of women in early film audiences need carry *no* determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, *no* univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions – in short, no commitment to a Grand Theory."[124]   There remains, however, the question as to what *does* condition an acceptable theoretical contribution to the conversation of cinema. Carroll wishes "truth" to be the regulator of critical and theoretical discourse. He feels that the humanities in general have been plagued by what he sees as a fear of trusting in truth and falsity as functional regulators of discourse. He sardonically comments that "throughout the humanities, those who cleave to standards of truth and falsity are regarded as at best a confused remnant and at worst the academic equivalent of racist skinheads."[125]   This leads Carroll to shy away from the implications of his own position. Explicitly, Carroll suggests that "If we jettison notions of truth and falsity, it is hard to imagine the way in which film theorizing will proceed."[126] He fails to recognize the possibility of further explanations requiring no foundational truth. It is here that I part company

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[124] *Ibid.*, p. 29

[125] *Ibid.*, p. 53

[126] *Ibid.*, p. 52

with Carroll. Although he appears to reject the notion of foundational truth, he has in fact merely interpolated a further theoretical level which serves merely to disguise the fact that his views rest upon traditional notions of truth.

Carroll is careful in elucidating what he means by notions of truth. He is not advocating a hard-line, absolute version of foundational truth. He describes those who dispute notions of truth and falsity as believing that: "If an interpretation is true, then that means that it is exhaustive – that it says everything that there is to say about a text. In other words, they assume that truth is a matter of what we might more accurately call Absolute Truth, where the Absolute Truth about a text gives you everything that there is to know about it."[127] He believes that you must hold on to notions of truth or falsity in order to even begin to differentiate the good from the bad. He suggests that when he claims to "evaluate tenets of the Theory in light of ordinary standards of truth and falsity, I have nothing so arcane as Absolute Truth in mind, and, in consequence, my objections, and objections like them, cannot be dismissed as Enlightenment extravagances."[128] Instead, Carroll feels that "we may refer to some of our theories as approximately true, acknowledging that they may

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[127] *Ibid.,* p. 53

[128] *Ibid.,* p. 55

be revised, augmented, and refined, but they are on the right track. Moreover, there is no persuasive reason to concede that we cannot also craft film theories in the here and now that are approximately true."[129] Further, he argues that "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."[130] He derisively claims that "it is just a howler to respond to requests for empirical evidence on the grounds that since the philosophy of empiricism has been discredited, evidence is tacky or out of style."[131]

In response to the claim that, since there is no one, singular true interpretation of a text, therefore there are no true interpretations, Carroll feels this argument to be "stupendously unconvincing." He claims that: "A text may have more than one, true interpretation. It is true that *Animal Farm* is about totalitarianism *and* it is true that it is about Stalinism. Thus, it does not follow that if a text has more than one interpretation, that there are not true interpretations of the text. For, obviously, there may be more than one *true*

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[129] *Ibid.,* p. 58

[130] *Ibid.,* p. 60

[131] *Ibid.,* p. 67

interpretation of a text."[132]   In short, his claim is that "in conceding the

historicity and revisability of theories, I have not given up truth as a regulative

ideal for film theorizing ... The fact that we are constantly revising our theories

in the light of continued criticisms and new evidence does not preclude the

possibility that our theories are getting closer and closer to the truth."[133]

Two further claims are implicit in this assertion: The first, with which I

do not argue, is that we may on occasion revise our own positions as a result

of the process of the conversation in which we engage, and claims made from

within other positions; the second, which is more controversial, is that certain

positions are (essentially) more accurate in their assessment of the meanings

of this or that film. In other words, Carroll requires the existence of at least

one foundationally true element of cinema in order to be on the "right path"

to discover it. To be "approximately true" is to be in proximity with something

fixed. Carroll will end up requiring a truth independent of any conversation

in order to make his contribution work at all.

However, the fact that we are continually revising our theories, as Carroll

indicated earlier, does not necessarily mean that the revisions are due to our

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[132] *Ibid.,* p. 53

[133] *Ibid.,* p. 58

uncovering new truths. The reasons for one critique or theory being more convincing than another are quite varied. At the least, they rest upon an assessment, determining that the theorist or critic has convincingly articulated cues that appear to be relevant to the argument. As Carroll notes, film theory, "like most other forms of theoretical inquiry, proceeds dialectically." These theories are constructed within particular historical contexts and particular projects of research for the purpose of addressing questions about movies. The strengths of theories, he argues, are "assayed by comparing the answers they afford to the answers proposed by alternative theories."[134] Thus, there must be a dialectical organization for the conversation of cinema in order for competing theories to be able to fight out their respective positions. Insofar as one theorist is developing a criticism of another theory or theorist, he or she is engaged in what amounts to an identical relationship that the critic shares with the film. The theorist is constructing a rhetorically powerful argument to express the meaning and interesting elements to be drawn out of the specific, competing theory. In so doing, the critic's *and* the theorist's practices are similarly regulated by rhetorical convention, and the questions that get asked

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[134] *Ibid.*, p. 56

are themselves generated by the subjective and varied interests of those participating in the conversation.

Carroll seems to want to have his epistemological cake and eat it too; his theory rests on the idea that some fixed and approachable truth, or set of truths, about any given film can be found, yet he seeks to downplay what this fact (if it is indeed a fact) implies. If a given statement about a given film is necessarily, as opposed to contingently, true, this entails that the contrary statement is false, and may be ruled out as a useful element in any possible conversation. At the same time, though, Carroll wants to avoid claims involving theoretical certitude. He argues that his conception 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)."[135] Although this model effectively illustrates the difference between Carroll's conception of the conversation of cinema and that of a more totalizing critic, such as Metz or Bazin, it is inconsistent with Carroll's broader claims; if we can *approach* the truth, our concerns must be, at least in part, with

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[135] *Ibid.,* p. 56

questions beyond "contextually motivated theoretical problems," since that which makes the truth "true" presumably lies beyond the immediate context.

Once this problem is understood, it can be seen that Carroll's inconsistency allows for, and to be rendered harmless requires, an even greater role for the rhetorical model than he allows. The claim that x interpretation is more accurate, or more closely approaches the truth, can now be seen as itself a rhetorical move of great power. By claiming to base her argument on some foundational truth about either the film in itself or about film in general (whatever that particular truth may be, and however the particular truth-cue is to be interpreted and shaped to make the argumentative point), the theorist plays her most powerful rhetorical card. Nor need the card be displayed blatantly. When Ebert, for example, asserts that Spielberg and Rodat "have done a subtle and rather beautiful thing: "making" a philosophical film about war almost entirely in terms of action," he is more than suggesting that such an achievement is somehow *better* than other approaches (a film in which philosophers discuss their wartime experiences, say, or one in which the combat is more personal; he explicitly compares *Ryan* to Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, finding it superior in scope). Ebert also claims that the supporting parts "are effective, partly because Spielberg resists the temptation to make them zany "characters" in the tradition of World War II movies;" the obvious missing

premise here is that zany portrayals (the hard-drinking Irishman, the dour

Midwesterner, etc.) are both less real and less effective, and that this is a truth

about movie portrayals in general. Yet even a glance at the reception of these

earlier films would reveal, as Ebert surely must know, that they, too, within a

different political, historical, and rhetorical context, were vastly effective. It's

not, of course, that Ebert is wrong *per se*, but that his purpose requires a

particular rhetorical gesture. If one wants to do what Spielberg wants to do,

under the circumstances in which it was done, one may well use his approach.

But if one wants to do what John Wayne wanted to do in *The Longest Day*[136] or

The Green Berets,[137] one will take an entirely different approach. The response

of the critic to these two films will likewise vary in accordance with her

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[136] *The Longest Day* (1962), directed by Ken Annakin and Andrew Marton, written by Romain Gary and James Jones. Clearly a 'gung ho' John Wayne vehicle, the multiple directors and plot streamlined to showcase the various stars, especially Wayne, make this film particularly anti-*auteur* when compared to the way Ebert describes Spielberg's opus.

[137] *The Green Berets* (1968), directed by John Wayne and Ray.Kellog, written by James Lee Barett. Quite a different film than *SPR*, this is John Wayne's attempt to win the Vietnam War all by himself. It is a blatantly patriotic film, in the way that *SPR* is, but it certainly can be seen to take a different approach to the 'reality', or at least the historicity, of warfare. This does not, however, presuppose a singular *critical* or *aesthetic* evaluation of the film, merely a conventional way of delineating between this film and Spielberg's, in terms of the viscerality of the war scenes (similar, of course, to the fact that they share the same conventional genre, "war movie"). It is the equivalent of deciding *a priori* the aesthetic superiority between the two Wars themselves, as if, say, the Second World War itself was more conditioned towards artistic reinterpretation then the Vietnam conflict.

expectations of what the films ought to be doing, and her review will be written in a particular way according to her goals in discussing the film. In every case, what matters is whether the review (or the film under review) is convincing on its chosen grounds, not whether it addresses some foundational truth about the nature of cinema or external reality.

Chapter 3

Section 2: Theory, criticism, dogma.

By giving the reader the sense that theoretical and critical claims are based on foundational truths about the nature of film, the argument is made convincing and the reader is lulled into accepting positions never made explicit. Once these foundations are accepted, the reader's structures of analysis become increasingly influenced by these unexamined presuppositions. The assumption which follows is that any future film experience will cohere with the theory derived from previous experiences of movies. The result is in fact a contradiction of the original critical purpose – an increasingly uncritical acceptance of certain elements of filmmaking. For certain people, these presuppositions give rise to dogmatic assertions about the nature of cinema.[138]

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[138] This is not to say that only theorists may be dogmatic. Recently, Danish filmmaker Lars von Triers published his manifesto *Dogme 95*, a list of restrictions and limitations upon film techniques to create a distinctive style. This list, or "Vow of Chastity" as it is dubbed, includes the following edicts: " 1. Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found); 2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot); 3. The camera must be hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place); 4. The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera); 5. Optical

What is forgotten in the process is that the original position stemmed from a

response to only one element, or at most a small group of elements, in a

particular film or small group of films. As other critics whose presuppositions

rest on other films enter the debate, different elements take on renewed or

greater importance. Since no critic has seen, or *could* see, all films, critics are

consistently forced to reconsider even the films on which they have based their

own positions[139], as a result of different experiences of the films, and persuasive

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work and filters are forbidden; 6. The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.); 7. Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.); 8. Genre movies are not acceptable; 9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm.; 10. The director must not be credited." The director also is to swear "to refrain from personal taste." No manifesto is complete without exclamation marks, and the Dogme directors use plenty: "In 1960 enough was enough! The movie was dead and called for resurrection. The goal was correct but the means were not! ... In 1960 enough was enough! The movie had been cosmeticised to death, they said; yet since then the use of cosmetics has exploded. The "supreme" task of the decadent film-makers is to fool the audience. Is that what we are so proud of? Is that what the "100 years" have brought us? Illusions via which emotions can be communicated? ... By the individual artist's free choice of trickery? Predictability (dramaturgy) has become the golden calf around which we dance. Having the characters' inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not "high art". As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise. The result is barren. An illusion of pathos and an illusion of love. To DOGME 95 the movie is not illusion!" [source: www.dogme95.dk] It is difficult to say whether or not this seemingly arbitrary list is meant humorously, but it certainly captures the vehement rhetoric of the more dogmatic participants within the conversation of cinema.

[139] This situation is further complicated by the multiplicity of extra-methodological factors which influence any given discussion of a film (say, being intimidated by a celebrity reviewer, having your claims tested against the claims of the filmmakers themselves, or dealing with the whims of academic departmental politics). The reader is seldom aware of these, but must respond to the rhetorical gestures on their own apparent

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reinterpretations offered by others. Thus, for example, a general critical claim such as "camera movements are good when smooth" gets undermined by a film (like, say, Godard and Truffaut's *À bout de souffle*) that breaks this "rule" apart.

If some quality or some technique is championed as the essence of good film, then there can be no instance of a film that breaks those so-called laws. However, one thing that has appeared consistently in the history of film is that those elements that have stood in as foundational laws of good cinema have been more often than not broken apart, only to have the new technique championed instead. Equally inconsistent are the conditions of acceptability of critical claims. Criticism may be regarded as being more conversational than its theoretical academic counterparts. The necessity of a more immediate reaction to a given film, and all the conditions that a newspaper or similar deadline place upon the critic, removes much of the demand for a consistent philosophical position. Roger Ebert, for example, does not have to connect his comments about *Saving Private Ryan* with anything he has said about any other film. The irony is that he is accepted because of his vast experience in watching films, yet he is not tested on the consistency or application of what amounts to his theoretical presuppositions.

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grounds.

Critics may appeal to theory explicitly, using it as a tool in the way that Bordwell has described. Theorists, ideally, are engaged in the questioning of the presuppositions that the critics may take for granted. However, as my discussion of *Kane* illustrated, the truths that the theorist appeals to are not value neutral. They are instead used functionally as cues – that is, elements intended to invoke specific, predictable responses – in the way that the critic will use elements of the film. The meanings of these facts are constructed within the theorizing, and their meanings often conflict among different theorists. No aspect of film escapes this. Thus, for example, both Metz and Eisenstein can point to the fact that film is a projected medium, yet each will draw a radically different theoretical conclusion from this.[140] The significance

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[140] *"According to Marx and Engels, the dialectic system is only the conscious reproduction of the dialectic course (substance) of the external events of the world. Thus:* The projection of the dialectic system of things into the brain *into creating abstractly into the process of thinking* yields: dialectic methods of thinking; dialectic materialism – PHILOSOPHY. *And also:* the projection of the same system of things *while creating concretely while giving form* yields: ART ... We shall consider the general problem of art in the specific example of its highest form – film." Eisenstein, Sergei *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form;* "In the cinema, the object remains: fiction or no, there is always something on the screen. But the reflection of the own body has disappeared. ... A strange mirror, then, very like that of childhood" - Metz, Christian, *Identification, Mirror;* "This emphasis on projection necessarily excludes certain interesting kinds of questions, among them some of the classic problems of film, cinema, and movie theory. It denies the notion of "the cinematic" altogether, since it assumes that any finished piece of cinema is indisputably a piece of cinema." - Mast, Gerald *Film/ Cinema/Movie;* "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art ... With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes of the public coincide." - Benjamin, Walter *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction;* "Isn't it curious that Plato,

of these truths is shaped by the conventions of the discourse, and, most importantly, it is the conversation that regulates when a cue or fact is an acceptable focus for debate. Thus, in the 1930s issues of ideology would have been seen as beyond the scope of film theorizing, while current theories that analyse credit sequences, soundtracks, or business practices similarly become regulated by what is to be accepted by those engaged in the conversation.

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in order to explain the transfer, the access from one place to another and to demonstrate, reveal, and make understood what sort of illusion underlies our direct contact with the real would imagine or resort to an apparatus that doesn't merely evoke, but quite precisely describes in its mode of operation the cinematographic apparatus and the spectator's place in relation to it ... In a general way, we distinguish the *basic cinematographic apparatus* which concerns the ensemble of the equipment and operations necessary to the production of a film and its projection, from the apparatus discussed in this article, which solely concerns projection." - Baudry, Jean-Louis, *The Apparatus;* "Baudry seeks the origin of the impression-of-reality effect in the projection situation itself, irrespective of what is being screened." - Carroll, Noël *Mystifying Movies*

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Chapter 3

3. Totalizing theory: "Anything Goes?"

If it is strictly the processes of rhetoric that are regulating the conversation of cinema, what grounds are there for advocating one theory over another? If there are no regulations outside of the conversation of cinema, what then is to stop even the most absurd claim from being taken as seriously as any other claim? In short, what is to regulate a debate if not hard and fast appeals to truths about the nature of film? A simple answer might be that this is a false dilemma, that the continuation of the debate by any means, allowing any idea to hold equal weight, is a positive thing. A model could perhaps be found in film criticism as it now stands – with competing criticisms and claims, each film is equally ripe for a large number of conflicting claims. Indeed, it might appear that this is already the situation in theory as well; Carroll points out that "Narrow, essentialist views of film theory ... are infrequently voiced nowadays."[141] But they are by no means extinct, as Carroll acknowledges, and they maintain a considerable influence in certain areas of discourse. This

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[141] Carroll, Noël. "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment." In *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, 37-68. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. , p. 39

requires further critical work; "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."[142]

Totalizing theories of any sort, by their insistence on closing off debate, are self-defeating. By their own admission, totalizing theories appeal to *a priori* assumptions to act as foundations; they are appealing to the foundational truths of cinema in order to justify their claims about the validity or invalidity of specific elements within specific films. Yet the validity of these foundations is developed through appeals to the effectiveness of particular elements; that is, because x works here and there x is taken to be a foundational necessity for good filmmaking, whereupon the presence of x is in itself taken to be a sign of a good film, whether it actually works or not. The argument is thus circular, and becomes an uninteresting tautology: A requires B which requires A which requires B, etc. No justification external to the circle is offered, or possible. Where no justification can be given, but where what is said is used in itself to justify other claims and judgments, the possibility of fresh understandings (that is, of developing and expanding the conversation) is at best considerably

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[142] *Ibid.*, p. 39

weakened, and more likely cut off altogether. By silencing opponents and denying the possibility of change, the totalizing critic is pragmatically unhelpful for the continuation of a healthy conversation.

The problems for totalizing theory go even deeper, though. Even if one grants the central tenet of the totalizing theorist – that there is a universalizable, foundational truth or set of truths about the nature of all movies – it is clear that there is nothing which has been accepted by all critics and theorists (and, especially, filmgoers) as definitive in this regard. That is, there is no significant statement about the nature of film which compels universal agreement, or where rejection of such indicates a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the dissident (in the way that rejecting evolution disqualifies one as a serious biologist, say). Even so simple a statement as "all films are projected" is subject to dispute, since the character of TV movies made on video and 70mm theatrical releases is widely divergent, as has long been noted in one way or another.

But if no such statement or set of propositions about film has been found, then any process which interferes with the search for that foundation is, if the foundation does exist and is knowable, harmful. Since totalizing theory *requires* the assumption that such foundations exist and can be found, and since none has been found, totalizing theories of any stripe require the

freedom to explore and to correct errors and misunderstandings. This, though, is precisely what totalizing theories tend to render difficult; a dominant totalizing critique prematurely advanced would, by its very nature, disallow precisely the sort of continuing free debate which it needs to correct its own errors. As has been shown, cinema itself cannot provide neutral evidence. Time and again, critics and theorists point to the same cues only to reach differing conclusions about them. The adjudication of the appropriate uses of these cues is caught up within the discourse itself. Therefore, the claims of a totalizing theory to reveal the underlying nature of cinema dissolve under the pressure of the needs of that theory itself. Theories can be consistent but not universal, or universal but not consistently applied; in the former case the theory avoids accepting contradictions by rejecting certain qualities quite acceptable on other accounts (as, for example, Bazin's rejection of expressionism and Ebert's claims of "zany" portrayals), and in the latter case the theory accepts everything, including films made from quite contradictory stylistic perspectives (virtually any film historian, for example, or Stanley Cavell, who is equally happy to accept Hollywood musicals as being

aesthetically significant).[143] Ironically, this leaves us with one foundationally

true theory: that no theory of film cannot be both universal and consistent.[144]

This conclusion, it seems to me, does not result in a completely

haphazard form of relativism but rather a healthy, pragmatic skepticism. It

seems impossible that completely random systems could generate meaningful

or convincing arguments.[145]   Bordwell argues that for the critic: "It is risky

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[143] "I am not, perhaps I should say, claiming that this work is the best work in the history of world cinema, nor that these films are better than the experimental or nonfiction films contemporary with them. I am, I guess, claiming that they are good, worthy companions of the best; and also that we have as yet no way of knowing, no sufficient terms in which to say, how good they are. So it is no part of my argument to insist that major work can only come from such an environment or to deny that significant movies continue to be made in Hollywood ... Over a period of fifteen golden years [mid-1930s to early 1950s], that comes to between three hundred and four hundred works, which is a larger body of first-rate or nearly first-rate work than the entire corpus of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama can show ... Nothing can show this value to you unless it is discovered in your own experience, in the persistent exercise of your own taste and hence the willingness to challenge your taste as it stands, to form your own artistic conscience, hence nowhere but in the details of your encounter with specific works." - Cavell, Stanley. "The Thought of Movies." In *Philosophy and Film*, edited by Cynthia A. Freeland and Thomas E. Wartenberg, 13-32. New York: Routledge, 1995., p. 18-19 Please note that Cavell here is quantitatively and qualitatively comparing "good" works like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* with *His Girl Friday* and *The Philadelphia Story*.

[144] There do remain tautologies such as "motion pictures are pictures that move" that are both universal *and* consistent. This is achieved at the price of utter vacuity. The obvious response of "So what?!" makes this a very dull end to the conversation of cinema indeed.

[145] One thousand monkeys typing on one thousand typewriters for one thousand years would not type out *King Lear*, but it would be utterly shocking if they couldn't bang out film scripts like *Waterworld, Godzilla* or any given Adam Sandler film.

to be innovative in picking out cues. If we want to prove that reel-change marks are worthy vehicles for semantic fields, then we will need at least to show that they are comparable to already acceptable cues or that they have an effect on spectators' comprehension of the film."[146] He further suggests that "the question of criteria for cues illustrates how institutionally grounded assumptions necessarily shape the process" of ; generating convincing criticism.[147]   Traditional structures of comprehension and rhetorical argumentation will continue to regulate the limits of acceptability, weeding out the truly off-the-wall claims as being too different from the accepted form. This is not to say that what gets accepted will not shift, simply that these shifts are by and large conservative, depending on the ideas and structures of previously accepted ideas and doctrines. Current structures of rhetorical acceptability within the conversation regulate the criteria for acceptance. In order to *be* a conversation, there must be a basis of intersubjective cooperation, a common ground on which argument may take place. A radically different claim would simply be an incoherent or unintelligible part of the conversation.

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[146] Bordwell, David. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989., p. 133

[147] *Ibid.,* p. 133

If the only thing really demonstrated by film theory is that nothing definitive has thus far been demonstrated, then no particular approach may be unilaterally ruled out. What is required is the broadest, most open ground for exploration. Film theory, if it is to continue to be a conversation, must be non-totalizing. What is needed, and what corresponds to the spirit of both Bordwell and Carroll's challenges to second-wave theorizing, is an open ended conversation in order to facilitate the generation of a multiplicity of meanings. By discussing these limitations philosophically, I am inviting people from other disciplines, practices and backgrounds to think about what they are doing and why. In short, I'm inviting the members of the conversation of cinema into the conversation of philosophy.

Richard Rorty describes his project in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as seeing "the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts."[148] This sentiment, I believe, holds up equally well for the conversation of cinema. Rorty suggests that for philosophy, "The

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[148] Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979., p. 318

fact that we can continue the conversation Plato began without discussing the topics Plato wanted discussed, illustrates the difference between treating philosophy as a voice in a conversation and treating it as a subject ... a field of professional inquiry."[149] Similarly, treating the questions of Metz, Bazin or Eisenstein as the only legitimate questions allowed within the conversation is to preemptively secure a critical or theoretical position.

Rorty wants to show how to see that "the issues with which philosophers are presently concerned...[are the] results of historical accident, as turns the conversation has taken."[150] The turns within the conversation of cinema are governed by similar accidents, from technological and stylistic developments in filmmaking, from institutionalization of theory and criticism, and the growing rhetorical sophistication of the field of film studies. In philosophy, and in film, the "useful kibitzing"[151]of the conversation generates interesting and novel ways of looking at particular phenomena.

Film *itself* does not provide sufficient guidance to adjudicate between relevant or irrelevant elements of cinema production, nor, it seems, does the

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[149] *Ibid.,* p. 391

[150] *Ibid.,* p. 391

[151] *Ibid.,* p. 393

extra-textual, extra-discursive world. Instead, the conditions of rhetoric seem to be the only guide for determining whether or not an argument is successful. In short, a theory is seen as something true or useful if it is found to be convincing. The function of theory, then, is to create a consistent and compelling generalization about cinema that will be found to be convincing by members of the conversation. The way to go about generating this conviction is to use in novel and effective ways the conventions of rhetoric.

The conversation is enriched by the participants being familiar with the history of the conversation. In this sense, the projects of Carroll and Bordwell are extremely helpful in pointing a way to reinvigorate, if not to restart, film's conversation. Weeding out the dogmatic and repetitive may generate interesting and novel threads of discourse. Rorty cautions that these historical arguments, however, "are punctuated by stale philosophical clichés which the other participants have stumbled across in their reading, but about which professional philosophers know the pros and cons by heart."[152] In this way philosophy can be of great use to cinema studies. As cinema studies matures, it can draw upon the experience of the philosophical conversation (going on now for at least 2,500 years of recorded history) to avoid some of the more

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[152] *Ibid.,* p. 393

obvious rhetorical pitfalls. It should be obvious that this does not imply that philosophy holds the foundational truths with which it will enlighten its disciplinary junior, but that cinema and philosophy, as Cavell said, share important common ground in their efforts to understand movies and related phenomena. Rorty's final claim is that the only thing on which he would insist "is that philosophers'... concern should be with continuing the conversation."[153] Freed from totalizing and dogmatic baggage, the continuation of the conversation of cinema seems to be an equally noble goal.

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[153] *Ibid.,* p. 394

Appendix

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN **** (R)
BY ROGER EBERT

The soldiers assigned to find Pvt. Ryan and bring him home can do the math for themselves. The Army Chief of Staff has ordered them on the mission for propaganda purposes: Ryan's return will boost morale on the homefront, and put a human face on the carnage at Omaha Beach. His mother, who has already lost three sons in the war, will have to add another telegram to her collection. But the eight men on the mission also have parents--and besides, they've been trained to kill Germans, not to risk their lives for publicity stunts. "This Ryan better be worth it," one of the men grumbles.

In Hollywood mythology, great battles wheel and turn on the actions of individual heroes. In Steven Spielberg's ``Saving Private Ryan," thousands of terrified and seasick men, most of them new to combat, are thrown into the face of withering German fire. The landing on Omaha Beach was not about saving Pvt. Ryan. It was about saving your skin.

The movie's opening sequence is as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen. In fierce dread and energy it's on a par with Oliver Stone's "Platoon," and in scope surpasses it--because in the bloody early stages the landing forces and the enemy never meet eye to eye, but are simply faceless masses of men who have been ordered to shoot at another until one side is destroyed.

Spielberg's camera makes no sense of the action. That is the purpose of his style. For the individual soldier on the beach, the landing was a chaos of noise, mud, blood, vomit and death. The scene is filled with countless unrelated pieces of time, as when a soldier has his arm blown off. He staggers, confused, standing exposed to further fire, not sure what to do next, and then he bends over and picks up his arm, as if he will need it later.

This landing sequence is necessary to establish the distance between those who give the order that Pvt. Ryan be saved, and those who are ordered to do the saving. For Capt. Miller (Tom Hanks) and his men, the landing at Omaha has been a crucible of fire. For Army Chief George C. Marshall (Harve Presnell) in his Washington office, war seems more remote and statesmanlike; he treasures a letter Abraham Lincoln wrote consoling Mrs. Bixby of Boston, about her sons who died in the Civil War. His advisors question the wisdom and indeed the possibility of a mission to save Ryan, but he barks, "If the boy's alive we are gonna send somebody to find him--and we are gonna get him the hell out of there."

That sets up the second act of the film, in which Miller and his men penetrate into French terrain still actively disputed by the Germans, while harboring mutinous thoughts about the wisdom of the mission. All of Miller's men have served with him before--except for Cpl. Upham (Jeremy Davies), the translator, who speaks excellent German and French but has never fired a rifle in anger and is terrified almost to the point of incontinence. I identified with Upham, and I suspect many honest viewers will agree with me: The war was fought by civilians just like

him, whose lives had not prepared them for the reality of battle.

The turning point in the film comes, I think, when the squadron happens upon a German machinegun nest protecting a radar installation. It would be possible to go around it and avoid a confrontation. Indeed, that would be following orders. But they decide to attack the emplacement, and that is a form of protest: At risk to their lives, they are doing what they came to France to do, instead of what the top brass wants them to do.

Everything points to the third act, when Private Ryan is found, and the soldiers decide what to do next. Spielberg and his screenwriter, Robert Rodat, have done a subtle and rather beautiful thing: They have made a philosophical film about war almost entirely in terms of action. "Saving Private Ryan" says things about war that are as complex and difficult as any essayist could possibly express, and does it with broad, strong images, with violence, with profanity, with action, with camaraderie. It is possible to express even the most thoughtful ideas in the simplest words and actions, and that's what Spielberg does. The film is doubly effective, because he communicates his ideas in feelings, not words. I was reminded of "All Quiet on the Western Front."

Steven Spielberg is as technically proficient as any filmmaker alive, and because of his great success, he has access to every resource he requires. Both of those facts are important to the impact of "Saving Private Ryan." He knows how to convey his feelings about men in combat, and he has the tools, the money and the collaborators to make it possible.

His cinematographer, Janusz Kaminski, who also shot "Schindler's List," brings a newsreel feel to a lot of the footage, but that's relatively easy compared to his most important achievement, which is to make everything visually intelligible. After the deliberate chaos of the landing scenes, Kaminski handles the attack on the machinegun nest, and a prolonged sequence involving the defense of a bridge, in a way that keeps us oriented. It's not just men shooting at one another. We understand the plan of the action, the ebb and flow, the improvisation, the relative positions of the soldiers.

Then there is the human element. Hanks is a good choice as Capt. Miller, an English teacher who has survived experiences so unspeakable that he wonders if his wife will even recognize him. His hands tremble, he is on the brink of breakdown, but he does his best because that is his duty. All of the actors playing the men under him are effective, partly because Spielberg resists the temptation to make them zany "characters" in the tradition of World War II movies, and makes them deliberately ordinary. Matt Damon, as Pvt. Ryan, exudes a different energy, because he has not been through the landing at Omaha Beach; as a paratrooper, he landed inland, and although he has seen action he has not gazed into the inferno.

They are all strong presences, but for me the key performance in the movie is by Jeremy Davies, as the frightened little interpreter. He is our entry into the reality because he sees it clearly as a vast system designed to humiliate and destroy him. And so it is. His survival depends on his doing the very best he can, yes, but even more on chance. Eventually he arrives at his personal turning point, and his action writes the closing words of Spielberg's unspoken philosophical argument.

"Saving Private Ryan" is a powerful experience. I'm sure a lot of people will weep during it. Spielberg knows how to make audiences weep better than any director since Chaplin in "City Lights." But weeping is an incomplete response, letting the audience off the hook. This film embodies ideas. After the immediate experience begins to fade, the implications remain and grow.

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