

**KING KONG, Carroll and Currie:  
Misconstruing Monstrously  
How We See Things by Means of Movies**

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Works of art, as Nelson Goodman has suggested, may introduce us to worlds other than our own – to objects and events in other spaces and times, yet equally real.<sup>1</sup> Semiotically stricken, Goodman could never quite bring himself to acknowledge that we *perceive* those other worlds or their inhabitants, and quite properly so in the opinion of most philosophers, for had he said so, his claim would have seemed even more absurd, and appreciation of absurdity is a cultivated taste. To contend, for example, that we *see* King Kong when watching the movie named after him, a commonplace of ordinary discourse, has seemed even more absurd to some philosophers than the suggestion of Wittgenstein with which it accords, namely that the ordinary uses of our languages are, philosophically speaking, perfectly in order.

I shall offer here no defense of what Goodman might better have said had he not lost his nerve, for none, I think, need be given: that we *see* King Kong when watching the movie is as true as it is absurd, being an identity claim about what we see, and identity claims, when push comes to shove, cannot be countered without begging the question.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I shall focus upon the counterclaims of two authors, Noël Carroll and Gregory Currie, who, having registered its absurdity, dismiss it forthwith as unworthy of consideration when discussing things cinematal, presuming wrongly that it must therefore be unwarranted. The consequences of their contempt, symptoms of a veritable mental block or 'cognitive illusion' comparable to the supposed error of the same name of which they wrongly accuse others, are remarkable to behold.

I shall focus here upon two confusions. The first, explicit in Carroll, is to presume that to distinguish filmmaking from playmaking, painting or the writing of novels or poems, etc., is *essentialist* and therefore philosophically untenable. The second, common to both authors, is to presume that we cannot when viewing a movie be seeing what we commonly think that we are seeing (seeing a great ape climbing a tall building, for

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson Goodman, *The Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> For arguments to this conclusion and others relevant to how things 'reappear' to us by means of photographs and movies, see the other essays encompassed within the 'Screenwriting 1895-1905 Prelude – the Arrival of the Lumière's Train' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35753>]

example, when watching KING KONG). As we shall see, the first flows naturally from the second, but first things first.

### Confusion 1

Noël Carroll has denied recurringly that we may justifiably acknowledge 'media specific' differences between photography and filmmaking on the one hand, and drawing and painting on the other (or, for that matter, between screenwriting and the writing of plays, novels, poems or short stories, or between composing music for movies and for concert presentation), despite the intuitions to the contrary of every powerful maker of movies since the arrival of the Lumière's train. Why has he so persistently disregarded the evidence of history and his own eyes and ears? Because, I suspect, he has failed to register the logical niceties needed to avoid an erroneous conclusion at which he arrived earlier – the presumption that distinguishing between them would entail *essentialism* and thus be philosophically untenable.

When attacking "the re-presentational theory of the photographic and cinematic image", Carroll minces no words: any suggestion that the tools of photography and filmmaking might be "unique" or "distinct" is essentialist.

From these quotations, it is possible to derive the key elements of the re-presentational theory of the photographic and cinematic image. First, it is essentialist, claiming that the nature of photographs and cinematic shots is unique, distinct, that is, from drawings, paintings, etc..<sup>3</sup> (p.37?)

We could distinguish photographs and movies from drawings and paintings, Carroll insists, only if works of the former kind were to embody an 'essence' distinct from the 'essence' embodied by works of the latter kind – only, that is, if photographs and movies were to 'share something in common' that no drawings or paintings share with one another, and conversely. Absent 'essences', we could never distinguish between them.

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<sup>3</sup> Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), page 37. Readers would be well-advised to ponder the essays included within "Part I: Questioning Media", pages 1-74, all of which are designed to divert attention in one way or another from the usefulness of notions of 'specificity of media' with respect to the arts and in particular those of the 'uniqueness claims' for photographic and cinematographic 're-presentation', as Carroll puts it. That the things that we see by means of photographs and movies are never 'present' to us as we see them, much less 'represented', but do 'appear' to us as we see them and are therefore 'reappearances' of things that stood before the camera when the photograph or movie, as Santayana insisted long ago, will be central to the second part of this presentation. (See footnote 2 above).

But this is misrepresent the logic of how we distinguish things from one another – to presume, that is, that we need talk of 'essences' to do so.

As Wittgenstein confirmed late in life through an example of remarkable simplicity, to seek for essences in the things to which we refer by a common term is a waste of time. We can distinguish 'games' of different kinds from one another without presupposing anything common to them all.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There *must* be something common, or they would not be called 'games' but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! ... And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way. I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I for some reason was unable to express; but that he is now to *employ* those examples in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining in default of something better. For any general definition can be misunderstood. The point is that *this* is how we play the game. (I mean the language-game with the word "game".)<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein's counsel to avoid wasting time searching for essences lay at the centre of his mid-life reconstrual of the methods and aims of philosophy, for as evident in the citation from Shakespeare's *King Lear* with which he once thought of opening his *Philosophical Investigations*, he wished above all to "teach us differences".<sup>5</sup> If we are to discriminate more exactly between things, we must avoid groping for essences.

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<sup>4</sup> From Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, vis-à-vis translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, edited by Anscombe and Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963 [1953]), sections 66 and 71. Wittgenstein spoke of games rather than cats, dogs or chocolate bars, or photographs, movies, drawings or paintings, but the import of his example is ubiquitous.

<sup>5</sup> See G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein, Understanding and Meaning*, Vol. 1 of 'an analytical commentary on the *Philosophical Investigations*' (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1980), page 18. The admonition "I shall teach you differences" is uttered by Kent to Oswald, the miscreant servant of Goneril, in Act 1, Scene IV of the play. Remarkably, the authors open Volume 1 of their extensive commentary by insisting that "the quotation is nowhere to be found in Shakespeare's works", then citing three related sentences from the same scene! How one could read the play, locate the scene and find within it three close neighbors to the quotation, but miss the quotation itself, passes understanding to me – unless, of course, one were cynical enough to suppose that the authors had never bothered to read the play at all but had relied instead on either a cheap concordance or the misreport of a graduate

Carroll, however, unlike Wittgenstein, has never registered the platonic perversity of presuming that differences require essences.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, he has never pondered how filmmakers have learned from the 'media specific' differences between filmmaking and other arts, disregarding the history of problem-solving by filmmakers working hard to distinguish what they could do well with the tools of filmmaking from what could only be done well with other tools within other arts, misconstruing their efforts as a matter of 'stylistic' choice. We may dismiss as irrelevant the historical witness of the filmmakers themselves, Carroll thinks, however distinctive the tools of filmmaking may have seemed to them.

But this is to dismiss the history of filmmaking itself, for learning how best to use one's tools rather than others lies at the centre of the crafts upon which filmmaking relies. Every filmmaker of elegance and power, having come to filmmaking accustomed to using the tools of another art, has had to learn how to distinguish new tools from the old, and as the tools evolved, it was exactly the growing awareness among filmmakers of the differences between them and those of other arts that propelled the 'stylistic' changes so dear to Carroll's heart.

To presume otherwise is to underestimate what filmmakers were compelled to learn of the differences between filmmaking and playmaking, for example, before doing what they did, and how hard it was to do it. Examples abound.

Every filmmaker with eyes and ears coming to realize during the 1930s that 'background music', destructive of staged dramas at their most serious moments, could be used ubiquitously within most serious films;

Sternberg learning that lighting faces for film differs from lighting faces for photographs or theatre;

Riskin, with Capra, recognising that the leading character of a serious film, being a 'reactor' rather than an 'actor' (the distinction later articulated by Dudley Nichols,

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student. In any case, this is assuredly one of the rare examples in the literature of philosophy in which the initial remark of a major commentary is trivially mistaken..

<sup>6</sup> For an account of Wittgenstein's learning of the lesson, see "From Plato to Socrates: Wittgenstein's Journey on Collingwood's Map" within the 'Philosophical Enquiries' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35702>.] Carroll's failure here and elsewhere to register the importance of the work of the later Wittgenstein remains, for me, one of the wonders of contemporary philosophy.

John Ford's screenwriter), could, contra theatrical practice, respond to an event both seriously and humorously;

Welles, having sorted the wheat from the chaff within the "catalogue of effects" of CITIZEN KANE, concluding correctly thereafter that visual lapse dissolves, unlike the auditory mixes to which he was accustomed in radio and theatre, are dramatically destructive in film;

Olivier coming to recognize that he could not present himself to us by means of film, as he had been accustomed to doing in the theatre, when delivering the soliloquies of HAMLET; or

Zeffirelli, when confronted with the task of adapting Verdi's LA TRAVIATA to film, dwelling on anything but the face of the singer singing an aria, contrary to operatic practice, and for good reason.<sup>7</sup>

What misled Carroll into dismissing the obvious importance to filmmakers of the 'media specific' differences between filmmaking and other arts and therewith the core of its history as irrelevant to our understanding of it? A misconception, I think, of how we see things appearing to us by means of movies that has seemed to him, and to Gregory Currie as well, so unexceptional (may I say 'essential'?) that the alternative, as true as it is absurd, has seemed unworthy of consideration. But that brings me to the second confusion.

## Confusion 2

I enter a cinema in Toronto in the 1990s to catch a screening of KING KONG. As the film unfolds, I and everyone else in the audience see the great ape climbing a building in a city far from Toronto in the 1930s, and we respond with fascination to what we are seeing. That is how we describe what we have seen when it with one another afterwards, speaking as viewers have spoken of things seen by means of movies films since 1895, how every filmmaker of power known to me has described what viewers would be seeing by means of their films when, hard at work constructing them, they have discussed their options with others and how every viable critic has reported the happenings within films they have seen – every critic, that is, having outgrown what Hume or Wittgenstein would rightly have regarded as a momentary fit of 'philosophical' perplexity.

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<sup>7</sup> For fuller accounts of these achievements, see the relevant essays under the 'Subjects' of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/3520>]

Listen to Carroll, however, commenting on our supposed behaviour when encountering horrifying things by means of movies.

... if one really believed that the theatre was beset by lethal shape changers, demons, intergalactic cannibals, or toxic zombies, one would hardly sit by for long. One would probably attempt to flee, to hide, to protect oneself, or to contact the proper authorities (the police, NASA, the bishop, the United Nations, the Department of Sanitation). People, that is, just don't behave as though they really believed there were monsters in the vicinity when they consume horror spectacles. Postulating this kind of belief may exonerate them from charges of inconsistency, but at the expense of making their behaviour inexplicably complacent, if not downright self-destructive and dumb.<sup>8</sup>

... if when reading or viewing fictions we came to be convinced, albeit by deception, that werewolves really existed in our vicinity, it would be difficult to continue to savour the story. One would want to take some measures to secure one's life and love ones. A very condition of there being an institution of fiction from which we derive entertainment and pleasure is that we know that the persons and events are not actual. Obviously, in the case of horror, we could not be secure in our enjoyment of the spectacle if we believed in its reality. ... horror would [then] be too unnerving for all save heroes, consummate masochists, and professional vampire killers.<sup>9</sup>

Or ponder Currie, echoing Kendall Walton, as he describes our supposed responses to seeing monstrous beings by means of movies.

... film viewers simply do not react in the way that people would react who believed in the reality of the fictional events the film depicts. You have only to reflect for a moment on how you would react if you saw, or thought you saw, a threatening monster, or if you thought yourself alone in a house with an axe murderer, or if you thought you were watching someone about to be attacked by an axe murderer, to see that your behaviour in the cinema is quite unlike that of someone who really did believe in the reality of the fiction presented. ... If I even vaguely suspected that there was a monster on the loose I would leave the theatre immediately and call the police.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), page 63.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., page 64.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pages 24, 26 and 27. Currie's discussion of Walton's

To Carroll and Currie, we could never be seeing King Kong, a great and angry ape, while sitting in a cinema and viewing the movie bearing his name, for were we to be seeing the monster, we should be acting differently than we do, rushing terrified about the cinema trying to escape the ape we see.

But this misdescribes both what we see and our responses to it, and patently so, for, on the contrary, it would be irrational beyond measure for me or anyone else, seated in a cinema in Toronto in the 1990s, to react in terror to seeing a great ape *climbing a building far from Toronto in the 1930s!*

When watching KING KONG, we see no great ape romping about *within the space and time within which we sit* but rather see him climbing a building in a space and at a time different from our own. We identify the ape with *nothing* in the room within which we sit. By attending to the variably illuminated screen upon which the movie is being projected, we see an ape climbing a building within a space and time *other than our own*, and having encountered nothing terrifying within our own space and time, we behave as reasonable people would behave and would expect us to behave. We are indeed enabled by focusing upon the screen to see a great ape, but the relation is one of causality rather than identity, for we never identify the great ape with any part of the screen despite our seeing the one by seeing the other.

Carroll and Currie have misdescribed how we see monsters by means of movies, but monsters are only one among many kinds of 'fictional characters' that movies enable us to see. As Currie soon confirms, the confusion that he shares with Carroll with respect to how we encounter monsters by means of movies undermines their accounts of how we thereby encounter other kinds of 'fictional characters' as well.

In 1984 Kendall Walton published an article within which he articulated what soon came to be known as the 'transparency thesis' – the claim that photographs and movies 'present' rather than symbolise things that stood before the cameras as they were being photographed.<sup>11</sup> To Currie, Walton's contention, wrong though comprehensible when restricted to our seeing of such 'non-fictional' things, becomes patently absurd when extended to encompass 'fictional characters' such as Alicia Huberman or T. R. Devlin in NOTORIOUS. Currie can hardly cloak his disdain for those who would claim to be seeing by means of the movie the 'fictional characters' that the actors are portraying.

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'Transparency Thesis' (see footnote 11) begins on page 50, but this and other contentions of Walton are often discussed by Currie throughout his book.

<sup>11</sup> Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism", *Critical Inquiry*, No. 11 (1984), pages 246-277.

The claim that cinematography presents rather than represents the world must be understood as the claim that it presents the real world of actors, props, sets and locations, not the unreal world of fictional characters. If the thesis is right [Currie thinks it is wrong!], film presents us with Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant, not with the characters they play in the movie, for these characters do not exist. Photography may have special powers, but it does not have the power to turn nonbeing into being.<sup>12</sup>

But were viewers of NOTORIOUS unable to see Alicia Huberman as they watch Ingrid Bergman portraying her ('you can't have one without the other'), they could hardly while watching register rightly the bifold identity of what they are seeing – as viewers often and seamlessly do.<sup>13</sup> A viewer unfamiliar but impressed with the actor might well whisper to a friend, 'Who's playing Alicia?', noting with a nod the reply, 'Ingrid Bergman', the friends having with perfect cogency identified the actor and the character that she is portraying. Were they unable to see the 'fictional character' being portrayed by the 'non-fictional actor' portraying her, the question and answer would be nonsensical.

Why have Carroll and Currie gone out of their way to misdescribe how we see things by means of movies, fictional or otherwise, disregarding as irrelevant how we and the makers of the movies commonly speak of them? Because, or so they think, they are doing us a favour. Whereas unsophisticated viewers talk as if they could see things by means of movies occurring in spaces and times other than their own, Carroll and Currie 'know better'. Having presumed that we cannot by means of movies see things other than objects and events in our own space and time and eager to press onward to work on kindred subjects that would be rendered otiose were the presumption false, they misdescribe what anyone – themselves included! – would *in common parlance* claim to have seen by means of a movie, and then, in the hope of 'saving the appearances' they have misdescribed, they stack, like Ptolemy, epicycle upon epicycle of purported

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., page 48.

<sup>13</sup> As Allardyce Nicoll had insisted sixty years before when contrasting 'Film & Theatre', to see an actor portraying a character by means of a movie is to see at one and the same time the character being portrayed. "We cannot appreciate burlesque in the cinema because of the fact that in serious films actor and rôle and indistinguishable; on the stage we can appreciate it since there, in serious plays, we can never escape from separating the fictional character and its creator." (Allardyce Nicoll, *Film & Theatre* (New York, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1936), page 36.) I comment at length upon Nicoll's insight in essays encompassed within the 'Screenwriting, 1940-1960 – Uncoupling Movies from Novels, Plays, Poems & Stories' sub-section of the 'Evan Wm. Cameron Collection' of YorkSpace, the 'Institutional Repository' of the Library of York University. [<https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35758>]

explanation of 'whatever else', they think, we must rather have been seeing – whatever kind of misleading 'symbol', that is, they think it must have been.

### **The Pretense of 'Symbols'**

When watching KING KONG in a cinema in Toronto in the 1990s, I and everyone else in the audience see a great ape climbing a building in a city far from Toronto at some time other than our own. To Carroll and Currie, however, contra Austin and Wittgenstein, our common description of what we have seen must be rejected. We can never, they presuppose, see anything occurring in a space and at a time other than our own. Though pretending to a new 'naturalism', neither can quite bring themselves to absorb the evidence that even the birds and the beasts of the field see and recognize objects by means of photographs and films.

Carroll, for example, upon noting that we learn how to see things by means of photographs and movies simply by learning how to see things and that even pigeons can recognize trucks when confronted by photographs of them, refuses nevertheless to acknowledge that we and the pigeons acquire both skills at the same time and by the same means because the tasks are identical.<sup>14</sup> For Carroll and for Currie as well, the things that we see by means of movies must rather be some kind of extraordinary 'symbols' for them – symbols that we have astonishingly learned to recognise simply by having learned to recognize the things themselves, just as pigeons, though unable to recognize 'symbols' of other kinds without extensive training, have inexplicably learned by simply seeing other things to recognize the referents of these symbols!'

Currie, for example, concludes his discussion of how he thinks we must be encountering 'fictional characters or events' by means of movies with a concise summary of its import – a consequence that he generalises elsewhere to encompass how we must encounter every kind of thing by means of movies, fictional or otherwise.

I sum up. At the movies, we do not see, nor do we imagine that we see, fictional characters or events. Rather, we see signs: pictorial or 'iconic' signs that tell us what to imagine."<sup>15</sup>

To think so, however, is to impose a vacuous explanation upon a misdescription of how things appear to us by means of movies, 'fictional things and events' in particular but 'non-

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<sup>14</sup> Noël Carroll, "Film, Attention, and Communication", in *The Great Idea Today: 1996* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Incorporated, 1996), page 13.

<sup>15</sup> Currie, op. cit., page 196.

fictional' ones as well, a begging of the question of cinematic perception masquerading as philosophical common sense. Much as the sense-data theorists of bygone days compounded rather than reduced the puzzle of perception by invoking spurious entities ('sense-data') through which to explain our seeing of chairs and tables but that could only be identified by speaking of the chairs and tables themselves, so Carroll, Currie and the 'new cognitivists' muddy how marvellously we see things by means of movies by invoking "iconic signs" that could only be identified by speaking of the things supposedly never seen by means of them. (When viewing KING KONG, so they say, we see only an "iconic sign" of the 'great ape'. What 'great ape'? The one that we mistakenly think that we are seeing!)

The two confusions to which we have been attending are therefore interlinked, having confounded Carroll and Currie as they did Münsterberg in 1916.<sup>16</sup> To avoid them, we must when watching movies, as when playing games or distinguishing cats from dogs, "look and see", as Wittgenstein insisted, building ever after upon the consequences of what we have seen, for, logically speaking, one can determine more accurately *how* something is seen only after having identified it.<sup>17</sup> We must *begin*, that is, by acknowledging that we can see King Kong, Alicia Huberman, Ingrid Bergman and the other things that we commonly speak of seeing by means of movies, for to do otherwise is to attend to an ersatz encounter through causal prejudice and logical ineptitude.

I make no attempt here or elsewhere to justify the unjustifiable presumption that I and others can see great apes, characters, actors or other objects by means of movies, and purposely so, for I should by doing so waste your time and my own, as would a physicist were she to try to justify her seeing of the counters on her instruments when describing the results of an experiment to colleagues. As Popper insisted half-a-century ago, science rests upon unjustified decisions. What distinguishes science from pseudo-science is the level at which they occur. Unjustified decisions are warranted within science only with respect to basic observations – the level of 'looking and seeing' at counters on instruments, for example – never with respect to theories being tested. Enquiries into filmmaking must be comparably constrained. If we are to comprehend how we see things by means of movies, we must build upon the consensus of viewers and filmmakers as they commonly speak of it – the level of 'looking and seeing' that Carroll and Currie, after Münsterberg, failed to respect.

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<sup>16</sup> Münsterberg suggested in 1916 that we see by means of movies a "mixture of fact and symbol" (see Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: a Psychological Study* (New York, New York: D. Appleton, 1916), page 71. Eighty years later, the phrase has morphed by Peircean evasion into "iconic signs", the title of section 6.9 of Currie's book, op. cit., pages 196 and 197.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 2 above.

To reinforce the lesson in historical context, let me turn to the striking resonance between the pretenses of the 'new cognitivists' with respect to filmmaking and those of the 'logical positivists' before them with respect to the making of mathematics and physics, both striving to emulate practices known to them only by hearsay, having never worked within the disciplines of which they speak and thus having neither habits of use to constrain their conjectures nor respect for those of others who do – believing themselves nonetheless to be models of emulation.

### The Old and the New<sup>18</sup>

In 1959, Alfred Ayer, the foremost English advocate of logical positivism, published an anthology of essays by the bright, energetic and argumentative men who had earlier this century committed themselves to reconstructing philosophy uncontaminated by metaphysics, emulating the latest exact science on the block, mathematical logic.<sup>19</sup>

Ayer's anthology, *Logical Positivism*, is now of interest only to historians, for in the same year appeared the English translation of Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, preceded a year earlier by Norwood Hanson's *Patterns of Discovery*, and followed three years later by Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The three authors, despite differences, demolished the pretensions of positivism: no literate philosopher would ever again suggest that philosophy, or anything else, could be reconstructed without metaphysical presuppositions, much less scientifically, for every science, as David Park, the quantum physicist, was to remark of his own, "swims in metaphysics like a fish swims in water, supported by it on all sides but unconscious of its existence until something goes wrong".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> I have interwoven within the following three pages remarks from my review in 1997 of the anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, Wisconsin: the University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) published within *Philosophy & Literature* 21, No. 2 (October, 1997, pages 492-494). [See <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/1568> and <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/26877/summary>]

<sup>19</sup> 'Logical Positivism' arose from the discussions of the members of the Vienna Circle, organised and sustained by Moritz Schlick in 1924 and lasting until in 1936 when he was murdered on a staircase leading to the philosophy rooms of the University of Vienna by a deranged student. After World War II a number of them emigrated to the United States where the movement centred and earned its name.

<sup>20</sup> I apologise to readers and to David Park for having no citation for this quotation. Professor Park was an esteemed colleague of mine at Washington State University, but I seem to have lost my record of the publication within which it appeared.

In 1997, forty years later, I was reminded of Ayer's anthology and of the promise, pretence and passing of 'logical positivism' by attending to a collection of essays, edited by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll and encompassing a contribution by Gregory Currie.<sup>21</sup> The volume was intended by its editors and contributors to serve as a model for film scholars of how to "reconstruct film studies".

The anthology reaffirmed for me, however, the remarkable resonance between the pretences of the 'new cognitivists' and those of the 'logical positivists' before them, for just as the positivists sought to exclude metaphysics from philosophy by reconstructing it to look scientific, the 'new cognitivists' refuse to acknowledge any general approach to comprehending the problem-solving enterprise of filmmaking, forswearing in particular any Freudian access to it, relying instead upon some kind of piecemeal, inductive procedural "stance" enabling anyone, it seems, regardless of their inexperience and incompetence as filmmakers, to bring empirical evidence of any kind to bear upon questions of any kind in film studies, be they historical, perceptual or analytical, unsupported by any "Grand Theory", much less metaphysical commitments.

On the surface, Bordwell and Carroll differed in their summaries of this "stance". Bordwell speaking as bluntly as the positivists a half-century before him, insisted that film studies "need carry no determining philosophical assumptions about subjectivity or culture, no univocal metaphysical or epistemological or political presumptions ... in short, no commitment to Grand Theory".<sup>22</sup> Carroll, better acquainted with the issues and acknowledging that such presumptions are unavoidable, suggested nevertheless that it would be useless to strive to uncover them, for, having confused distinctiveness with essentialism, he was unable to fathom how the search could be viable.<sup>23</sup> The method of film studies must rather be "dialectical", demolishing previous arguments with better ones.<sup>24</sup>

Dialectical attack, of course, had been the method of the logical positivists (though they would never have called it so!), for, when push came to shove, they had no choice. Though they spoke incessantly of philosophy, science and mathematics and how to do them better, none of them had trained themselves to be able to do first-rate work in any of the disciplines of which they spoke. Even as they amplified superficial differences between themselves and their supposedly 'metaphysical' antagonists, the positivists were losing the war that they thought they were winning and for good reason.

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<sup>21</sup> See the anthology cited in footnote 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, page 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pages 39 and 58.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pages xiv and 56f.

Neither they nor their antagonists had immersed themselves within any of the disciplines of which they spoke – philosophy included!

None could contribute constructively to their advancement, much less by constructing useful 'theories'.

Entrapped unwittingly within the 'metaphysical' presumptions of the day, none could recognize the nature and value of the contributions of others before them.

Despite having never learned through the hard work of experimenting how to register the world more exactly before trying to explain it, the 'logical positivists' tried to impose their conjectures upon philosophy, mathematics and the sciences they pretended to know, misrepresenting all of them.

### Conclusion

What prevented Carroll and Currie from describing accurately how monsters appear to us by means of movies? What has prevented them and other 'new cognitivists' from respecting how viewers have spoken of the things that we see by means of movies? What in particular has prevented them from registering and building upon how *filmmakers* have thought and spoken of the things with which they hoped viewers would engage upon seeing them by means of the movies upon which they were working? Three questions requiring only a single answer: a lack of hands-on experience in putting the tools of filmmaking to *use* – a deficiency of comparable kind to that which before them had prevented the 'logical positivists' from comprehending philosophy, mathematics and science.

No one among the 'new cognitivists' has bothered to learn how to make films before babbling about it, unaware save by hearsay of the scope and nature of the problems of 'filmmaking' that have determined its history.

Were one to try to write a book on piano-playing without ever having learned to play the instrument competently, much less to play it 'musically' (as my wife would put it), one would fail to the surprise of no one. The 'new cognitivists' chatter on, however, striving to persuade listeners of speculations about filmmaking while misdescribing the very act of *seeing* upon which the making of powerful films rests.

If, with them, we fail to respect how we commonly speak of seeing things by means of movies, refusing to acknowledge its precision and therewith the importance of the 'media-specific' distinctions that our finest filmmakers have in practice been compelled to

draw when making them, we shall continue to tread water within the same swamp that entrapped Munsterberg in 1916.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Munsterberg, however, we shall have no excuse for having rejected the refined presentiment common to our most penetrating philosophers from Socrates through Kant to Austin and Wittgenstein, namely that the purpose of seeking philosophical clarity is to focus more clearly upon the *mystery* of how the world appears to us – a conviction so important to the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, for example, that only the 'illogical positivists' could have dismissed it.

As Oscar Wilde observed long after Kant,

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.<sup>26</sup>

If the mystery of life lies in how things *appear* to us, then our seeing of things by means of photographs and movies is only a most example of how mysteriously things may appear to us, and Stanley Cavell, contra Carroll and Currie, was right to remind us of it and of our obligation as philosophers to accept rather than deny it.

It may be felt that I make too great a mystery of these objects. My feeling is rather that we have forgotten how mysterious these things are, and in general how different things are from one another, as though we had forgotten how to value them. This is in fact something movies teach us.<sup>27</sup>

To deny how we see things by means of movies to avert our gaze pretentiously from the ever-receding target at which philosophy must aim. Indeed, as the biologist J. B. S. Haldane reminded us,

The universe may not only be stranger than we suppose, but stranger than we can suppose.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 16 above.

<sup>26</sup> From "The Picture of Dorian Grey", quoted by Bas. C. Van Fraassen in *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1980), page 204.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Cinema* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), page 19.

<sup>28</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, as quoted in *Science News* (26 August 1978, Vol. 114, #9), page 136.