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Starrs, D. Bruno (2008) The Evolving Human and Dream-like, Screen-based Media. *artciencia.com* IV(9).

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The Evolving Human and Dream-like, Screen-based Media.

"Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night" (*Eleonora,* Edgar Allen Poe, 1917).

"A man must dream a long time in order to act with grandeur, and dreaming is nursed in darkness" (*Thief's Journal,* Jean Genet, 2004).

With rare exceptions, film theorists have traditionally focussed on culturally symbolic criticism in a persistent denial of the biological function and benefit of film-going. There has been a recent reversal of this trend, however, with the development of a cognitive theory of film, which Nicolas Tredell describes as an approach whereby "A film can be regarded as a simulation of a (possible) real-life situation that engages the viewer's intellect, emotions and body, and that involves a complex negotiation between fiction and reality" (2002: 259). One aspect of this attempt to include science in the understanding of film has been neoteric work by William Evans on the evolutionary aspects of film-going. He argues that "humans have evolved to prefer television and film to print media [… because] it seems real to us [and because] humans are hardwired to attend and respond to visual stimuli, especially when visual stimuli include other people […] engaging in salient behaviour" (2005: 200-201). But this elegantly simple explanation of the evolutionary significance of film and other screen-based media needs further elaboration. Firstly, Evans fails to consider the evolutionary benefits that accrue from what I believe is the threat rehearsal function of film-going, in that films are like dreams. Secondly, in emphasizing the reality of the screen's moving image, he neglects to consider why humans attend to unrealistic (and most dream-like) films such as animations. Thirdly, he omits consideration of the evolutionary function of a film auteur who is assigned the virtual status of tribal elder who cultivates a unified, community-wide dream. In addressing these three omissions, my paper aims to gain credibility for a more comprehensive evolutionary theory of film.

In 1996, Joseph D. Anderson's book *The Reality of Illusion* drew attention to a cognitive film theory of how humans have evolved to a level where the perception and understanding of the flickering screen could occur. Likewise, Torben Grodal's 1997 work on cognitive film theory, in which he primarily considers film as the product of, rather than contributing to, the process of human evolution (21), is another antecedental text. It has its critics, however, and has been described as "quasi-scientific" (Tredell 2002: 210). More promising is his forthcoming compendium addressing the topic, entitled *Embodied Visions,* which despite being as yet unpublished, is a set text for a course Grodal apparently teaches at the University of Copenhagen named 'Cognitive and Evolutionary Film Theory'. Even psychoanalytic film theorist Barbara Creed hints at a reversal of the so-called grand theory trend, dominant in film and cultural studies departments around the world since the 1970s,

and consisting of an obfuscating mish-mash of neo-Freudian Lacanism and neo-Marxist Althusserism that requires one to "stretch our imaginations" (Starrs 2008). Demonstrating a remarkable grasp of Gavin Moodie's "least publishable increment" (2005: 7), Creed moves from her paper on the evolutionary analysis of a "zoocentric perspective" (2006: 46) in *Max Mon Amour* (Nagasi Oshima 1986) in 2006 to an evolutionary analysis of three versions of *King Kong* in 2007. In this most recent work, Creed presciently foreshadows the next part of this paper on dreams, and her forthcoming book is tantalisingly entitled *The Darwinian Screen*. But the above mentioned texts have each merely touched upon (or, I conjecture, will merely touch upon) the biological role cinema plays in the ongoing evolution of *Homo sapiens*.

Films as Threat Rehearsing Dreams.

Firstly, we must back-track a little. One useful consideration of the grand theorists is the possibility that film-going is like having a dream. From Hugo von Hoffmansthal to Elizabeth Langer to F. E. Sparshott to Christian Metz, the argument has been made in various ways and Noel Carroll concludes, "The determinant characteristic of film will be dreamlikeness while its role or value will be whatever the role or value of dream is …" (1996: 378). And here we see the possibility for an evolutionary approach to step in and fill the void, for Antti Revonsuo has argued that dreams serve an evolutionary role through their threat rehearsal mechanism (see Revonsuo, 2000). This concept advocates that humans have biologically evolved an ability to practice in the imagination survival strategies for various scenarios, not just consciously but asleep as well. Much more than Freud's understanding of dreams as "wish fulfillment" (1982: 212), a concept which does not satisfactorily account for the occurrence of nightmares, dreams are like an actor's workshop, in which various approaches to the main task, a successful live performance, are improvised and tried out.

I would like to suggest that films and other screen-based media, like dreams, provide detailed and unexpected scenarios which draw us ineluctably into the diegesis, and permit us to rehearse various responses to survival threats (both individual and species-wide). With our giant neo-cortexes, the genetically determined meaning-seeking behaviour of humans is allied to a quest for solutions to problems and our alternative fictitious narratives, be they any filmic genre, provide a mental fitness regime for Darwinian natural selection. Although Revonsuo stresses the evolutionary function of dreams, he does not consider in depth the function of cinema as a kind of waking dream and although Grodal discusses dreams at length, he fails to make the link to their evolutionary advantages, despite almost hitting the mark with the comment, "In an evolutionary perspective, however, our ability to empathize with, identify with, and cognitively simulate the situation of other members of our species is linked to the evident survival-value of these prosocial activities" (86). Nevertheless, I believe the relation between dreams and film and other screen-based media is obvious, and has been well accepted in the academy since 1951, when Hortense Powdermaker asserted "Hollywood is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams" (38) and numerous academics have continued this analogy. Apparently, even film-makers such as Steven Spielberg also subscribe to the theory, as evidenced in the naming of his production company "DreamWorks". Such cinematic dreams may better equip us to survive any similar environments we may encounter in real life. "What did the successful hero/heroine do in that horror, sci-fi or teen romance movie?" we may consciously or unconsciously one day ask ourselves,

asleep or awake, and the satisfaction and evolutionary benefits in learning that behaviour in the comfortably darkened cinema, especially if the movie ended happily, is considerable. Herein lies this paper's first contribution to Evan's work on an evolutionary theory of film and other screen-based media.

That Most Dream-like of Film Genres: The Cartoon.

I would now like to broaden my theory of the threat rehearsal evolutionary function of film-going by brief consideration of a well-known genre of mainstream film-making that varies markedly from the reality TV programming Evans examines, and that is the animated film. This failure to consider the cartoon is the second shortcoming of his otherwise excellent work. Often involving the anthropomorphism of animals to the impossible extent that they exercise perfect fluency in human language, writing and reading skills, the animated film is inherently unrealistic. At the most basic level, the visuals a cartoon presents us with are unconvincingly artificial: they are only two-dimensional and complex surfaces are frequently simplified to the extent they are merely penciled outlines, broad brush strokes or rafts of unshaded colour. Additionally, in the diegesis of many animated films, reality is overtly misconstrued, with characters often surviving violence that would be fatal to any known living organism. Gravity, that great leveler and destroyer of life, is warped and animated characters can often fly. As such, I would argue that they are more dream-like than most realistic non-animated films. Consider the example of Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse, one of the first and most popular of all animated characters. Apart from his biological illogicality (he is a giant, talking, reading, writing, car-driving, steamboat-captaining, clothes-wearing rodent), he survives any and all biological threats, including the ravages of time itself. Surely no viewer of this preposterous *Mus musculus* believes him to be at all real. Yet we attend to the antics of this character as readily as we might to a realistic film that portrays the power struggles, sexual contests and lifelike violence of accurately depicted human characters engaged in salient human behaviour we might easily learn or copy. Certainly, Evan's theory that it is the realism of the moving screen image that makes us attend to it so closely, is somewhat incomplete. Furthermore, the popularity of this enduring, but unrealistic creation, begs the questioning of it's relevance to the evolutionary pressures applied to *Homo sapiens*: where is Evan's "salience" in mice regarding men? Rather, I would suggest that we see the cartoon as the ultimate dream-like film and accept that in this medium, as with dreams, anything is possible.

The Evolutionary Significance of the Dream-making Auteur.

Finally, I wish to make an even more tendentious and unstable claim regarding the evolutionary benefit of cinema, and that relates to film-goers assigning the status of 'auteur' to an individual writer/director/producer, despite the well known collaborative nature of film-making, and the (dare I say) out-of-fashion Barthesian notion of the death of the author. The third elision in Evan's nascent evolutionary theory of film is consideration of authorship and the habit we humans have of valuing and heeding advice from those individuals we respect. Regarding the work of Disney again, one notes the absence of certain genres of cinema in his otherwise heterogeneous body of work: Disney has never made an overtly bloody war film or explicitly sexual movie. Such exclusions, only apparent when the many films signed as Disney films are considered as a single text emanating from an individual author

(in itself a very problematic stance with Disney, who ceased drawing animations himself in 1927 and thereafter only imprinted his auteurial signature as the film's producer), generate an understanding of the Disney worldview, and prompt an understanding of this auteurial individual akin to meaning-seeking villagers genuflecting to a wise tribal elder as (s)he offers advice for perpetuation of the species in the evolutionary struggle for survival of the fittest. Disney was cultivating a communal dream, in which family values were paramount. Of course, one could easily argue that he was simply complying with the Production Code Administration set up in 1934 and right-wing pressure groups typified by the Legion of decency, but the Disney film is universally expected to be a wholesome family film. Whether it be animated or realistic, a film authored by Disney generally presents a worldview in which the importance and classic order of family is prioritised and, furthermore, explicit sexuality or bloody violence is never shown. As Eric Smoodin summarizes, Disney is the "defender of American 'family' values" (1994: 8). Because family permits extended child-rearing, so vital for the passing on of culture, education and survival skills, it is evolutionarily advantageous behaviour. Not for nothing is Disney known as 'Uncle Walt' and one doubts if Quentin Tarantino, that contemporary auteur of the inter-textual shlock-horror film, would ever be affectionately known as 'Uncle Quent'. Let us consider what some call Disney's most radical work, that being *Fantasia* (1940). This film depicts various styles of animation set to orchestral music, and is notable for its depiction of various unhappy and troubling scenarios including, for example, the evolution and demise of the dinosaurs, or as the narrator says, "what science thinks went on during the first few billions of years of this planet's existence." The film also portrays a mischievous and careless Zeus hurling lightning bolts down upon a pastoral scene of courting pegasi, centaurs and unicorns. The final vignette shows a giant demon perched upon a rocky eyrie, summoning up lesser demons and ghosts in a "struggle between the profane and the sacred", before the forces of darkness are eventually dispelled by the peals of a church bell as monk-like figures file past to the sound of Franz Schubert's *Ave Maria.* With such mind-boggling fantasy, it might be hard for some to see the director's auteurial signature involving family-friendly values. But in the film's opening episode, set to Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite,* we see a family of Chinese-styled mushrooms dancing in a ring, careful to include a child mushroom in their ceremony. In the equine fantasy segment, we see flying horses nurturing a brood of foals beneath their wings, accompanying *The Pastoral Symphony* by Beethoven. Most significantly, to the music of Paul Dukas, we see a cameo from Mickey Mouse, who, playing 'himself', is a child-like, pre-pubescent (his voice has not yet broken, and indeed, never will be) sorcerer's apprentice who needs the firm hand of guidance from the father-figure wizard, whose punishment for the boy's misdemeanours amounts to a paternal swish on the rump with a broom. Konrad Lorenz first suggested, in 1950, that child-like features trigger an innately affectionate instinct to nurture, and Mickey (who, as Stephen Jay Gould notes, has become progressively more juvenile in appearance since *Steamboat Willie* (1927)) in *Fantasia* looks like the child we want to nurture in our families.

Even in *Fantasia*, Disney's most avant garde and unsettling film, the evidence is abundant that family is important. Significant to my argument, however, is that despite the vast numbers of employees actually responsible for making such a Disney animation, the public wishes to see the oeuvre as the teachings of an individual. A wise, uncle-like auteur. Attending to such a body of work as the result of an individual worldview from a font of wisdom fit for family consumption, is, I would

suggest, of evolutionary benefit to the human species. A tribe has need of a single authoritative voice, if it is to propagate its genes successfully. A hundred advice-giving uncles, for example, would be problematic. That tribe needs to have a unified vision for survival, or a dream for the future, and the tribal elder is charged with the task of leading it and guiding it. Disney (his secret personal life and perfectly valid criticisms of the patriarchal, white hegemony his films promote aside), in being identified as a film-maker who embeds family values in his dream-like animations, is elevated to the position of venerated tribal elder. Like a shaman telling stories about his cave paintings, which are brought to movie-like movement by the flickering firelight, the auteur's stories are attended to in a way that is inconsistent with a more accurate recognition of film-making's collaborative mode of production. To summarise Disney's evolutionary function and to put it in the form of a simplistic equation, Tribal elder = Disney = family values = extended childrearing = successful reproduction = survival of the species.

Conclusion.

The evolutionary approach sketched in this paper is not simply the identification of evolutionary themes in movies, as Ron Edwards has admirably done in his pedagogy (see Edwards 1997), but rather, one that stresses that the process of watching films and other screen-based media is itself an evolutionarily important act. All theories of film study have contributed fascinating analyses, and I do not pretend that an evolutionary theory of film is the best. Indeed, its main virtue probably lies in its simplicity, in both concept and language, and in this regard it will probably not sound the death-knell of grand theory. But to an increasingly Cartesian public, the scientific basis to this theorising must surely lend it some substantial credibility and support my plea for greater academic attention to be paid to expanding its scope and reach. I anticipate criticisms that this theory is overly structuralist and deterministic for relying on Evan's "hard-wired" mental circuitry with the rejoinder that free will can still be employed by the meaning-seeking film-goer, in that (s)he can exercise an interest in either the survival of the 'hero' or the 'villain', regardless of the attempt by the writer/director/producer to subjectively align an audience with either. The viewer of *Fantasia* may identify with the demon high atop the mount rather than the tiny, sheep-like monks below. Evolutionary benefits can accrue from modeling behaviour on either character's success. And let's be frank: the evolution of humans is a very rapid and recent phenomenon compared to, for example, crocodiles or platypi, and should not be considered a process that is complete. As Chris Gray acknowledges, with consideration of the pervasive cyborg-like trajectory of post-modern, technology-dependent humans, "We are involved in participatory evolution, and that means the responsibility to participate is ours" (2001: 199). The ideas presented in this paper may be decried for their reductionism and determinism, but many humans have agency: we are often capable of choosing to either bend to the instincts or participate in the conscious refusal of such innate compulsions. Other critics may argue that an evolutionary theory of film is nothing more than an elaboration of cognitive film theory. However, my theory makes the novel suggestion that the cinematic simulation is like a dream, which engages not just the intellect, emotions and body, but the evolutionary instincts as well. Torbal notes "In moments of peak tension during an action-suspense fiction, this muscular pattern will surface as a barely suppressed muscular tension in the viewer aiming at release in physical action" and wonders that "This enactive meaning is somehow fused with visual and verbal levels of meaning" (48). My answer to his wonderment is that the evolution of dream

rehearsal strategies finds utility in the cinema or in front of another screen, as film-watching permits the "enaction" that Torbal describes, although not necessarily on a conscious or sub-conscious level, but a biological, instinctive level. This possibility is exemplified by our attention to the non-realistic, dream-like animated film and our attention to those film auteurs we identify as purveyors of cinematic wisdom. There is no (and should never be) one universal, totalizing theory for human's relationship to the moving, sound-making screen image. Nor can we even hope for a common language. Rather, we should acknowledge and accept the many contributions, ranging from cultural to biological, that various theories, including evolutionary theory, can make. For humans operate in the realms of both the real and the imaginary, and as Gilles Deleuze said:

> We run in fact into a principle of indeterminability, of indiscernibility: we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to know. It is as if the real and the imaginary were running after each other" (1989: 7).

Indeed, if, for the sake of alliteration, I were to proceed from Deleuze and seek another D(ream), I should go back to the basis for this Cartesian attempt to explain screen imagery and invoke Descartes' seventeenth-century principle, 'I think, therefore I am', later appropriated by August Strindberg as "I dream, therefore I exist" (1968) and which I might today reformulate as "We dream in front of the screen, therefore we evolve."

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