

## Cognitivism, Contemporary Film Theory and Method: A Response to Warren Buckland

Noël Carroll

### Introduction

As its title indicates, my book--*Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*--rejects a great many of the presuppositions of the cinema studies establishment in the United States and Britain today. Moreover, since the British journal *Screen* was the source of many of those presuppositions, it is not surprising that it published a scathing response to *Mystifying Movies*. That response took the form of a substantial article by Warren Buckland entitled "Critique of Poor Reason."

*Screen* sent neither me nor my publisher a copy of this review article. I came across it over a year after its publication date. I wrote to *Screen* requesting an author's right to refute Buckland's charges in an article of comparable length. *Screen* suggested that I write a five-page letter to the editor, or, if I wanted to write an article, that it connect my dispute with Buckland to larger methodological issues in the debate between psychoanalytic film theory and my view, which is sometimes called cognitivism. The following article was my attempt to implement the second option.

*Screen* rejected the article. Whether *Screen* rejected it as a result of a judgment that it does not sufficiently address significant methodological issues or as an attempt to repress alternative voices in the predictably stalinist manner of Lysenko is a question for the reader to resolve. . . .

Throughout the eighties, albeit in fits and starts, there was an attempt, by people like myself and David Bordwell,<sup>1</sup> to field an approach to film theory that offers an alternative to the psychoanalytic-marxist-semiotic theory which has been disseminated most notably by *Screen* and which is, especially when amplified by Lacanian feminism, the dominant approach to film theory in the English-speaking world today. This alternative approach has been labeled "cognitivism" because of the emphasis that it places on the efficacy of models that exploit the role of cognitive processes, as opposed to unconscious processes, in the explanation of cinematic communication and understanding.

Cognitivism is not a unified theory in three senses. First, it is not a single theory, but a series of small-scale theories, each of which offers answers to specific questions about film communication, e.g., how do audiences assimilate film narratives? Second, it is not a unified theory because different cognitivist theorists often present small-scale theories that conceptualize the phenomena at hand differently and, sometimes, in nonconverging ways. And finally, cognitivism seems not to be a unified theory because, partly due to the previous two considerations, we have no reason to believe that all the small-scale theories that the cognitivists have assembled can be organized into a single framework.

On the other hand, though cognitivism is not a theory, its proponents share certain convictions, such as: that cognitive models may provide better answers to many of the theoretical questions we have about film than psychoanalytic models do; that film theory is a mode of rational enquiry and, as such, is assessable according to our best standards of reasoning and evidence; and that theories are evaluated comparatively, e.g., psychoanalytic theories must be put in competition with cognitive theories that propose to explain the same data (like narrative comprehension). Furthermore, some cognitivists--most notoriously myself--have argued that once the reigning psychoanalytic-marxist theory is assessed according to canons of rational enquiry and compared to alternative cognitive theories, it appears baroque and vacuous, indeed, altogether an intellectual disaster.

Predictably, cognitivism has evoked the ire of the cinema studies establishment.<sup>2</sup> Not only does cognitivism challenge the foundations of that establishment's paradigm, but it also emerges at a time when it is evident that that paradigm is producing routine, rather than interesting, new results. And it is a commonplace that researchers are apt to abandon a theory when it ceases to provide innovative discoveries. Thus, it should come as no surprise that we are beginning to encounter a number of what might be thought of as "damage control" articles which are dedicated to the refutation of cognitivism and/or to establishing its compatibility with the dominant psychoanalytic model (the new pluralism).

One of the most interesting of these articles--because it is the most sustained as well as the most methodologically ambitious--is Warren Buckland's recent attack, published in *Screen*, of my book *Mystifying Movies*.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I wish to respond to Buckland's attack in detail. But, more importantly, I would like to address a series of deep methodological issues that his attack raises which are pertinent to any future debates between cognitivism and the ruling psychoanalytic-marxist theory. Thus, though this article is, in part, a reaction to Buckland, it is also an attempt to clarify what I take to be some of the most important methodological issues between cognitivists and psychoanalytic-marxists.

### Science Bashing

Buckland, like others, fears that cognitivism, at least under my construal, puts too much faith in scientific method (and analytic philosophy). It is true that I regard scientific method as a useful guide to the sort of rational enquiry that film theorists pursue. But Buckland seems to think that I believe that scientific method and analytic philosophy lead "to an unconditional avoidance of error in order to establish 'the truth.'" (CPR, 81) But let me disabuse him of this. Not only do I never advance such an idea, but I couldn't, since it is evident that talented scientists and philosophers would not be embroiled in defending incompatible theories if they possessed such miraculous methods. I do believe that specific methods (like Mill's) and protocols (like "if one of two competing theories fits the phenomena better, *ceteris paribus*, prefer it to its rival") are truth-tracking; but none so far have guaranteed what Buckland calls the "unconditional avoidance of error." Nor is someone who upholds the value of such methods committed to this view. What I am committed to is that such methods serve as the best (the heretofore most reliable) means for justifying our beliefs. But, of course, I admit that a justified belief can be false.

Buckland likes to chastise science by calling it "imperialistic"--foisting its findings on all comers as the truth. But this is not a shortcoming of science; it is a reflection of Buckland's confusion of the issue of truth with the issue of justification. Scientific method provides us with strong justifications for things like theories, though, again, a well-warranted theory at time T1 could turn out to be false at time T2. Nevertheless, that a justified theory or belief could be false does not seem to loosen our expectations--of both ourselves and others--that we strive to back up our beliefs with the best justifications available. The psychoanalytic-marxist misrepresents the cognitivist as a "truth-bully." I, for example, don't demand acceptance of my theories as infallibly true, but only as better justified, at this point in the debate, than their competitors.

One way in which Buckland seeks to undercut what for him are the dubious scientific presuppositions of cognitivism is to charge that I think of scientific method as a source of absolute truth and falsity. (CPR, 81) In contrast, Buckland thinks that relativism is the better course, and, in fact, the brand of relativism that he prefers is a variety of social constructivism. But before looking at Buckland's sketch of the social determination of scientific knowledge, we must consider the underlying structure of Buckland's argument.

Buckland confronts us with a dilemma: either one must be an absolutist with respect to scientific knowledge or one must be a relativist; you can't be an absolutist (actually, for the reasons I gave above); therefore, you must be a relativist.

But this argument, though it is often deployed by theorists in the humanities, is too facile. It has not explored all the available options. One can eschew absolutism and relativism at the same time. One can be what is called a fallibilist, which, by the way, is the position that cognitivists, like myself and Bordwell, hold.

The fallibilist admits that she may have to revise her theories in light of future evidence or of theoretical implications of later developments because she realizes that at best her theories are well-warranted, and that a well-warranted theory can be false. There is no claim to a purchase on absolute truth here. But neither is there a concession to relativism in any standard sense of the term. For we are open to revising our theories in accordance with the best available transcultural standards of justification, those shared, for example, by capitalist physicists, Chinese communist physicists, and Vatican physicists.

The fallibilist denies that we could revise all our beliefs, theories, and protocols at once. But any subset thereof is revisable under given circumstances, and, indeed, the entire set might be revised serially. The scientific viewpoint does not commit us to the arrogant presumption that it delivers absolute truth, but only to the more modest claim that there are discernible grades of justification, of which some have proven to be more reliable than others. All the cognitivist need claim for her theories is that they are more justified, at this juncture in the dialectical debate, than are psychoanalytic-marxist competitors. And she may do this without claiming that none of her theories will ever have to be modified or abandoned.

Of course, Buckland will deny my appeal to transcultural standards of justification because his version of relativism maintains that "the truth values of each theoretical paradigm are predominantly (although not exclusively) relative to the social and historical determinations from which they emerged." (CPR, 81) This is an empirical claim. In order to defend it, a social determinist like Buckland will have to demonstrate that major scientific claims--like the notion that gases expand when heated--have been endorsed by

most scientists for reasons that have almost nothing to do with evidence, arguments and observations, and that they have almost everything to do with socio-historical causes.

No one has done this, nor does it seem very likely that it can be done, since it is surely a daunting fact that scientists from very different socio-historical backgrounds (capitalist, marxist, Catholic, Islamic) accept a great many of the same claims (even sometimes across historical epochs). If Buckland were correct and scientists accepted theories not in terms of shared standards of enquiry but in terms of prevailing social agendas in their respective cultures, the fact of recurring strong consensus among scientists over a large number of theories could never be explained. Moreover, with reference to Buckland's bizarre talk about truth values, it is hard to imagine how one would specify the truth conditions for "gases expand when heated" in terms of specific constellations of socio-historical relations: "Gases expand when heated" is true if and only if what?--the relevant socio-historical context is a Protestant capitalist oligarchy!

And, in any case, Buckland's social determinism appears at odds with his attempt to debunk the scientific pretensions of the cognitivist. For he wishes to advance the generalization that in fact all scientific claims are relative to social determinations. But what then is the status of his generalization? Presumably he wants us to regard it as either true, or approximately true, or well justified. But since it is an empirical generalization, his theory must be reflexive, i.e., it must apply to itself. And applied to itself, Buckland's objection reduces predominantly to an expression of the values and aims of the particular socio-historical situation he inhabits. So, either we will have to regard Buckland's view as inexplicably transcending the constraints of social determination (and thereby serving as a self-refutation of the theory), or we will have to regard his view as just as self-deluded as he claims that cognitivism is.

Conceptual relativism, augmented by a social determination thesis, then, is not a promising line of attack for the contemporary film theorist eager to undermine cognitivism. Moreover, the attractiveness of this line for politically-minded film theorists (and literary theorists) has always been mysterious to me. For relativism of this sort turns progressive claims about economic inequality, racial oppression, and sexual bias into the special pleading of certain social formations.

However, in that case, public support of the claims of reformers on the part of persons outside said social formations loses its point. Surely such reformers, a minority in every country in the industrialized West, cannot expect this support unless they can advance their claims as justifiable to people from alien social formations. Since conceptual relativism plus social determinism is so inimicable to the aims of political film theorists, one is tempted to explain

its allure for such theorists on the grounds that they think that the theory is probably true. But conceding that much contradicts their allegiance to a social constructivist epistemology.

Buckland presumes that the cognitivist film theorists have not yet absorbed the lessons of post-positivist philosophers of science, viz., that theories should be evaluated pragmatically in a way that is sensitive to the contexts in which they emerge. Usually, these post-positivist insights are fleshed out by noting that competing scientific theories emerge in specific historical contexts (of theoretical debate) in order to answer presiding questions and that these theories are assessed pragmatically in terms of the way they differentially succeed in solving the contextually motivated problems. This mode of assessment is pragmatic (rather than absolutist) because it ranges only over known rival theories (rather than over every conceivable theory that might be brought to bear on the question), and because it focusses particularly on solutions to contextually motivated (theoretical) problems. But if this is the sort of post-positivist view of science that Buckland yearns for, then he fails to note that cognitivist film theory is pragmatic and contextual--with a vengeance.

The entire underlying structure of *Mystifying Movies* is dialectical. The elements of cinema that I have attempted to explain, like perspective and narrative, have been targeted because those are the features that psychoanalytic-marxists have, contextually, isolated as the ones that are in need of explanation. Alternative cognitivist explanations are mounted and explicitly weighed against reigning theories in terms of their comparative justifiability. This approach is not positivist; it is maximally compatible with the sort of pragmatic, contextual sensitivity Buckland advocates, though, ironically, he does not recognize it as such.

Indeed, if *Mystifying Movies* makes any lasting contribution to film theory, I would hope that it would be that it explicitly introduced the dialectical (pragmatic, contextually sensitive) form of argumentation to the field. Moreover, I also believe that I have said enough at this point to block dismissals of cognitivism as a naive version of positivism. In the future, intoning buzz phrases like "absolute knowledge" will not suffice as a way of rejecting cognitivism. If the debate about scientific methodology continues in film theory--as I think it should--then it will be constrained to begin with the understanding that cognitivism is prima facie based on a sophisticated, post-positivist conception of science.

### Bashing Analytic Philosophy

For Buckland, not only does my reliance on science as a guide to rational enquiry impose an imperialist, absolutist conception of "truth" on film studies;

my commitments to analytic philosophy reinforce this original sin. He writes: "Analytic philosophy presents itself as the only legitimate paradigm based on 'true,' 'objective' knowledge. . . ." (CPR, 81) This is a strange view of analytic philosophy. For analytic philosophy is not a body of knowledge nor is it a paradigm in any strict sense of the term. It is not a paradigm because competing, contradictory theories can be developed under its aegis, which is also why it is not a body of knowledge.

Some analytic philosophers of politics are marxists (or "Analytical Marxists")--like G. A. Cohen--while others are libertarians (e.g., Robert Nozick and Tibor Machen) and still others are liberals (e.g., John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin). And there are distinguished feminists, like Virginia Held, who are analytically inclined. Richard Wollheim advances a psychoanalytic theory of mind while Adolf Grunbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre reject psychoanalysis altogether. Analytic philosophy is a tradition rather than a paradigm or a body of knowledge--a tradition in which different and contradictory theories can be and have been developed. Thus, my allegiance to analytic philosophy in no way begs any questions in my debates with psychoanalytic-marxist film theorists.

There is no reason to suppose that, in principle, someone might not defend some version of a psychoanalytic-marxist approach to film within the context of analytic philosophy. Therefore, there is no justification, methodologically, in complaining that analytic philosophy antecedently stacks the deck against a psychoanalytic-marxist approach in film theory.

Of course, Buckland's reservations about analytic philosophy may spring from an uninformed conflation of analytic philosophy with logical positivism. But by this time in history, logical positivism is a defunct program, due to devastating objections advanced by other analytic philosophers. Moreover, logical positivism has been discredited for several decades. And, indeed, for the reasons stated in the preceding section, my approach to film theory is post-positivist.

Perhaps the strangest feature of Buckland's initial denunciation of the inherent absolutist imperialism of analytic philosophy is that throughout his article he relies heavily on the authority of analytical philosophers both to criticize me and to develop his own recommendations for film theory. Along the way we meet up with Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, W. V. Quine, Joseph Margolis, and J. J. Katz, while the theory of relevance that Buckland favors derives from the work of H. P. Grice. But these people are not marginal renegades; they are representatives of the core of the tradition. I cannot see how Buckland can reconcile his rejection of me specifically because of my analytic stance at the same time that he approvingly marshals so many once and future officers of the American Philosophical Association to rebuke

me. If ever one were tempted to mobilize psychoanalysis, it might be to explain Buckland's self-contradictory, love-hate relation to analytic philosophy.

### The Principle of Charity

A central premise of Buckland's rejection of my arguments against psychoanalytic-marxist film theory is that in interpreting their commitments, I fail to abide by the principle of charity. (CPR, 83-84) The version of the principle of charity that Buckland depends upon is derived primarily from Donald Davidson's article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."<sup>4</sup> Davidson's principle is developed in the context of considering the problem of how one translates from one language to another. His principle of charity advises that in order to maximize the sense of the language that we are translating, we try to optimize agreement between ourselves and our interlocutors. That is, we assume that we share the bulk of our beliefs with the users of the alien language that we are translating. For if we can't formulate most of what x is saying in terms of our own conceptual scheme, we cannot be sure whether or not x is just making random noises.

What Buckland wants to contend, I think, is that insofar as my interpretations of psychoanalytic-marxist film theorists don't respect something like the principle of charity (that pertains to contexts of radical translation between alien languages), my formulations make contemporary film theorists sound pretty silly. Whereas, if I extended the principle of charity to their theories--presuming that what I take to be reasonable corresponds to what they are trying to say--then their theories wouldn't appear as outlandish as I make them out to be.

But I'm not sure, *pace* Buckland's construal of Davidson, that, even if we can provide a convincing version of the principle of charity, we can suppose that it should apply to the interpretation of theories (rather than to the translation of languages) in general or to my interpretation of psychoanalytic-marxist film theory in particular. Wouldn't it be a mistake to interpret Aristotle's physics in terms of contemporary physical beliefs--that is, to attempt to find interpretations of his claims that would make as many of them as possible true by the lights of modern day science? Surely a principle of interpretation like that would produce a mass of anachronisms.

However advisable a principle of charity might be for translating the ordinary speech ("There's a dog.") of alien languages, it does not follow that the same procedure is appropriate in reconstructing rarefied theoretical idioms, especially those of contesting theories. For such a policy--if carried out completely--would make the best interpretation of two rival theories the one that has them both committed to the same assertions about the relevant phenomena. If I extend the principle of charity to a competing theory my best



construal of it necessarily makes it into my theory. If one follows Buckland's advice fully, we wouldn't have rival theories at all. But that's absurd.

For the preceding reasons, I am, in general, reluctant to extrapolate the principle of charity from the context of the radical translation of alien languages to the interpretation of rival theories. But I am also reluctant to accept the principle of charity as a policy governing my interpretation of contemporary film theory for another reason. Contemporary film theory is not an alien language for me.<sup>5</sup> I am a user of the languages in which contemporary film theory is articulated. The context is not one of radical translation.

The contemporary film theorist and I share the same criteria for identifying instances of chairs, tables, dogs, convertibles, perspective and film editing. We already share most of the same beliefs about the world. We may differ about a tiny fraction of the beliefs that make up our highly technical theories. But, at the same time, in virtue of all those beliefs we hold in common, we may be able to surmise with confidence that some of our rival's technical theories not only differ from ours but also actually are silly.

It does not seem to me that Buckland is aware of the incongruities that result from endorsing Davidson's principle of charity as a principle of theory interpretation. Indeed, often it seems to me that Buckland's notion of my lack of charity amounts to his feeling that I am imposing alien (scientific, philosophical) modes of reasoning on contemporary film theory and, thereby, failing to interpret it from the inside. Of course, if that's what I'm doing, am I not charitably extending my beliefs about proof to psychoanalytic-marxist film theorists? But, in any case, I am not convinced that I am employing different forms of reasoning than contemporary film theorists do. For example, I recognize the kinds of arguments and standards of evidence that Buckland uses against me, even if I am not convinced by them.

An example of my lack of interpretive charity, in Buckland's rather than Davidson's sense, which is raised more than once (CPR, 82-83; 89-90), is that I fail to acknowledge that contemporary film theorists stipulate or presuppose that movies engage the unconscious psyches of spectators. That is their starting point. That their theories turn out on my accounting to seem ridiculous is a consequence of my refusal to grant this premise.<sup>6</sup> And undoubtedly psychoanalytic-marxist theory would not seem so ridiculous to me if I accepted this presupposition.

However, I do not believe that a film theorist can stipulate that movies engage people's psyches on an unconscious level (CPR, 83) any more than I believe that an astrologist can be allowed to stipulate that our fates are controlled by the stars. One cannot presuppose whatever one wants; one's presuppositions should be open to discussion and criticism. Film theory is not

a formal system. My refusal to accept this stipulation is a substantive issue, not a matter of interpretative protocols.

Indeed, it is my conviction that the most important issue to be confronted in the debate between the psychoanalytic-marxist film theorist and the cognitivist concerns the question of whether and how the premise that Buckland seems to think can just be stipulated is to be defended. But more on that below.

### Misinterpretation I

Due to my putative lack of interpretive charity, Buckland maintains that my arguments against contemporary film theorists miss their mark because I am not confronting their views, but only my own misinterpretations of their positions. By now, given the example of Stephen Heath, misinterpretation is one of the canonical methods of dismissing my objections. Needless to say, I do not believe that my interpretations are as blind as Buckland claims. So I would like quickly to review some of his charges in order to unhorse them. At the same time, I would also like to show how very easily Buckland's "new" interpretations can be rejected.

Buckland opens his rebuttal by accusing me of being uncharitable to Baudry's argument in "The Apparatus." (CPR 85-88) The crux of the dispute is this: I take Baudry to be advancing an inductive argument by logical analogy which concludes that the charged experience of cinema is caused by the desire for and regression to primitive narcissism. Baudry reaches this conclusion by adducing eight basic analogies--which sometimes invoke sub-analogies--between film and dream. I try to undermine these analogies--and the various sub-analogies--while also introducing some challenging disanalogies between film and dream. Depending on how you count them, I muster about ten lines of objection to Baudry's argument, though some of these also involve attacking what I've just called Baudry's sub-analogies. Where Buckland believes that I've been uncharitable to Baudry concerns the matter of one of Baudry's sub-analogies. So even if Buckland were right, his worries pertain to roughly 8¼ percent of my arguments.

Baudry claims that dreams and films have screens and that the so-called dream screen is a figure for the mother's breast. Baudry derives this "insight" from the psychoanalyst Bertram Lewin. I, in turn, challenge the plausibility of the subtending analogy between a screen and a breast, noting:

One must at least question the purported screen/breast association. What is its basis? And how extensive is it? Maybe some white people envision breasts as white and then go on to associate the latter with white screens. But not everyone is white. And I wonder

if many whites associate breasts and screens. Certainly it is not an intuitively straightforward association like that between guns and penises. For example, screens are flat; and lactating breasts are not. A screen is, ideally, uniform in color and texture; but a breast has a nipple. (*MM*, 29)

Where did I go wrong? I reject the analogy between screens and breasts because most breasts are not white, breasts are not uniformly colored and textured and because breasts are not flat. Buckland says that I'm unfair here because Lewin says that for a portion of *one* of his patient's dream her putative breast/dream screen was flat. So Baudry could respond to the flatness part of my objection by claiming that within Lewin's theory, one might say that breasts, in the relevant sense, are flat.

Since Baudry never explicitly endorses this claim, I don't see how I can be said to have misinterpreted him. At best, one could say that I overlooked a possible countermove of which Baudry might avail himself upon hearing my objection. Was I uncharitable in failing to rehearse this countermove? Well, I'm not sure. Lewin's claim sounds pretty flimsy. It is not even based on an overt association on the part of his patient but upon an inference that Lewin, rather than the subject, makes regarding her description of her dream. Moreover, as I had already pointed out about the Lewin material (*MM*, 28), the empirical support offered for the hypothesis that all dreams have screens is statistically miniscule as well as being conceptually crude (we are not told how, in principle, to tell personal, idiosyncratic dream associations and structural elements of dreams, like screens, apart). Given all these problems with Lewin's speculation, it seems to me that I was probably exercising charity in not saddling Baudry with Lewin's flattened breast screens.

Furthermore, if anyone feels that I was remiss in ignoring Lewin's flattened breasts, let me say what was already implicit in the charges I did make. If one patient can, by means of an inference, be said to associate flattened out breasts with screens, that would be scant evidence that all of us have dream screens that we associate with breasts, or even flattened breasts. And anyway, of course, even if Baudry could deflect my flatness argument by invoking Lewin's scarcely motivated and strained speculations, that would still leave over ninety percent of my refutation of Baudry intact.

In criticizing Metz's hypothesis about the role that the Imaginary plays in film reception, I doubted whether the phenomenon of viewing a film sufficiently matched canonical discussions of mirror stage identification. For we do not appear in the film image. Buckland criticizes me for ignoring the fact that authority figures like Metz and Penley assert that it is enough for the film to present an absent "spatial and temporal elsewhere" for the Imaginary to be engaged. (*CPR*, 89)

Well, I know that Metz thinks something like this; but I was asking that the belief be explained and justified. Buckland seems to think that I should accept the pronouncements of his authorities unquestioningly. I, of course, reject such authoritarianism on scientific grounds; I would have thought that it would also be unpalatable on political grounds. But, in any case, the issue is not one of misinterpretation. I don't misrepresent what is being claimed; I only require that the claim be supported by argumentation and explanation.

A crucial aspect of my supposed misinterpretations of Metz is that I don't catch onto Metz's thought that all films are fictional due to their presentation of an absent spatial and temporal elsewhere. (CPR, 89; 91) According to Buckland, this oversight leads me to criticize Metz as if he were writing about the disavowal of conflicting beliefs and disbeliefs with respect to the presence of the profilmic referent of the image; whereas, for Buckland, Metz is discussing the presence of the diegesis. (CPR, 91) Several things need to be said about this.

First, Buckland's inference from fiction in Metz's sense of diegesis is specious. Not all fictions are narrative. Second, Metz's contrast between a chair onstage and a chair on film suggests that he is talking about the play of absence and presence of the profilmic referent.<sup>7</sup> Third, the contrast between the referent and diegesis seems spurious, since narratives refer, even if that reference is fictional. And finally, though I know that Metz thinks that all films are fictional, I have already rejected the plausibility of that claim at length.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout, Buckland shows his tendency to regard my rejection of central premises in the arguments of contemporary film theory to be a matter of misinterpretation, when, in fact, they constitute substantive points in the debate. If someone claims that "the moon is made of green cheese" as a premise in a theory and I dispute this premise, I am not misinterpreting the theory. And, it may go without saying, I regard many of the premises of contemporary film theory as on a par with "the moon is made of green cheese."

For Buckland, it would appear that the interpretation of a theory involves acceptance of the premises of the theory. This hermeneutic principle leaves me dumbfounded. An interpretation undoubtedly involves stating the premises of rival theories. But I see no reason to think that that mandates either believing them or treating them uncritically.

Though Buckland is not willing to advert to my writings other than *Mystifying Movies* when supposedly they show that I am refuting rather than misinterpreting contemporary film theory, he will refer to those writings when putatively they reveal my chronic inability to interpret people correctly. For example, he cites my discussion of certain illusion theories of representation in "Conspiracy Theories of Representation"<sup>9</sup> in order to declare that one of its

arguments fails to apply to Metz and Baudry. But why is this a problem, since the article is not about Metz and Baudry?

Certainly Buckland is right in noting (CPR, 90) that both Metz and I agree that film viewers know that they are watching films. However, that is not the issue that is under dispute. Rather the issue is whether or not this needs to be explained in terms of a notion of disavowal. And I, of course, try to argue that commitments to disavowal are extraneous.

In recounting my debate with Stephen Heath on the status of perspective (CPR, 93), Buckland suggests that my emphasis on the biological and perceptual aspects of perspective renderings precludes the fact that perspective has a history and, therefore, a conventionalist status. Of course, I never deny that perspective has a history; people write books about it, and I have read them. But this concession hardly implies that perspective is merely a convention in the sense defended by conventionalists like Goodman and Wartofsky in the philosophical and psychological literature. Indeed, I would even be willing to grant that there are some conventions within the tradition of perspective rendering (e.g., that the most significant elements in the rendering be placed at the vanishing point). But this does not compel me to accept the idea that perspective works solely in virtue of conventions.

Buckland also chides me for my interpretation of contemporary film theory's treatment of perspective because I do not foreground their supposed discovery that perspective is really a representation of a metaphysical position--such as Husserlian Idealism--with religious overtones. (CPR, 92) This is not quite right, for I do dismiss one variation on this theme, viz., Comolli's. (*MM* 137-138) However, Buckland is correct in observing that I do not deal with the version of the thesis propounded in Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus."

The reason that I did not pause to dismiss Baudry's correlation of the cinematic apparatus with Husserlian Idealism was that I thought that the argument was evidently flawed. For Baudry seems to find that the apparatus reflects Husserlian Idealism on the basis of the same features that in his article "The Apparatus" he correlated cinema with Platonism. But Husserlian Idealism and Platonism are incompatible philosophical positions. How can cinema represent two incompatible philosophical positions in virtue of the self-same features? The fact that Baudry discovers that cinema represents Idealism as easily as he discovers that it represents its Platonic antipode suggests to me that the "apparatus" underdetermines what philosophical theories can be associated with it. And this, furthermore, suggests to me that we would be better off dropping the idea that cinema as such is a representation of a specific philosophical or religious position altogether.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Buckland's accusation of my systematic misinterpretation of contemporary film theory is his explicit refusal

to commit himself to the tenets of contemporary film theory once they have been interpreted accurately (i.e., à la Buckland). (CPR, 87) Basically, Buckland seems to be arguing that, though I'm wrong due to my biased interpretations, he, Buckland, is not prepared to say that contemporary film theory, when correctly interpreted, is viable. Moreover, when one realizes that the positive theoretical recommendations that Buckland makes at the end of his article (CPR, 102-103) are basically cognitivist, one begins to suspect that the "Critique of Poor Reason" is "pulling a fast one" on the reader. That is, Buckland really wants to be "more cognitivist than thou" (or me), and the vociferous complaints about my misinterpretations are camouflage. *Screen* beware: Buckland may be a cognitivist in psychoanalytic clothing.

### Misinterpretation II

If Buckland is convinced that I systematically misread contemporary film theory, I am equally sure that Buckland misreads me. I don't think that this is a lack of Davidsonian charity. He simply doesn't take note of the words on my pages.

In reviewing my positive proposals about the nature of our perception of the cinematic image, Buckland complains that I reduce the image to the status of a natural object. (CPR, 97) This just ignores my contention that we should conceptualize picturing (including motion picturing) as cultural inventions. (*MM*, 142-145)

Also, Buckland infers that I am attracted to the hypothesis that pictures are universally recognizable because this entails that pictures have no ideological repercussions. But before this debunking account of my scurrilous motives for embracing the hypothesis is accepted, one should consider all the psychological data I advance in favor of the hypothesis. I'm not championing the view because I have a covert political agenda. I feel drawn to the hypothesis because of the psychological evidence. (*MM*, 139-142)

Buckland also maintains that my theory of cinematic perception is inconsistent. For, on the one hand, I claim that when perceiving a cinematic image we are focally aware of what it is about and subsidiarily aware that it is a representation. But when I offer my characterization of cinematic awareness, Buckland claims that I place "exclusive emphasis upon the focus in which the subsidiaries are marginalised out of the picture (literally!)." (CPR, 97)

This is not so much a misinterpretation as a misreading. It ignores sentences like: "Human perceptual capacities evolve in such a way that the capacity for pictorial recognition comes, almost naturally, with the capacity for object recognition, and part of that capacity is the ability to differentiate

pictures from their referents." (*MM*, 144) This, of course, acknowledges that subsidiary awareness of the picture is part and parcel of all picture perception.

On the other hand, if what worries Buckland is that I think that what he calls the focus commands more of our attention than the subsidiary, he has read me correctly. I do think that the focus generally carries more weight. That's what it means to be the focus rather than the subsidiary. Or, alternatively, what's the problem with marginalizing the subsidiary, since the subsidiary is, by a definition Buckland seems to accept, relatively marginalized?

Buckland criticizes my positive account of cinematic narration on the grounds that it ignores the possibility of the subversion of hypotheses a film induces its audience to formulate. But in my account of what I call a sustaining scene, I, for example, explicitly state: "A scene that begins to answer a narrative question but then frustrates the answer--e.g., a detective following up a wrong clue--is also a sustaining scene." (*MM*, 174-175) Moreover, Buckland's exploration of this supposed lacuna in my view, specifically with reference to horror films, is dealt with more thoroughly in my book *The Philosophy of Horror*.<sup>10</sup>

Buckland thinks that there is a fundamental problem with my positive account of cinematic comprehension: it is what he calls code/semantic rather than pragmatic. (CPR, 100) In contrast, I think Buckland is mistaken in characterizing my theory this way; moreover, I suspect that the origin of Buckland's confusion is that he has taken parts of the theory to be the whole of the theory.

As I understand him, my theory is supposedly a code/semantic theory because it treats cinematic comprehension as if it were "automatic." And I suppose that, were cinematic comprehension simply a matter of decoding, one might call it automatic. But two things require emphasis here. First, I do not maintain that film comprehension as a whole is automatic, though I think certain aspects of it may be "virtually automatic," viz., that we are looking where we are looking in a close shot in virtue of the framing, and that we recognize what images are about in virtue of innate perceptual capacities. The latter claim may be controversial, though I think the psychological evidence is on my side, while the former claim is I think incontestable. Moreover, I do not reduce cinematic comprehension to these two processes, but go on to stress the importance of hypothesis formation in my account of erotetic--or question/answer--narration in a way that is more a matter of what Buckland would call a pragmatic theory. Thus, though there are elements of automatism in my theory, the theory as a whole puts a great deal of emphasis on the kind of pragmatic approach Buckland endorses.

Second, even if aspects of my account of cinematic comprehension are automatic, they are not automatic in virtue of some code. That I am looking at the heroine's face in a close shot is not a function of an arbitrarily

established code. The perceptual structure of the image, typically, causes one to be looking where one is looking. Similarly, I advance a number of considerations in order to deny that our processing of the cinematic image involves decoding. Thus, not only is my theory as a whole not a semantic/code theory, but even the parts of it that regard some features of cinematic comprehension as "automatic" do not rely on codes. Therefore, I am not a code/semantic theorist. Indeed, throughout my career as a film theorist, I have always explicitly stressed the importance of inference over decoding as a model for cinematic comprehension.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, once it is clear that I am not a code/semantic theorist, the significance of Buckland's pragmatic alternative to my approach loses its dialectical force. For the choice between Buckland/Sperber/Wilson and Carroll cannot be decided on the basis of superiority of pragmatic/relevance theories versus semantic/code theories. Moreover, though it is somewhat difficult to make out Buckland's positive recommendations for film theorists--given his clotted, programmatic style of writing--I suspect that my theory of cinematic comprehension is probably compatible with the sort Buckland advocates (that is, if Buckland's view makes sense).

Buckland also bandies about the charge--frequently leveled at cognitivist theorists--that I am a formalist (e.g., CPR, 100). This overlooks the fact that not only do I discuss the use of certain structures in terms of their ideological significance (e.g., *MM* 158,159) but I explicitly promise that cognitivism can offer piecemeal generalizations about the operation of ideology in film. Similarly, though Bordwell is generally upbraided as a formalist, I can think of few studies as dedicated as his of Ozu to situating his subject so thoroughly in terms of its socio-political context.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, Buckland is right in noticing that most of the theories that are proposed in *Mystifying Movies* are what he would call formalist. But that is only to say that I believe that some of our questions of cinema may require what he calls formalist answers. However, I have never precluded the possibility that other questions must confront the issue of ideology. Indeed, in recent papers, I have attempted to extend the cognitivist approach to issues of film ideology.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the real issue is not whether cognitivism is formalist, but whether the contribution that cognitivism can make to what I take to be legitimate questions about film and ideology is productive or not. Specifically, we will need to compare the merits of cognitivist models of film ideology to psychoanalytic models.

Cognitivism is not a fully developed theory. It is an approach that has guided some theorizing already and which, it is to be hoped, will guide more in the future. I have always agreed that some of this theorizing will pertain to the ideological and political dimension of cinema. In that sense, I have never been a formalist. Moreover, since cognitivist theories of these topics are



beginning to be produced, charges of formalism are obsolete. The issue now is whether cognitivist or psychoanalytic theories do a better job answering our questions about ideology. This discussion has barely begun; nevertheless, I welcome it.

### Cognitivism, Psychoanalysis and Constraint: The Big Question

Perhaps Buckland's central objection to my approach is that I will only countenance or regard as valid theories of film that are cognitivist. (CPR, 96) In this way, Buckland distinguishes between the good cognitivist cop, Bordwell, and the bad cognitivist cop, me. But, in fact, I have never denied that psychoanalysis might contribute to our understanding of film. I wrote:

Nothing we have said suggests an objection in principle to these more specific questions about aspects of the audience over and above their cognitive faculties. Social conditioning and affective psychology, appropriately constrained, might be introduced to explain the power of given movies or types of movies for target groups. Sociology, anthropology, and certain forms of psychoanalysis are likely to be useful in such investigations. (MM, 213)

Perhaps these qualifications, and similar ones in my book *The Philosophy of Horror*, have been overlooked by readers because of my protracted, admittedly relentless rejection of one psychoanalytic hypothesis after another. But I have consistently acknowledged that apart from the specific arguments that I have advanced against specific applications of psychoanalytic theories, I have no knock-down argument to show that psychoanalysis is always out of place in film theory. Indeed, as the preceding passage indicates, I explicitly allow that, appropriately constrained, psychoanalysis may add to our understanding of film.

Of course, the sticking point here is whatever is meant by "appropriately constrained." Indeed, I think that the continued debate between cognitivism and psychoanalysis hinges on discussing and debating the kinds of constraints that film theorists should respect when applying psychoanalysis to film. In order to advance this debate, allow me to state my view.

In thinking about when it is appropriate to embrace psychoanalytic explanatory frameworks, it pays to remember that psychoanalysis is a theory that is designed to explain the irrational. Thus, behavior that can be traced without remainder to organic sources, such as brain lesions and chemical imbalances, are not in the domain of psychoanalysis. For they are nonrational causes, not irrational ones. Similarly, behaviors--like certain slips of the tongue

of the sorts translators and transcribers make--which can be attributed to limitations of standard cognitive processing are also analyzable in terms of nonrational and not irrational causes, and, therefore, are not proper objects of psychoanalysis. Likewise, behaviors, states, or reactions that are explicable rationally and/or in virtue of normal cognitive processing are not, *prima facie*, appropriate topics for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis explains breakdowns in rationality or in normal cognitive processing that are not otherwise explicable in terms of nonrational defects.

Another way to put this is to ask what remains to be explained if we can account for a behavior or a state in terms of rational psychology or in terms of nonrational defects in the organism or processing system. That is, in order to mobilize psychoanalysis, one has to be able to point to some data which are not sufficiently explained by rational (under which rubric I would include many cultural practices), organic or systemic factors.

Freud himself abides by this methodological constraint in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, where he first, and at great length, disposes of dream theories of the preceding sorts before advancing his own theory. Moreover, I would contend that he was motivated here by more than respect for the niceties of dialectical argumentation. He realized that in order to postulate the operation of repressed unconscious forces he had to demonstrate the failure to accommodate the data of rationalist psychology, standing accounts of cognitive processing, and organic hypotheses. For it is analytical to the very concept of psychoanalysis that its object is the irrational, which domain has as its criterion of identification the inadequacy of rational, cognitive or organic explanations. Put bluntly, there is nothing left for psychoanalysis to explain if the behavior or state in question can be explained organically, rationally or in terms of the normal functioning of our cognitive and perceptual systems.

The relevance of this to the dialectical structure of argumentation in *Mystifying Movies* should be obvious. First I criticize various psychoanalytic explanations of our responses to cinema in terms of their logical and empirical flaws. Then I field a rival hypothesis which I argue is not logically flawed, and which I argue does a better job with the data. In other words, I put theories in competition.

However, there is a feature of this dialectical strategy that is not standard in most other scientific debates. For the theories that I advance in competition to psychoanalysis are all what we call cognitivist. Thus, if they are convincing and if psychoanalytic theory is constrained in the way I argue, then my theories not only challenge psychoanalytic alternatives, but preclude them. For they show that the responses in question are not in the appropriate domain of psychoanalysis.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, I don't suppose that this ends the discussion. Confronted with this strategy, the critic disposed toward psychoanalysis will want to find some

aspect of the data that my theories do not explain. But if this is the structure of the debate between cognitivism and psychoanalysis, then it indicates that *Mystifying Movies* has achieved at least one effect. Namely, it has shifted the burden of proof to the defender of psychoanalysis. The underlying purpose of *Mystifying Movies* and of my recent cognitivist account of horror has been to shift the burden of proof to the psychoanalytic film theorist. Indeed, I chose the horror genre as an arena in which to expand cognitivist theorizing just because its traffic with intense emotional states gives it the appearance of being, so to speak, a "natural" target for psychoanalysis. It is now up to the psychoanalyst to show what my theories of horror, cinematic narration, cinematic representation, editing and film music have left out and to show that in order to account for this remainder we must resort to suitably constrained psychoanalytic explanations--rather than cognitivist or biological or socio-cultural alternatives.

Again, I have no argument to show that there is nothing left over for psychoanalytic theorists and critics to explain. What I think I have shown is rather: first, that there is less to be explained than is usually presumed, without argument, by contemporary film theorists and, second, that the burden of proof in the debates I have initiated is theirs. Maybe there are aspects of our response to cinema that call for suitably constrained psychoanalytic theorizing. My position is that it now up to psychoanalytic critics to prove it. They cannot, as Buckland proposes, simply stipulate it.

On the one hand, I am a methodological pluralist in the sense that I favor having a field where there are a lot of theories. For insofar as putting all our available theories into competition delivers results, putting a lot of theories into play is likely to be productive. But I am a robust methodological pluralist since I am not advocating a situation in which everyone just rattles around in their own paradigm. Instead, the available theories should be critically compared in such a way that some may be eliminated, though critical comparison may also reveal that some of these theories are complementary or supplementary or otherwise compatible. Unlike Buckland, I am not ready now to suppose that cognitivism and some form of psychoanalysis are obviously compatible. But neither am I committed to the view that this is an impossible conclusion. At present, my bets are clearly on cognitivism. Yet I have always conceded that only time and critical, reflective debate will settle the issue.

I admit that I know no reason in principle to predict that psycho-analysis will never provide the most satisfactory explanations of some of the data at hand. All we can do is compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of our theories. This, of course, also requires that we interrogate the framework in which we compare our theories. Questions about whether there are constraints to which psychoanalysis is beholden and about what these

constraints are constitute the fundamental issue between psychoanalytic film theorists and their cognitivist counterparts today. Let the discussion begin.

*Madison, Wisconsin*

## Notes

1. E.g., Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988); Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990); David Bordwell, *Narration and the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wis.: U of Wisconsin P, 1985); David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989).

2. See, for example, Robert Ray, "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge," *Strategies*, no. 1, Fall 1988; Dudley Andrew, "The Limits of Delight: Robert Ray's Postmodern Film Studies," *Strategies*, no. 2, 1989; Dudley Andrew, "Cognitivism: Quests and Questionings," *Iris*, no. 9, Spring 1989; Dudley Andrew, "A Reply to David Bordwell," *Iris*, no. 11, Summer 1990. Also relevant to the debate are: David Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism," *Iris* no. 9, Spring 1989); and David Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections," *Iris*, no. 11, Summer 1990.

3. Warren Buckland, "Critique of Poor Reason," *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 4, Autumn 1989. Henceforth, this will be referred to as CPR in the text where the relevant page references will be cited. *My Mystifying Movies* will be referred to as *MM* with page references also cited in the text. Stephen Heath has also registered prolonged objections to my work in his "Le Père Noël," *October*, Fall 1983. I will not review Heath's attack here because I have already dealt with it in Noël Carroll, "A Reply to Heath," *October*, Winter 1983. Nor will I dwell on the objections made by Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake in their book *Film Theory* since they did not have access to the theory propounded in *Mystifying Movies*. See Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988).

4. In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984). It may be of interest to some readers that, ironically, I have used this very article to undermine the post-Saussurean linguistic theory upon which so much contemporary film theory and literary theory depends. See Noël Carroll, "Belsey on Language and Realism," *Philosophy and Literature*, April 1986.

5. This is also a reason to refrain from charging that my approach is incommensurable with respect to marxist-psychoanalytic film theory. For example, the cognitivist and the marxist-psychoanalytic theorist share myriad observation terms, like perspective, convention and film editing.

6. Perhaps Celia Britton has a similar argument in mind when she chastens me for not mentioning that Lacan believes that the unconscious plays a role in determining the behavior of normal people. I, of course, know that Lacan thinks that. My point, however, is that Lacan can't just assert that; he must prove it, preferably by defending his criteria (if he has any) for explaining normal behavior psychoanalytically. See Celia Britton's review of *Mystifying Movies* in *Reviewing Sociology*, vol. 7, no. 1.

7. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982), p. 44.

8. See Noël Carroll, "From Real to Reel: Entangled in Nonfiction Film," *Philosophic Exchange*, 1983.

9. Noël Carroll, "Conspiracy Theories of Representation," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 17, 1987.

10. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, especially Chapter Three.

11. For example, see Noël Carroll, "Toward A Theory of Film Editing," *Millennium Film Journal*, No. 3 Winter/Spring 1979.

12. David Bordwell, *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton UP and the British Film Institute, 1988).

13. See Noël Carroll, "The Image of Women in Film: A Defense of a Paradigm," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 84, no. 4, Fall 1990; and Noël Carroll, "Film, Rhetoric and Ideology," *Explanation and Value*, ed. Salim Kemal and I. Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, forthcoming).

14. Of course, if you don't accept what I refer to as the constraints on psychoanalysis, you will not agree that the plausibility of my theories neatly removes psychoanalysis from the field. On the other hand, the consequences of this are not devastating for my attack. For my theories are still competing theories which the psychoanalytic theorist must engage, one at a time, even if my theories don't have the special advantage claimed for them in the text.

# ORUM - THEATRE FORUM - THE M - THEATRE FORUM - THEATRE

A NEW INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF THEATRE & PERFORMANCE ART & DANCE THEATRE & MUSIC THEATRE  
& FORMS YEJ TO BE DEvised

THEATREFORUM will document, discuss, and disseminate theatreworks which are innovative or provocative representing a wide variety of aesthetic and cultural interests ranging from transcultural adaptations of classic texts to performance scores of works that are principally non-verbal.

## ANNOUNCING ISSUE NUMBER 1 MARCH 1992

### 7 BLOWJOBS AND OTHER DRAMATIC EVENTS

- The text of 7 BLOWJOBS, an interview with playwright Mac Wellman, documentation of the premiere production by Sledgehammer Theatre, and a profile of that theatre.
- George Tsy-pin and his design process
- Documentation of GAUDEAMUS performed by the young company of the Maly Drama Theatre, St. Petersburg
- Butoh/French modern dance collaboration
- Bobby Baker, performance art in an English kitchen
- DAYER DAYER, an Egyptian UBU ROI by El Warsah Theatre, Cairo
- Theatre in a changing world by Barney Simon (Market Theatre, Johannesburg), Lev Dodin (Maly Drama Theatre, St. Petersburg), and Alex Darie (Comedy Theatre of Bucharest)
- THE ATRIDES by Théâtre du Soleil
- New choreographic work by Belgium's Anne Teresa de Keersmacker
- Athol Fugard on multi-culturalism
- "Festivals? Who Needs Them?" by Ritsaert ten Cate
- And in case you do need them, listings of summer and fall festivals around the world.

THEATREFORUM is edited by Theodore Shank and co-editors Andrei Both, Jim Carmody, Tony Curiel, Frantisek Deak, Floyd Gaffney, Allan Havis, Jorge Huerta, and Adele Edling Shank. Published twice a year by the Theatre Department, University of California, San Diego.

To start your subscription with the first issue, cut or copy this form.

1992 subscription order (2 issues)

\$15/Individuals     \$25/Institutions     \$12/Students     \$9/Single Issues (Issue # \_\_\_\_\_)

Additional Postage: \$3/Canada and Mexico, \$6/outside North America

Prepayment required by charge, check on U.S. bank payable to Regents of the Univ. of Calif., or by international money order. Students enclose photocopy of current student I.D.

Payment enclosed     VISA     MasterCard    Acct # \_\_\_\_\_    Ex.date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_    Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Send order with payment to: THEATREFORUM • Theatre Department • University of California, San Diego •  
9500 Gilman Drive • La Jolla CA 92093-0344 • USA    Tel (619) 534-2062    Fax (619) 534-1080