

My Dinner with Noël; or, Can We Forget the Medium?

• Murray Smith

Picking up a theme from his earlier writings, but turning up the volume, Noël Carroll exhorts us to 'Forget the Medium!' in the opening essay of *Engaging the Moving Image*.¹ Carroll thus gestures towards a radical doctrine that we might call *medium eliminativism*. Beginning with *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*,² the theme of 'medium specificity' has been a major preoccupation in Carroll's writings. The central arguments that Carroll has advanced in respect of this theme, as they are summarized and elaborated in this essay, are as follows: a) that film was said by many classical theorists of film to have established a new artform, and that this new artform was distinct from all existing artforms in virtue of the unique properties of the medium of film; b) that this uniqueness was taken to imply 'positive' and 'negative' aesthetic 'laws' of the medium, or 'categorical stylistic imperative[s]',³ constraining how film style could be successfully deployed;⁴ c) that the proponents of medium specificity equivocate between empirical and analytic arguments in support of their case, and in general beg the question by covertly assuming what is to count as the essence of cinema and then purportedly discovering it through empirical research; d) that artforms generally involve multiple media rather than a single medium, unique and distinctive to the artform; e) consequently, many media are utilized in various artforms; f) that media are routinely modified and re-invented; media and artforms are historical phenomena, 'not analogous' to natural kinds; and finally g) on the basis of all the foregoing, we would do better to reconceptualize the field in terms of the *artform* of the *moving image* (rather than the *medium of film*). In pursuing these arguments in such detail

and with such tenacity, Carroll has performed a great service, liberating the field from the many blind alleys into which medium specificity has led us; just as in other writings Carroll has freed us from the tyranny of Grand Theory.

I have to thank Professor Carroll in even stronger and more personal terms, since his remarks about medium specificity release me from the grip of a troubling memory. In one of my very first graduate film courses, the subject of Louis Malle's *My Dinner with André* (1981) somehow came up. This film had been released around the time when I was first getting seriously interested in film, and I had assimilated, more or less uncritically, the prevailing wisdom at the time of the film's release, viz., that it was a Masterpiece. My two teachers, however, dismissed the film briskly, sweeping aside some tentative resistance on my part with the assertion that the film was 'theatrical' and 'did not exploit the possibilities of the medium' – or words to this effect. This, I think, is a paradigm case of the sort of flawed logic that Carroll identifies – that a film's value can be directly, logically derived by assessing the extent to which it realizes or takes advantage of one or more techniques that are taken to be essential to the medium.

Cut ahead twenty years and here I am, worrying about this paper, and thinking, 'Maybe I'll take a look at *My Dinner with André* again.' I mention to my wife that I'm going to watch the film. 'Shall we watch it on the big TV (in the room with the uncomfortable sofa) or the small TV (with the comfortable sofa)?' I enquire. 'Well, it's not very cinematic, so let's watch it on the small TV' she replies. A couple of night's later, Spike Lee's *The 25th Hour* (2003) is on the menu. 'I'm not sure that I can face three hours of Spike Lee melodrama tonight' I aver. 'Oh, but his films are always so *cinematic*,' my wife (re-)assures me.



• *My Dinner with André* (1981).

Now my wife's use of the adjective 'cinematic' is clearly in important ways akin to the hostile remarks in the film class, but it's important to stress that her remark about *My Dinner* wasn't straightforwardly damning. She'd seen the film before, liked it, and wanted to see it again. But it's not being 'cinematic' was a salient feature of the film in her mind, certainly descriptively, and perhaps bearing in some way on the quality of the film (as a work of art). More on this later.

Now the question raised by this second anecdote is the following one: is this sort of language just a historical hangover? Carroll writes of the 'days when we still spoke about "the cinematic"' (p. 2), as if they were long since passed; is he right? Or does such language still perform an important service, pointing to a substantive matter? Carroll doesn't think so; in fact, he suggests 'that we might fruitfully dispense with [the concept of 'the medium'] completely, at least in terms of the ways in which it is standardly deployed by aestheticians' (p. 6). Happily for her, my wife is not an aesthetician. But it's not clear to me that her way of using the concept of 'the medium' is entirely divorced from the way we hardened professionals would wield it. So for now I will proceed on the basis that her utterances are relevant, but in need of clarification and justification in the light of Carroll's case against the concept of medium specificity.

So can we forget the medium, as Carroll urges us to? Before we can answer that question we need a working definition of a medium.

Following Carroll, I will assume that the term 'medium' refers to the physical materials from which, and the instruments by which, a work of art is made (paint, canvas, paintbrush). In contrast to medium eliminativism, I want to argue for the retention of the concepts of medium *and* medium specificity, albeit in curtailed form. Call this *medium deflationism*.

The first point to be made is that both practitioners and viewers must necessarily engage with moving image structures as they are realized in particular media. The medium is, almost literally, the coalface at which both artist and spectator work. Neither artists nor spectators encounter the 'strategies of articulation' (p. xxi) common to all moving image media (parallel editing, etc.) in the abstract, but rather as they are embodied in one or more of these media. Allow me to draw on another anecdote to elaborate this point. My five-year old son was recently assigned the task of writing a brief story using a set of words he'd just learned to spell. 'OK,' I said, 'Let's begin with this: *The dog was tired,*' giving him a start to this little story. 'But Daddy, Mrs. Parker wants me to write a story, not a sentence,' he shot back. 'Well,' I said, 'don't you need to make your story out of sentences?' Of course, in a different context I would have allowed that you can make a story out of lots of other things, including still and moving pictures. But a story has to be made out of *something*, and the concept of the medium, whatever its problems, is the concept which picks out this 'something'. In performing this role, it is, I believe, the only game in town.

Perhaps it will seem that this is too obvious a point and that Carroll's argument cannot really overlook it. Speaking of literature as an artform, however, Carroll argues that it 'does not appear to have a medium at all. This may sound strange to you. You may be tempted to regard words as the distinctive medium of literature. And yet, are words the right sort of thing to constitute a medium? Aren't media, in the most clear-cut sense, physical, and are words physical in any aesthetically interesting way?' (p. 3)⁵ Now it might be that Carroll has some particular definition of 'the physical' which would make

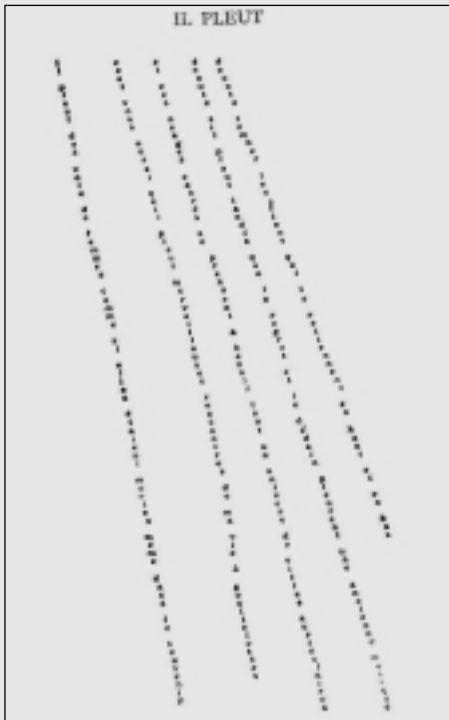


• George Herbert, 'Easter Wings'.

this claim plausible, but as it stands, it sounds very strange indeed. Surely the sound of a word is a physical feature of the word, and the sounds of words are integral to the aesthetic character of literary works; indeed sometimes these sounds are the paramount aesthetic features (think of certain forms of poetry and densely poetic novels, such as the works of Joyce).⁶

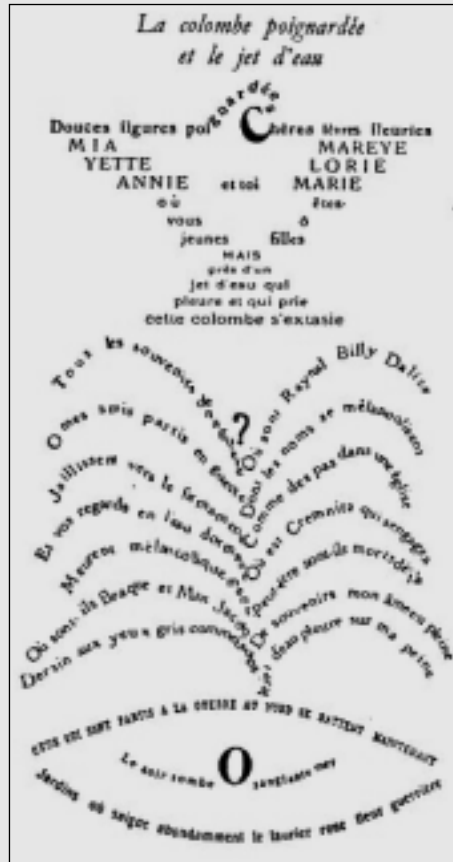
Note how far Carroll pushes his argument here. It is one thing to argue, as he does with respect to film, that moving image artworks can be realized through several different media. It is another to argue that an artform exists that has no medium, and thus, does not need to be realized in a medium. This is to eliminate not only the notion of medium specificity but the concept of the medium itself – and this is of course just what Carroll contemplates, in the title of the essay and in the passage on literature that I've quoted. To my mind, Carroll drives his thesis here so far that it comes off the rails of logic. With the possible exception of conceptual art (and if it is an exception, it is a calculated one), artworks are by definition objects which are realized through some material substance and process, that is, some 'medium', the work thus becoming available for perception by an audience. As Hegel put it, the work of art is the 'the sensuous embodiment of the idea'. The medium is the material bridgehead between the artist and the appreciator; it is what allows the artwork to be *sensed*. In the case of literature, the medium is indeed 'the word'.

Carroll goes on to argue that, even if we accept for the sake of argument that words count as the medium of literature, they can't be regarded as the 'distinctive artistic medium' (p. 3) of literature. Words are not the special and unique possession of literature, as a moment's reflection on the artforms of theatre, song, opera and film will tell us. But here too I see the baby going out with the bathwater. Can we not say that words play a *uniquely central* role in the artform of literature, a role they do not characteristically play in any other artform?⁷ After all, some works of literature make use of pictorial devices – think of examples of 'pattern' or 'concrete poetry' in which words are arranged on the page in order to form striking, sometimes depictive, patterns. George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' is one such poem; Guillaume Apollinaire's *Caligrammes* form a collection of them. But we would not be tempted to say that Herbert's work is a painting rather than a poem, any more than we would be tempted to say that Michael Snow's *So Is This* (1982), a film comprised entirely of shots of words, is a poem rather than a film. If the issue of the medium of a work is as incidental or irrelevant as Carroll contends – if it can be eliminated – what would stop us from thinking of Herbert's work as a painting⁸ and Snow's work as a poem? Why do we *not* say these things? Because we recognize that the word (in Herbert's case) and the cinematographic image (in Snow's case) are somehow foundational to the enterprise of each, even if they are being used to unusual ends in both cases (to depict, and to render words and sentences, respectively).⁹ Much of the force of these works resides in the gestures they make *within* their given media; considered as a painting 'Easter Wings' would be rudimentary, while *So Is This* considered as a poem would be barely coherent, since many of the sentences articulated by the film refer to its status as a film. The concept of the medium of the work is thus playing an important background role here. (Carroll might say that the background role here is being played by *artform* concepts rather than media concepts. If this is right, however, it suggests that artforms and media cannot always be easily disentangled.)

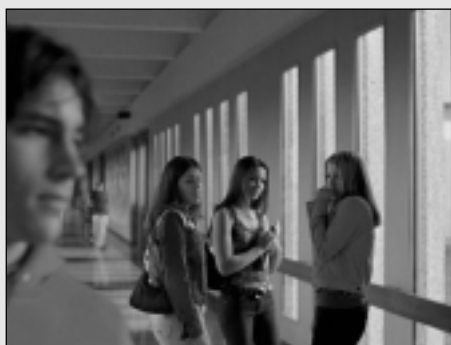


• *Calligrammes* by Guillaume Apollinaire – 'Il pleut', 'La colombe poignardée et le jet d'eau', and 'La petit auto'.

If we turn our attention away from appreciators and towards the creators of art, similar problems emerge with regard to the eliminativist proposal. The range of media available to artists at any given historical moment often provide inspiration, and pose problems and challenges, to artists. At a minimum, not all



filmmakers work all of the time at the level of shared 'moving image' structures, but many will often work at a more medium specific level. Consider this in relation to the particular qualities of digital cinematography, in contrast to the qualities of photographic film, e.g. in terms of shot duration. Films as otherwise different as *Time Code* (Mike Figgis, 2000), *Russian Ark* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002), and *Elephant* (Gus Van Zant, 2003) all evince a fascination with extreme long takes – equivalent to the length of the entire film in the first two cases. These shots are of a duration well in excess of anything that can be achieved with a conventional (photographic) film camera.¹⁰ Such long takes perform a realist function, in the Bazinian sense, but not just that; there is also a fascination in contemplating the orchestration of camera and



• An extended sequence shot in *Elephant* (2003)

figure movement over such extended periods. So there are certainly some features of these films, indeed very salient ones, which arise from an engagement with a particular medium (digital cinematography) rather than generic features of the artform of the moving image.

Similarly, *Gummo* (Harmony Korine, 1997) intercuts a whole variety of moving image media, ranging from 35mm film stock to low-grade

video, playing the different media and their associations off each other, and varying its visual texture in a 'painterly' fashion. And looking 'backwards' rather than 'forwards' in terms of the historical succession of media technologies, consider *Decasia* (Bill Morrison, 2002). This film foregrounds the qualities peculiar to (certain types of) photographic film stock, especially those qualities that emerge as the stock ages and decays. We can't begin to conceptualize this film without something like a concept of medium. Finally, in this vein, we might think about contemporary plastic artists who make and describe their works in terms of 'mixed media'. Perhaps such work will seem like grist to Carroll's eliminativist mill, in that the artists connected with it seem to be saying: 'Forget the medium, just look at the work. Don't box me in. I'm an artist, not a housepainter or a stonemason or a blacksmith. I'll use whatever suits the purpose.' And yet surely the 'mixed media' label only draws further attention to what is usually salient in these works, namely the importance of the varied textures and associations brought into the work by the 'media' in question, which have included, among other materials, blood, dung, and all manner of textiles, fabrics, and consumer products. The point isn't restricted, though, to such all-singing, all-dancing contemporary artists. 'Lucien Freud's world is made of paint,' Robert Hughes has said, and we could say similar things about the black-and-white, celluloid world of von Sternberg or the videographic world of Bill Viola.¹¹ In all of these cases, the medium strikes us – physically as well as mentally – as vital to the life of the artwork.

Note, though, how the proposal here differs dramatically from the proposal that different media *determine*, in law-like fashion, the parameters of style. The point here is that many artists work on and 'through' media as sources of inspiration, and consumers of these works of art must attend to the qualities of media in order to appreciate them. This, of course, takes us back to my original point – that artforms have to be realized and then perceived through particular media. To the extent that artforms do not float free of media and that, at least in any given



• Varied visual texture in *Gummo* (1997).

historical context, we will relate them to one or more media – then we cannot *entirely* forget the medium.

This leads us to recognize the historically-embedded nature of artforms, a feature which Carroll, here and elsewhere, has emphasized. One aspect of this history is constituted by the way theories of art (in the broadest sense) become part of the 'filmworld' and are taken up and explored by practitioners – whether or not the theory is philosophically defensible or scientifically correct. Consider again *My Dinner*. Is not part of the force of this film the way it flies in the face of received wisdom regarding the 'cinematic'? Two characters meet in a restaurant. They talk, and talk, and talk. Occasionally they

pause, briefly, to eat or drink. Then they talk some more. What's more, they talk mostly about theatre, and the 'characters' are dramatized versions of the people playing them – playwright Wallace Shawn and director André Gregory, both well-known figures in the world of theatre. The film is bookended by sequences showing Shawn travelling to the restaurant and then returning home, but is otherwise resolutely rooted in the restaurant, and for the most part visually restricted to the table at which the two interlocutors sit. What could be more like 'canned theatre' and less like 'pure cinema' than this, and thus more in danger of failing aesthetically?

Now as I've implied, the film is widely regarded as a success. But my point here is not to defend the aesthetic value of the film. Rather I want to stress the way in which it appears to be a calculated response (even affront) to the idea that subject matter of this sort cannot work cinematically, and must be reserved for the theatre. Even if we think the film an aesthetic failure in this light, in order to properly understand the project of the film we would still need to make reference to the theory of medium specificity. In order to interpret the film as a critique of the theory of medium specificity, we will need to refer not only to the film's medium, but the theory of medium specificity itself.¹² In sum, then, even if medium specificity can be eliminated as a first-order concept, it cannot be eliminated as a second-order concept, that is, as a concept that has entered and is now part of film history.

That history includes not only the history of filmmaking and film theory, but also the history of both professional film criticism and casual critical discourse about films – the sort of talk engaged in not only by innocent by-standers like my wife, but even us professionals, in off-duty mode. I suggested earlier that the casual, everyday use of an adjective like 'cinematic' was, at the very least, not unrelated to the use of the term by aestheticians. What, then, is the meaning of this word, when used in the kind of statement made by my wife ('this film is (not) cinematic')? The word is both descriptive and



• Photographic decay in *Decasia* (2002).

evaluative. It identifies features in a film which, to the speaker, are in some way *characteristic* or *prototypical* of the medium; often, though not necessarily, this will mean a film 'doing only what only film can do'.¹³ But note that features taken to be characteristic of the medium (or the artform, for that matter) could be judged to be characteristic simply by virtue of tradition – that is, as a matter of historically-validated practice;

we've seen these features in earlier films, and we have seen that they have worked well.¹⁴ (This is how speaking of 'characteristic' features of the medium differs from speaking of 'definitive' or 'essential' features of the medium.) So the word 'cinematic' need not imply anything like a 'law' of the medium being observed, but might instead suggest a stylistic practice being emulated.

A similar point may be made about the evaluative force of the word. 'Cinematic' is invariably a term of praise, but it does not depend on a concept of the 'laws of the medium' to have evaluative force. My wife's remarks about *My Dinner with André* are a case in point. For her, the film wasn't very 'cinematic' – that's why watching it on the small TV was OK. But the film had other artistic virtues, inhering (I guess) in its dialogue and its philosophical play with ideas, its love of argument, and perhaps its overall conception. These are not, in her mind, qualities associated uniquely (nor even particularly) with cinema. Still, the film has these virtues, so her implied overall judgement is that the film is good, if uncinematic, and thus worth viewing. 'Cinematic' in this scheme is thus just one of many criteria which might inform an evaluation of a film; and it does not imply anything mechanical or law-like about the process of evaluation. So while I maintain that 'cinematic' in everyday discourse is related to the way the term may be used by aestheticians, it is quite different from the medium-specificist use of the term as analysed by Carroll.

Incidentally, my comments here on the evaluative significance of the word 'cinematic' are very much in accord with Carroll's proposals on film evaluation in *Engaging the Moving Image*, insofar as Carroll is concerned to develop a theory of evaluation based on a plurality of evaluative criteria.¹⁵ My arguments here suggest a way in which 'the cinematic' might be reconceived and rehabilitated in order to fit into such a pluralistic account of film evaluation, in contrast to the 'unitary' approach implied by most classical film theory.

A last thought before I move to my conclusion. The arguments I have offered here in

favour of medium deflationism have been broadly epistemic in nature. But Carroll notes that one of the reasons that the concept of 'the cinematic' has stuck around is more pragmatic and political than epistemic, namely, that it fosters an intellectual environment in which a wide and deep knowledge of film is regarded as essential to the teaching of film. Is Carroll implying, in recommending that we set aside the medium and focus instead on questions posed at the (more abstract) level of artforms, that this is no longer a worry? I for one am not ready to turn over the teaching of film, or the moving image, to (for example) my colleagues in the English department, even though they are (mostly) smart and well-intentioned people, and that the knowledge of narrative that they derive from their own discipline makes them very insightful about the narrative aspects of moving image artworks. The trouble is that they are typically, in equal measure, less able to discern those features of moving image works which arise from the specific media in which they are embodied.

Perhaps much of what I have said in this paper misses the point, since Carroll has proven most attentive to matters of medium and style in other contexts. In that case, this paper can be regarded as an invitation to Carroll to develop more fully his speculative aside on the desirability of eliminating the concept of the medium; to clarify how his arguments about 'forgetting the medium' mesh with his writings on other subjects in which features of particular media play an important role; and to say more about the concept of an artform, and the relationship between the concepts of artform and medium.¹⁶

Carroll concludes his essay by elaborating on the imperative declaration that serves as his title: 'Forget the medium; watch the movement – the movement of history and the movement of the image.' (p. 9) The trouble is that in watching the movement of any given image, we will be watching a work rendered in one or more media, and in surveying the history of the moving image as an artform, we will to a large degree be watching the emergence of media through which the artform has been realized, along with

the way artists have exploited new media, and in doing so sometimes redrawn the limits and definition of the artform itself. So Carroll is wrong to ask us to *forget* the medium – but he is absolutely justified in jolting us out of our complacent, doctrinaire or obsessive focus on film as the only medium that matters in the world of the moving image. Forget the dogma; watch the image as both medium and artform.

Notes

- 1 Noël Carroll, 'Forget the Medium!' Chapter 1 of *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 1–9. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers follow quotations in brackets.
- 2 Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988).
- 3 Carroll, 'Introduction,' *Engaging the Moving Image*, p. xxiv.
- 4 The medium-as-artform being regarded as a (virtual) 'natural kind' Carroll, 'Forget the Medium!', (p. 7).
- 5 Words as a *part of language* as a *whole* strikes me as a more obvious candidate for this role, acknowledging the array of sub- and superordinate levels of language arrayed around words: phonemes, morphemes, sentences, paragraphs, etc.
- 6 Presumably Carroll thinks of words (and language more generally) as pre-eminently mental (rather than physical) entities. The fact that most of the time literary works are read silently, however, and the words comprising the poem or novel in question are only 'voiced' mentally, does not upend the argument that the physical properties of words are central to their aesthetic effects. The mental voicing of words depends on our understanding and experience of the literal voicing of words, and thus their physical presence in this sense. When we read 'I Like Ike' and voice this in our minds, what we 'hear' is the repetition of particular sounds – physical events – that we would hear if we uttered the words out loud.

What non-physical feature of words might Carroll have in mind as having more obvious aesthetic salience? I guess that he has in mind the meaning or 'semantics' of words (and language in general), which are not physical 'in the most clear-cut sense'. The meanings created by the language of literary works are indubitably of the utmost aesthetic significance, but the physical aspects of words often bear on their meanings (think of the new meanings suggested by rhyming sounds, as in 'his room was a tomb') or, alternatively, they may have a dialectical function, tugging us away from the meaning and

- creating a more 'musical' effect. The only point I am concerned to insist on here is that the aesthetic character of words in literary works cannot be reduced to their meaningfulness, understood in terms of non-physical semantic properties.
- 7 If one thinks of theatre as an artform distinct from literature, one might think that the centrality of words to theatre would be a problem for my claim here. In theatre, however, a particular kind of language – speech – is central, and such speech is typically performed live.
 - 8 I use this term in the broad and inclusive sense alluded to by Carroll in his essay on Gregory Currie's *Image and Mind* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), where he notes that the word 'painting,' as it is used to refer to an artform, is really a stand-in for the idea of 'marking surfaces,' since art historians routinely encompass great diversity in respect of the material of the surface to be marked, the materials used to mark it, and the instruments and techniques used in the process of marking ('The Essence of Cinema' *Engaging the Moving Image*, note 11, p. 264). Herbert's poem fits comfortably into this definition as a 'painting' – a surface marked to depict something or to create a visually arresting design.
 - 9 The case of Snow's film is similar to the sub-genre of painting and sculpture known as 'word art,' in which the artwork is dominated by the rendering of words. Contemporary exponents of the form include Jenny Holzer, Sean Landers, Richard Prince, and Peter Davies; Landers' *Self-Something* (1994) is a spectacular example. Again we can ask: why do we think of these artworks as paintings rather than poems or short stories, in spite of their intense focus on language? Are we right to do so?
 - 10 Other than through the kind of 'cheat' deployed famously by Hitchcock in *Rope* (1948).
 - 11 I derive this observation from J. Hoberman, 'Veni, vidi, video,' *Vulgar Modernism* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991), p. 41. Hughes' remark was made in *The New Shock of the New* (BBC, 2004).
 - 12 Carroll himself discusses structural film in this way, in his review of Currie – that is, as a mode of filmmaking engaging directly with questions about the supposed nature and essence of the medium of film. As in the case of Malle's film, even where philosophically suspect assumptions are made by structural filmmakers, as viewers and critics we need these assumptions in order to make sense of the work – that is, we need to recognize them as part of the 'theoretical' background of the world; we don't need to assume their truth, of course. In this respect, beliefs about medium specificity are no different to the other beliefs an artist might hold in making a work, e.g. in the existence of God. We won't get far with a film by Bresson if we don't recognize the spiritual beliefs which informed the making of the film, but this doesn't commit us to the beliefs. And so it is with an artist's belief in medium specificity.
 - 13 Bruce Kawin, review of *My Dinner with André*, *Film Quarterly*, 35:2 (1981/2): 63.
 - 14 Nothing on this account blocks recognition of innovative artistic strategies. But these would more likely be identified and praised as 'novel' rather than 'cinematic,' insofar as the latter term refers to valued traditions of practice. Or one might claim that a certain film exploited a previously unforeseen potential of the medium. The key point here is that 'cinematic,' in this model, has descriptive and evaluative but *not* prescriptive force.
 - 15 Carroll, 'Introducing Film Evaluation', *Engaging the Moving Image*, pp. 147–64.
 - 16 Some passages from the essay under scrutiny here, and some other essays by Carroll, suggest that his stance too would be best described as deflationary rather than eliminativist, in spite of the title of the lead essay in *Engaging the Moving Image*. So this paper might also be regarded as an invitation to Carroll to clarify how the theses of elimination and deflation, significantly different in my view, cohere in his work.