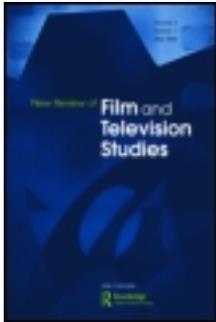


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### On some epistemological problems in film theory

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## On some epistemological problems in film theory

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In the light of recent debates in film studies over the nature of film theory and the kinds of knowledge it produces, this paper examines some of the epistemological issues currently being raised by film scholars. In particular, it examines the 'dualistic' positions that have been developed by Noël Carroll and Malcolm Turvey and seeks to find a 'third' way by calling on the philosophy of American pragmatist C.S. Peirce. Two general conclusions are drawn: first, that epistemological inquiries into what we call 'film theory' require we take into consideration the various goals and ideals that animate its numerous projects; secondly, that many epistemological problems will be solved if we avoid the sort of dualism implied by Carroll and Turvey's positions.

**Keywords:** film theory; epistemology; film-philosophy; Noël Carroll; Malcolm Turvey; Rudolf Arnheim; C.S. Peirce

Perhaps no one will contest the claim that the bulk of what we do in film studies is *not* 'hard science', especially if by 'science' one has in mind the purpose and methods associated with the natural sciences. For most of us, rather, film studies belongs to the 'softer' domains of humanities and social science scholarship. In fact, were film studies a full-blown nomothetic science, were its theories to seek the status of explanatory natural laws, it isn't obvious just what sort of fact this science could predict successfully (certainly not a film's box-office success!), nor even what practical uses it might have. We know that the 'hard sciences' seek to produce theories that, through testing, resist the trials of experience and provide us with corroborated stable beliefs and expectations. Nevertheless, what of film studies?

The question has some currency if only because of an undying, and even growing, urge in film scholarship for well over a decade now to debate the 'nature' of film theorizing, that is, to inquire into the *being* of theories and, perhaps even more importantly, to question what they *ought* to be or even *whether* they ought to be at all. And though we shouldn't reduce the entire domain of film studies to film theory – my film historian friends would never forgive me! – the very idea of theory, the ability to make general claims about the cinema and about films, is something that ought to concern all film scholars, including film historians. Indeed, in a broad sense, film history is also 'theoretical', as are all forms of historiography

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(the latter understood as the ‘theory’ of history). It follows that uncertainty towards the nature and goals of film studies and film theories, that is, towards our disciplined epistemic labors to know the cinema, ought to command epistemological attention. The fact that epistemological inquiries have tended to focus more on the natural sciences than on the humanities should not deter film scholars from pursuing them. In such instances, using science as a foil to consider humanistic knowledge and theorizing may prove useful. As we shall see, moreover, it can also help us realize that different ways of knowing may not be as incommensurable as we might otherwise think.

## I

I begin by briefly considering two opposed and seemingly incompatible views on the nature of theorizing in film studies, as developed by Malcolm Turvey and Noël Carroll.<sup>1</sup>

In an essay entitled ‘Can Scientific Models of Theorizing Help Film Theory’ first published online in 2001, and later revised for print in 2005, Malcolm Turvey, in response to arguments made by Noël Carroll (and assumed to be held by cognitivist film theorists in general), pursues a line of reasoning that he initially developed with Richard Allen in the introduction to their 2001 collection *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*. The argument calls on Wittgenstein’s critique of scientism and his assertion that philosophy is not a science. Indeed, in §109 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (2009) famously asserted:

It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically ‘that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and-such’ – whatever that may mean. . . . And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

On this basis, Allen and Turvey go on at length about how ‘theory’ is inimical to humanities scholarship, including in film studies. Philosophy, they argue ‘is concerned exclusively with something that antecedes and is separable from empirical inquiry: namely, questions of sense and meaning’ (Allen and Turvey 2001, 4). This implies, for instance, ‘specifying . . . necessary condition[s] of [language] use, rather than making an empirical claim about the world’ (5). In short, ‘philosophy . . . has nothing of an empirical nature to discover about language, thus ruling out the natural scientific method of theory construction as an appropriate form of philosophical explanation’ (5). It follows, for Turvey, that theorizing is, logically speaking, an unsuitable form of inquiry for most areas of

film scholarship as currently practiced (which includes, for instance, inquiries into film narrative, genre, gender and identity politics, film historiography, as well as aesthetics). A key point for Turvey concerns the fact that theory always seeks to explain by ‘postulating’ (the term is Allen and Turvey’s, [2001, 6]) ‘principles which are usually invisible to normal, everyday observation ...’. (Turvey 2005, 24) As a result, he writes, ‘we have to undertake research to find out about them, and theoretical claims about them are necessarily hypothetical and falsifiable, at best approximating the truth’ (24).

For Turvey (2005, 25), the telltale sign that film theory doesn’t conform to this model is that film scholarship is crafted, and sometimes even convincingly so, ‘in the absence of the sort of systematic empirical investigations we find in the natural sciences’. However, the point isn’t that film theory can get away without empirical investigations, rather it is offered as proof that such investigations are logically inappropriate for film scholarship since, ‘unlike theories of the natural sciences, film theories concern *what human beings already know and do*’ (25). There is no need for fallible hypotheses, since no empirical falsification ever takes place. For as Turvey notes, ‘our answers to questions about the cinema’s internal norms are not fallible and do not need improving in the future’ (31).

Turvey’s essay cites explicitly his opposition to Noël Carroll’s 30-plus page introduction to *Post-Theory*, a book he co-edited with David Bordwell in 1996. Here the culprit is not theorizing *per se* but what Carroll and Bordwell refer to as ‘Grand Theory’, the loosely knit amalgam of structuralism and post-structuralism, Marxism and psychoanalysis that first emerged in France in the 1960s and 1970s. What Turvey objects to, though, isn’t the critique of Grand Theory, but rather Carroll’s (1996, 56) proposed ‘framework for film theorizing’. According to this framework, explains Carroll, ‘what can be claimed for science may be claimed eventually for film theory’ (59). The argument, however, is not that film theory ought to belong to the hard sciences. Carroll is very clear on this:

I invoke discussions about scientific methodology in proselytizing for a dialectical conception of film theory, not because I believe film theory is a natural science, but only because the philosophy of science provides us with some of our best models for understanding theoretical inquiry. (59)

And shortly thereafter, he adds: ‘We should not attempt to slavishly imitate any of the natural sciences. We need to be alert to the special features of our own field of inquiry, and to modify our methods appropriately’ (59). In short, Carroll’s ‘dialectical’ conception of film theorizing amounts to a fairly modest, commonsensical – though I shall argue somewhat vague – program of inquiry driven by the search for truth, through critical and, therefore, rational means. His claims that film theories can be true or false, that one ought to ‘evaluate [them] in light of ordinary standards of truth or falsity’ (55) and that ‘prospects’ for film theory depend on these notions since ‘without [them] it is unclear how we shall criticize theoretical hypotheses’ (56), seem plainly at odds with a Wittgensteinian-inspired approach devoted to describing what we already know and do with film.<sup>2</sup>

According to Carroll's framework, film theorists should develop fallible (or falsifiable) theories to answer specific questions or explain well-defined problems, debate and compare rival theories, and submit their premises to 'intense theoretical criticism' (57).

Both Turvey and Carroll offer compelling arguments, and in a sense both may be seen as contributing distinct prescriptions rather than categorical statements about the nature of the work typically labeled 'film theory'. Either way, however, both views entail difficulties to which I will now briefly turn.

## II

We have seen that Turvey and Carroll's positions leave us with two opposing views with which we can consider that vast body of work we usually refer to as 'film theory' and which is comprised of works by writers as diverse as Münsterberg, Arnheim, Kracauer, Benjamin, Eisenstein, Balzàs, Bazin, Cohen-Séat, Mitry, Metz, Bellour, Baudry, Ropars, Mulvey, deLauretis, Cavell, and Deleuze, just to name a few. In important ways, these two proposals are versions of what have been key positions in epistemological debates in the philosophy of science throughout the twentieth century. The first one often relies on a nominalistic and relativistic reading of the later Wittgenstein. In the sciences it has come to nurture the incommensurability theses of Kuhn (1962) and Feyerabend (1993), as well as various strands of skepticism. The other position relates to empiricism, of which there has been several incarnations, including logical positivism and Popperian falsificationism.

Bringing the issue back to film studies, the concern that Turvey's conception raises is that it offers us no assurance regarding the *rationality* of 'film theory'. As shown earlier, Turvey believes that, unlike the natural sciences where assent requires rigorous empirical testing, we subscribe to film theories regardless of any such tests. Consider his discussion of theorists as different as Christian Metz and David Bordwell:

When someone like Metz, for example, compares the cinema to phenomena such as dreams, daydreams, and fantasies, some of us are tempted to agree with him because we think – 'Ah yes, he's right. Some films are like dreams, the experience of cinema is sometimes fantasy-like', and so on. Or when Bordwell claims that we try and construct a coherent story when watching a fiction film, some of us might concur because we think – 'Yes, that's true. When I watch a film, I do make inferences, try to fill in missing information, anticipate and form hypotheses', and so on. (Turvey 2005, 25–26)

The obvious downside to this conception is that it leaves us without any formal means to mount a critique of film theories. For instance, what are we to do when a theorist – such as Carroll – maintains that Metz' theory is *false* and that the experience of film is nothing like a dream? Turvey, it seems, has no answer to this, nor can he produce one since, in the end, he advocates that, properly speaking, *there can be nothing empirical or scientific at stake in humanities scholarship*.

Whence his conclusion that ‘new clarifications are not *better* than their predecessors’ but simply ‘*different*’ (Turvey 2005, 30). The risk incurred is obvious, however, and not addressed by Turvey: if there’s nothing empirical in humanities scholarship, then different ‘theories’ may appear as incommensurable language games. Moreover, the notion that they ought to be ‘measured ... by how well they make sense of the norms they seek to clarify’ (30) gives us little to go on. Doesn’t Carroll’s contention that film isn’t dreamlike also make sense?

The difficulty I find with Carroll’s proposal is of a different nature. I agree with him that film theory is a *rational* endeavor. The implication of this is simple: film theory must be submitted to criticism, for there lies the benchmark of rationality. However, his scheme – as presented in *Post-Theory* – amounts to little more than a vague wish. As I alluded to earlier, and notwithstanding several references to the sciences, Carroll’s dialectical ‘framework for film theorizing’ doesn’t explicitly state, for instance, how the criteria of truth and falsity ought to be applied for critiquing film theories, nor how these would compare with criteria that exist for the same purpose in the epistemology of science. The Devil, as we know, is always in the details.

In the natural sciences, we know that various schemes have been proposed to ensure that theories be subjected to criticism. One of the best known is undoubtedly Karl Popper’s falsificationism. And though it is not today without many detractors, falsificationism’s success in the scientific community is due in no small measure to its ability to tap into what Stephen Toulmin (1972) has described as the hard sciences’ disciplinary ‘compactness’, that is, their cohesiveness with regards to well-defined goals and ideals. Falsificationism promised to demarcate true scientific theories from pseudo-science and non-scientific opinions – whether it has delivered on its promise, and at what price, however, is still a matter of debate among philosophers of science. It is premised on the overwhelmingly accepted goal among scientists and philosophers of science that science ought to explain phenomena through laws and, therefore, use these laws to predict token phenomena. Accordingly, a theory is considered scientific if there are conditions under which its predictions – that is, what would be expected to aver, were it to be the case – could be observed to fail. Carroll, however, does not invoke falsificationism in his essay (nor any other such formal scheme), and when Slavoj Žižek (2001) brandishes the specter of Popper in his response to *Post-Theory*, it is the book’s co-editor, David Bordwell (2005), who answers back that ‘Carroll’s view of collective problem-solving through debate is a far broader position in the philosophy of science than Popper’s account.’

Of course, most of what we call ‘film theory’ would not resist scientific falsification for the simple reason that ... it’s *not* natural science. Now, I’m not saying that the use of scientific methodologies – in the spirit of what some filmologists tried to do in the 1950s, for instance – should never be attempted in film studies. Rather, I’m merely drawing attention to the well-known fact that falsification could not be used as a criterion for criticizing that *entire* historical body of work we have come to label ‘film theory’ – or even the vast majority of it.

It might be countered that even though Carroll doesn't explicitly spell out how truth or falsity are to be used in accounting for film theories, his own meta-critical practice – his studies, over many years, of authors as diverse as Münsterberg, Arnheim, Kracauer, Bazin, Baudry, or Metz – offers plenty of such examples. There is not enough space to go over these many examples here, so I will limit myself to two brief comments.

In his introduction to *Post-Theory*, Carroll makes a number of critical claims regarding psychoanalysis – the latter, we know, is the *bête noire* of cognitivism. For instance, he questions its use to explain certain facts about film that, according to him, could just as well be explained by neuroscience or cognitive psychology without calling forth the Freudian notion of the unconscious (Carroll 1996, 64). His most severe criticism here, I believe, is that psychoanalysis should carry an extra burden when used in film studies, *because it was initially developed to explain and treat irrational behavior*. Now, I'm not a psychoanalyst, nor do I practice psychoanalytic film criticism (i.e. I have no particular vested interest in it either way), but it is fair to say that Carroll's argument *doesn't show psychoanalysis to be false* (neither does he claim, as Popper did, that it is unfalsifiable – according to many today an inconclusive diagnostic for judging scientificity since it relies on an arguably unwarranted skepticism toward inductive reasoning and thus an acceptance of skepticism). However, the argument fails to convince me for the simple reason that rather than claim that psychoanalysis can only deal with irrational phenomena because it was developed to do so, one could just as easily retort that it is *in treating irrational behavior that the hypothesis of psychoanalysis – namely, the unconscious – appeared as necessary*, a fact which *doesn't preclude* looking at rational or 'normal' behavior psychoanalytically (as Lacan argued, for instance), and therefore *releases it from any special burden of proof in film studies*. Simply put, concepts like the Oedipus complex or those of 'drive theory' aren't applicable solely to irrational behavior. For if psychoanalysis can claim any success, as a therapeutic approach or a hermeneutics, it must account for irregularities (or symptoms) within a conception of the 'normally' functioning mind of its own. What it tells us, furthermore, is that the boundary between 'normal' (or rational) and irrational behavior or mental life may not be as impermeable as we previously thought it to be. Finally, it would be a mistake to think that psychoanalysis and cognitive neuroscience offer competing accounts of the *same* facts. As Ricoeur (1977) once argued, psychoanalytic facts are not observable in quite the same way. Thus, if psychoanalysis is to be discounted in film theory it should be on different ground than what Carroll proposes.

The second example comes from Carroll's treatment of Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art* in his 1988 book *Philosophical Problems in Classical Film Theory*. Carroll's review of Arnheim is several dozen pages long and I can't hope to render it justice in just a few lines. However, he does uphold that if we take Arnheim's claim that 'art is expression' to be a generalization, then the claim is *false* (Carroll 1988, 59). Part of the argument can easily be refuted, however. Indeed, Carroll argues that if 'expression entails the communication of proposition-like messages,

then many works of art are bereft of expression' (59). However, this is an inference on Carroll's part, for nowhere does Arnheim limit expression to proposition-like messages. Yet this is not my point. Rather, the argument that ought to be made here is that Arnheim might well reject as 'non-art' what others consider to be 'art', and this being the case one wonders how his conception could be falsified in a strict sense. Indeed, it is a key feature of Arnheim's approach to art that not all paintings, stage plays, sculptures, or films are art. The point, then, is that to falsify Arnheim's art-is-expression theory, one would have to show that there is a universal conception of art that forbids this thesis. Barring that, falsifying Arnheim's view as a generalization is a rather tall order. Carroll is then led to infer that Arnheim's claim must be *prescriptive* rather than a categorical statement. However, there is no essential relation between prescriptivism and Arnheim's position *in this matter*. Arnheim might simply rejoin that some people use the word 'art' loosely – in fact this is precisely what he claims in the first German edition of his book (which Carroll doesn't mention and which differs significantly from the shorter version published in the USA in the 1950s<sup>3</sup>). The point is that, rather than arguing for a prescriptive conception of expression in art, it could well be – theoretically speaking – that the discrepancy Carroll considers between what is called 'art' in our culture today and Arnheim's conception of art-as-expression, lies in our culture's lack of sensitivity toward art and its expressiveness. My goal is not, however, to endorse Arnheim's claim nor to prove that he's right on this issue – for I don't believe this could be done. Instead, we ought to consider the *value* of Arnheim's film theory, by which I mean the fact that he gives us tools – principles – with which we can come to appreciate silent cinema, principles to help us achieve aesthetic judgment: true representations of real aesthetic qualities in this case. We may, of course, criticize Arnheim's conception of art as being antiquated or incapable of accounting for aspects of what people call 'art' today – namely, on the ground of different aesthetic qualities –, as we can with Münsterberg's Kantian influenced aesthetic theory, but this is obviously different from claiming that they are *false* because they follow from *false* premises. Should we say instead that Arnheim's theory is implausible? However, even this weaker version doesn't apply since expressiveness is, after all, a plausible definition of art irrespective of any particular aesthetic or stylistic prescription as Arnheim's work shows.

This brief detour through Arnheim's aesthetic theory was meant to highlight the fact that any blanket critical approach to the entire body of work called 'film theory' is tricky business for the simple reason that 'film theory' is not a unified body of doctrines driven by a single goal or purpose, such as *nomothetic explanation* in the natural sciences. The implication is that distinct critical approaches should be envisaged for the various types of claims film theories make. Surely, neuroscience theories on brain activity in watching films that can be tested by brain scans, or sociological theories upheld through statistical data gathering may be expected to hold up to the epistemological standards of either the natural or 'harder' social sciences. The problem, of course, is that these standards don't hold for much of the tradition of humanities scholarship in film

studies. As a result, humanities scholarship has either simulated scientificity or embraced dualism (the idea that scientific and humanistic research are bereft of epistemological commonalities) in such a way as to emphasize its alienation from science and scientific epistemology.

### III

For simplicity's sake, the final section of this paper will limit itself to consider epistemological issues raised by *aesthetic theories* such as Arnheim's. Now, so far, my comment on Arnheim would seem to give reason to Turvey in that, if 'art is expression' is a definition – that is, *if it merely stipulates how we ought to use the term 'art'* –, then it would appear that no protocol of *systematic empirical investigation* is called for.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one might then argue that all forms of reiteration of this statement are true, yet logically meaningless in as much as no experience could ever contradict them. As I mentioned earlier, find a work of art that is non-expressive and Arnheim could answer back that you are not using the term 'art' properly. His 'theory', it might be argued, is a tautology. If so, one wonders how this situation (one we might take to be paradigmatic of humanistic research in film studies) could ever be reconciled with the rational requirement for criticism promoted by Carroll.

In the natural sciences, theories are ideally corroborated or falsified when consequences deduced from them being the case are submitted to empirical testing. A scientific theory requires what polymath philosopher Charles S. Peirce – who was also, amongst other things, a lab scientist – called a pragmatic elucidation, namely, the ability to represent something by way of statements (which may be categorical or conditional) that concern what might be expected of this object under various conditions, natural or experimental. Pragmatic elucidation of concepts requires continua of qualities, which is why, according to Peirce's semiotic, only *symbols* can be elucidated. Were something, say a diamond, a token of a class, the class of diamonds, it would possess certain qualities (e.g. hardness). Thus to elucidate a concept (e.g. that of 'diamond') is to know the 'habits' of the class of objects represented by it: what would ensue were something a diamond (namely, its normal 'behavior' under given circumstances). It is this which enables one to judge the truth or falsity of propositions such as: 'This is a diamond' or 'A diamond is hard.' In return, such propositions make possible hypotheses by which our knowledge of diamonds can grow (thus I can discover that diamonds can be used as a stylus on turntables, as cutting tools, etc.). This is a movement that grows from critical commonsensical acceptance of perception to science, for example, controlled perception and thought through experimental protocols.

The scientific method, according to Peirce, consists in several steps, from positing a hypothesis (thanks in large measure to our ability to imagine the workings of matter), to determining all that would follow from it and inductively verifying these outcomes. Though induction doesn't suggest a theory, nor determine its truth, successive inductions may ever more approximate the truth,

understood that the pragmatic conception of truth is deflationary. ‘Your problem’, wrote Peirce, ‘would be greatly simplified, if, instead of saying you want to know the “Truth”, you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt’ (CP, 5.416<sup>5</sup>). Now, one interesting way to reconstruct Peirce’s conception of science – while still being faithful to it – is to say that it concerns the *habitual agreement of two minds*, that of the scientist and that of the world. In important ways, Peirce was an objective idealist and unlike many epistemologists – including Popper – believed the source of hypotheses to be an epistemological concern, not a psychological one.

In considering the possibility that we can use our imagination to guess true hypotheses leading to successful predictions about the natural world, Peirce conjectures that mind and matter must share some qualities. What they share, in fact, is generality or *habit-taking*, which is the defining quality of mind. The medium of thought being signs, which are general, their ability to stand for matter (including its laws or habits) and represent it truthfully comes from that shared quality. Whence Peirce sees matter as *mind having lost much of its plasticity*. Habit must be understood here in relation to phenomena exhibiting the tendency to spread out into a continuum, that is to say, to regularize and to reproduce themselves indefinitely in the future. This tendency manifests itself in the fact that once a phenomenon appears, the possibility of another one just like it appearing in the future becomes more likely. Qualities of feeling are monads and thus unrelated to anything else, and yet, by their very appearance they acquire the power of making their reproduction, their growth, and their regularization more likely than before. Once regularized in this fashion, qualities of feeling become what Peirce calls *ideas*. This is the very principle of habit-taking that Peirce describes as the ‘law of mind’: ‘Feeling tends to spread; connections between feelings awaken feelings; neighboring feelings become assimilated; ideas are apt to reproduce themselves. These are so many formulations of the one law of the growth of mind’ (CP, 6.21).

On the one hand, our aptitude for science rests on our ability to control the mental habit whereby one thought can determine another, namely, our logical bent at making inferences, which are the general signs of reasoning. *It does so, however, with regards to a regulative goal or ideal, namely, the search for truth*. On the other hand, when confronted with the fact that scientific rationality and logic are related to an ideal, Peirce began to realize that other forms of normativity (other values) must undergird logic, these include our ability to normalize our behavior and our feelings, the domain of *ethics* and *aesthetics*. Aesthetics, as understood by Peirce, concerns our ability to normalize the very normalization of our feelings, to control, if you will, the habit of forming habits. Its rationality, in short, is that of the development of ideals or goals as habits of feeling understood as self-generating norms under the law of mind. *Truth, in this regard, is an aesthetic ideal as expressed in logic*.

What does this have to do with the critique of humanistic film theories such as Arnheim’s? Let’s just say to begin with that the first truly *rational* question

one should ask of a theory – scientific or not – is whether it is *attractive* (in the sense also of actively promoting attraction), that is to say, whether it is apt to attract feelings and habits, develop new habits of feeling and, eventually, habits of conduct and thought – irrespective of advance knowledge of the ‘admirability’ of any consequence that would follow from these habits, which only ethics or logic could judge should they ever grow sufficiently as to concern conduct or thought. In fact, Peirce tells us that attraction to what is admirable in itself, regardless of anything else, is the very foundation of epistemic rationality. And though one can only guess at first what is admirable, such guessing can grow in self-control as (aesthetic) instinct grows into (logical) reason. Arguably, this gives us very little assurance. Indeed, despite growth in our ability to guess right, greater assurance in exercising self-control and discriminating between our ideals can only come from their consequences on conduct and thought. The upshot being that, while aesthetics, for Peirce, is concerned with the rational formation of ideals, it is, on its own, ill-equipped to handle discrimination between them.

The point of all this abstract conceptualizing is that we shouldn’t search to *falsify* theories such as Arnheim’s ‘art is expression’ as much as question their value, their admirableness and attractiveness with regards with what we *ought* to feel or experience. Moreover, this admirableness begins with the fact that a statement such as ‘art is expression’ *merely tells us that there may be some object that is such that it is expressive*.

Concretely speaking, in the case of *Film as Art*, for example, reading it many years ago helped me *experience* and *appreciate* the aesthetic qualities of silent cinema all the more and thus nurtured habits of feeling with regards to film viewing that have led to the growth of taste, viewing, and teaching practices. We may debate whether this is an admirable goal in itself, whether it agrees with other ideals we cherish, and we may debate whether Arnheim’s conception and his own attempts at exemplifying and clarifying it meets this goal successfully or whether the ability of other writers of the silent period – Freeburg, Delluc, Eisenstein – to see films in a different light meet this goal more successfully, bringing more depth, or more subtlety or nuance to our appreciation. *This is precisely the point*. Moreover, in as much as such theories *react to experience* and may help us experience something, it would be false to say, as Turvey has it, that there is nothing empirical about them, even though they cannot be falsified, strictly speaking, by experience and sustained empirical testing. Whence, in the event that no one else but Arnheim could ever see the aesthetic worth of his claim, then the theory would be *valueless*, not false (unless we want to coin the term ‘aesthetically false’).

In *Conjectures and Refutations* (2002), Karl Popper made a related point. He claimed that when theories cannot be severely tested anymore, and therefore are not explanatory, they can still be used as instruments of *exploration*. As a result, he says, an instrumentalist conception of their nature and of the reasons to accept them becomes unavoidable, for instead of tests we get applications.

However, in the case of a theory such as Arnheim's, my proposal might seem to imply a very subjective form of evaluation, and therefore not something we would expect from epistemology. However, the point is that when epistemology is concerned solely with truth as the ideal of logic and with the forms of inquiry that embody this ideal (such as the natural sciences), it fails to account *critically* for other aspects of *experience* pertinent to the ideals of aesthetics and ethics which underlie all forms of inquiry (including science). Still, one might retort that, unlike Popper's exploratory theories which concern objective empirical data, aesthetic qualities, such as expressiveness, are purely subjective. After all, I may see expressiveness in a film or in a bronze sculpture by Jasper Johns, but you (or Noël Carroll) may not. Moreover, it may further be argued that someone's use of the concept of 'expressiveness' is highly subjective, more so, for instance, than what goes on in equally exploratory formal theories of narrative such as Aristotle's, which requires the identification of the 'beginning–middle–end' structure. If this were the case, then epistemology might, in some instances, at least, concern itself with purely relativistic or even private matters. However, I disagree with this conclusion.

My argument is that if theories such as Arnheim's – though I believe the same holds for a host of humanistic approaches to the cinema, ranging from social and ethical theories concerned with gender and identity to the more formal theories of film narratology or semiology, which are sometimes heavily taxonomic –, respond or react to experience then, by definition, the principles that ensure their value cannot be purely subjective. Yet, in the case of 'expressiveness', many might argue that, like beauty, grace, or other aesthetic qualities, it is a purely relative term, as is the evaluation of its admirability. Here, the problem resides in the way we conceive of aesthetic concepts and whether or not their application relies on a set of criteria and, if not, whether it can be objective. Obviously, this is a large philosophical debate that I don't intend to fully solve here. However, some introductory remarks might help give direction to our meditations and help stamp out the charge of epistemological relativism or subjectivism.

Philosophers have given much attention to concepts whose usage falls on fairly strict criteria or norms. Others, however, such as Russell (1959), have made a useful distinction between knowledge by description (which is consciously inferential) and knowledge by acquaintance (which is immediate). Objectivity seems to rest on our ability to use criteria and follow norms in applying concepts, and the fact that concepts are cultural constructs is compatible with this view.<sup>6</sup> However, as American philosopher T.L. Short (2008, 119) notes:

in the case of concepts applicable without criteria the same question of objectivity cannot be raised. It would seem that the only question is whether a person can be so trained that their judgments will agree. If there is agreement, then there must be something in the items observed that accounts for that agreement, and that is the feature said to be observed.

For example, take the perception of the color 'red'. Looking at how people use this color concept, we find much agreement respective to the light wavelengths

measured between 630 and 750 nm. This might well fool someone into thinking that the measure stands as a criterion with which to judge the correct use of the term 'red'. However, this only inverts the facts: the physical measurement of 'red' isn't a criterion for applying the concept, rather it results from it. Perceptual and observational judgments – which need not be restricted to what is *sensed* – are immediate, and they refer to what is real and independent from our will. Aesthetic concepts, I would argue, are of the same nature. Yet, the prevailing view today is that they are either purely subjective or else entirely socially and culturally determined. At least three arguments might serve to challenge this conception.

The subjective view is first challenged by the fact that there exists much agreement in aesthetic matters. Thus, even though we find ourselves light years from universal assent, were judgments concerning aesthetic qualities be purely subjective, there would obviously be no way of accounting for the degree of agreement that does exist, save through pure chance or serendipity. In other words, if judgments concerning aesthetic qualities were purely subjective, then there ought to be more disagreement between them than is currently the case.

The second argument responds to the skeptic's answer that what little agreement there is relies not on the reality of aesthetic qualities, but on social and cultural determination. Of course, knowledge of art, familiarity with artistic styles, cultivation of taste, etc. – all of which fall under the umbrella of what Wittgenstein calls a 'form of life' – can all help us perceive aesthetic qualities; however, they don't ensure their perception *necessarily*. In fact, there are numerous cases where knowledge of art (and cultivation) has actually served as a hindrance to the perception of aesthetic qualities, for it has led some critics to develop blinding *criteria* for applying (or not applying) aesthetic concepts – the early reception of the impressionists is a *cause célèbre*, but the same can be said about some early (and not so early) responses to photography and cinema (or comic books or rock music). Surely, however, that no such criteria exist ought to be sufficiently evidenced by all those *ars poetica* that litter the dustbin of art history and aesthetic philosophy – a point Morris Weitz famously made over 50 years ago. Furthermore, and this gets to the heart of the matter, the skeptic who refuses to accept that aesthetic qualities are real, and therefore refers aesthetic agreement *wholly* and *entirely* to socially or culturally laden determinations, is forced to argue, against the evidence, that these qualities must be applied through norms or criteria. For how else could we move from culture alone to aesthetic perception? However, just as there is no going 'behind' color perception, so it is, I believe, with the perception of aesthetic qualities. The point is not at all to deny the importance culture – or cultural conditioning – can play in the observation of aesthetic qualities, but rather to claim that culture can offer no rules, no criteria for the application of aesthetic concepts to observed facts. As a result, this makes observation all the more difficult. Charles Peirce's phenomenology was entirely predicated on such observations. Moreover, because there are no criteria to phenomenological observations, the ability to repeat them and find agreement is paramount. Thus, of his reader, Peirce wrote: 'he must actually repeat my

observations and experiments for himself, or else I shall more utterly fail to convey my meaning than if I were to discourse on the effects of chromatic decoration to a man congenitally blind' (CP, 1.286). Phenomenology and its observational 'method' were, for Peirce, very close to aesthetics; the one key difference lying in the *normativity* of aesthetics, namely, the fact that, in producing ideals, aesthetics moves one step 'beyond' pure phenomenological observation to consider not only what *can* be felt in general but what *ought* to be felt.

Obviously, this doesn't mean that we shall all agree at once on real aesthetic qualities. Our ability to perceive aesthetically is a complicated matter and often requires much training in discerning various qualities. Moreover, aesthetic qualities appear to be disjunctive – unlike those qualities Locke called primary, secondary, and tertiary –, yet, like all qualities they are powers to produce feelings and ideas. Thus, qualities such as 'expressiveness' or 'beauty' may reside equally in a tracking shot or in a line that is drawn in the context of a work, but not necessarily in the context of another work. Moreover, as with all perception, it is not easy to distinguish a real perception from a hallucination, for 'taken in themselves' as Peirce writes, 'there is no difference' (CP, 7.644) and there are no infallible tests with which to tell them apart – which, by the way, is *no* reason to be skeptical about perception. A scientist looking through a telescope must come to learn to differentiate between celestial bodies and the telescope's artifacts. Moreover, it is just as obvious that we don't always agree on some of the simplest sense perceptions, having various perceptual thresholds and having cultivated different tastes, different habits of feeling – sometimes even at the risk of blindness toward other qualities. Yet disagreements, barring error or hallucination, don't imply incommensurability. If an aesthetic quality is real, and not a figment, then objectivity can be achieved in accounting for it.

Thirdly, we ought to recognize that the presumption of objectivity in aesthetic judgment is also embedded in our very engagement with such texts as Arnheim's. Indeed, why would we even make the effort to read *Film as Art* if we were convinced that its aesthetic argument is a private or purely subjective affair? The point is that we continue to read Arnheim animated by the regulative hope that in so doing we can come to see or experience something about film and that we can develop new habits of feeling toward the cinema, review past habits or else give greater credence to them. In addition, the *rationality* of this hope lies in the reality of aesthetic qualities – a solution certainly less convoluted than, say, Kant's rather improbable account of the universality of aesthetic judgments.

These arguments are not meant to be conclusive and many conceptual efforts remain to be made to buttress the position. Yet they give us reasons to resist the relativistic claims of the subjectivist skeptic toward aesthetic matters and to believe in a realist epistemology for all forms of film theorizing – including humanistic and aesthetic theorizing – on the basis of which critique becomes possible even when strict scientific falsification fails.

\* \* \*

Two general conclusions might be drawn for the above. First is that epistemological inquiries into what we call ‘film theory’ requires we take into consideration the various goals and ideals that animate its projects. Not all ‘theories’ are theories in quite the same sense and we need to distinguish between their various ambitions with regards to knowledge. Secondly, we should recognize that doing so need not require we embrace dualism – as do Malcolm Turvey and Noël Carroll in their characterization of the problems of film theory. Proper solution to the predicament of dualism lies not in casting the entire domain of the humanities into the sciences, or in refuting rationality, or even in converting the sciences into textual studies. Indeed, the full-blown scientific model has not given very good results with the humanities – for one thing, it yields very little in terms of predictability; while the full-blown ‘textualist’ approach to the sciences has failed to account for their successes and distinct form of disciplinary rationality. In the end, it appears as though the nineteenth-century crisis of historicism was never satisfactorily dealt with as it migrated from history to literature and then to the rest of the humanities. Not surprisingly, Peirce has been mentioned by philosophers such as J. Habermas and K.-O. Apel as offering a possible exit strategy from this heritage of Western philosophy. His late realization that logic needs the assistance of ethics and aesthetics paves the way for a comprehensive approach to epistemology that sheds incommensurability for continuity all the while ensuring the *rationality* of non-scientific humanistic inquiries – including, of course, those of film theory.

### Notes

1. I say ‘seemingly’ because in a more recent piece, Turvey inexplicably and, in my view, somewhat confusedly seeks to partly reconcile his views with Carroll’s. (See Turvey [2007]. See also note 2 below.)
2. Such statements explain why I was stunned by some of Malcolm Turvey’s (2007, 112) claims in his more recent *October* piece, including the following passage where he fully endorses Carroll’s ‘framework’ for film theory: ‘As in the natural sciences, film theories, [Carroll] argues correctly in my view, should be formulated through dialectical criticism of rivals because it is only by proposing better theories of film that film theory can make progress, and it is this dialectical criticism that had been sorely lacking in film theory when it was dominated by psychoanalysis and semiotics. . . . Theoretical inquiry in a variety of theoretical disciplines such as philosophy, the natural sciences, and the human sciences has advanced through dialectical criticism, so why shouldn’t film theory?’ In addition, on the essay’s final page, he adds: ‘. . . film is what we are trying to *explain*’ (120, italics mine). It seems fair to say that Turvey has abandoned the notion according to which, as quoted above, ‘our answers to questions about the cinema’s internal norms are not fallible and do not need improving in the future’.
3. In the 1933 Faber and Faber English edition of *Film als kunst*, Arnheim writes: ‘The idea of conscious artistic creation is a very late product of civilisation. To this day very few people are moved by it . . . Up to the present, artistic appreciation is confused with the pleasures suggested by works of art . . . It follows that even today mankind in the mass is unconsciously inimical to the development of the arts. . . . Enormous audiences crowd the cinemas. But the pleasure which most people derive even from

- films of artistic value is wholly divorced from any artistic appreciation and depends solely upon the action and the *milieu*' (43–46).
4. Obviously, a definition may also purport to tell us what existing usage is, in which case the statement may be true or false. However, this is clearly not what Arnheim is doing in defining art as expressive – whence his comment concerning how loosely some people use the term. Morris Weitz (1956), of course, made a similar argument to the one I'm making here more than half a century ago.
  5. This is standard notation for the eight volume edition of the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Peirce 1931–60). The first digit refers to the volume number while the numbers that follow the period refer to the paragraph.
  6. See Thomas Short (2008) for a brief but useful discussion of the matter.

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