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Berys Gaut's Failed Revival of Medium-Specificity
Aleksy Balotskiy

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Berys Gaut's Failed Revival of Medium-Specificity

I. Introduction

Most people concerned with the task of understanding art generally and art works specifically agree that we ought to have some kind of analytic framework which allows us to talk about art works and media. Of the many functions of talking about art works and media that such an analytic framework should be able to perform, some of the more important ones include explanation and evaluation. That is, any useful analytic framework should provide us with some guidelines as to what information is relevant in the explanation and evaluation of particular art works. Furthermore, any useful framework should also provide us with some principle that governs the conditions under which a medium constitutes an art form. Despite the general agreement about what an analytic framework for talking about art works and media should accomplish, there has been widespread disagreement about the specifics of the correct framework. One kind of framework that has received a lot of attention is the medium-specificity framework. Proponents of medium-specificity frameworks argue that in explaining and evaluating art works, one should pay special attention to the unique or distinctive properties of the medium of the art work. These unique or distinctive properties not only play a part in the explanation and evaluation of particular art works, but also in establishing media as independent art forms.

Although the recent attention received by medium-specificity frameworks has been largely negative,¹ one contemporary champion of medium-specificity frameworks, Berys Gaut, has emerged with his own, original medium-specific framework. In this paper, I

¹ See my appendix on Carroll for both an account of some of his more prominent arguments against medium-specificity, as well as a full bibliography of his relevant works.

first look at two historical examples of medium-specificity claims, those made by André Bazin and Rudolf Arnheim in their defense of film as an art form. After setting the stage with this exposition of some historical medium-specificity claims, I turn to a discussion of Gaut's original medium-specificity framework, paying particular attention to how Gaut adapts traditional medium-specificity claims. Once I have explained Gaut's framework, I will argue that it fails to satisfy the functions of medium-specificity frameworks given above in any interesting, non-trivial way, and thus fails as a plausible framework for the understanding of art works and media.

II. Traditional Medium-Specificity Claims

Medium-specificity claims have had a long history in the philosophy of art. Historically, medium-specificity claims have most often been invoked to legitimize emerging media as independent art forms. This legitimizing function was played most prominently by appeals to what theorists today call unique properties. Properties of a medium are unique to it if they appear only in that medium. Proponents of traditional medium-specificity claims and frameworks argue that if one can show that an emerging medium, such as film, possesses certain properties that are unique to it, then one can show that the emerging medium constitutes an independent art form. Furthermore, once one has established an emerging medium as an independent art form, appeals to unique properties of that medium can also ground claims about which particular art works in that medium are to be valued, as well as provide guidelines as to what the artist working in that medium ought to do with that medium. In the remainder of this section, I will

critically discuss several traditional medium-specificity claims made by two early film theorists, André Bazin and Rudolf Arnheim.

André Bazin

For Bazin, photographic media, such as photography and film, are media that are uniquely capable of objectively reproducing reality. He writes:

The photographic image is the object itself no matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value...it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model. (14, original emphasis)

While other media, such as painting, have often attempted to depict the objects of their paintings objectively, for Bazin this desire is a futile one. “No matter how skillful the painter,” writes Bazin, “his work [is] always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity” (12). This inescapable subjectivity comes about due to the way in which painters exert complete creative control over their creations. Photographic representations of objects, however, are not inherently subjective in this same way, for they come about partly due to mechanical processes, over which artists exert no control. A painter can, in some sense, realistically represent a horse on one of her canvases, in that her painting might faithfully reproduce what a horse looks like in real life. But a filmmaker, argues Bazin, can show us the horse itself. The filmmaker’s representation of a horse objectively reproduces that horse, whereas the painter’s representation of the horse merely provides a likeness of the horse that she was painting—if in fact she was painting an actual horse.

Photographic media are unique, then, in that they are able to objectively reproduce reality. There are at least two different photographic media, however, photography and film. Both objectively reproduce reality in the way described above, yet the photographer is only able to objectively reproduce one fixed moment at a time, whereas the filmmaker is able to objectively reproduce extended periods of time. For this reason, Bazin refers to film as “objectivity in time,” or, perhaps more intuitively, objectivity over time (14). “For the first time,” writes Bazin, “the image of things is likewise the image of their duration” (14). Because film is the medium uniquely capable of objectively reproducing reality over time, Bazin locates the aesthetic possibilities of film in this ability.

Rudolf Arnheim

Unlike Bazin, who appeals to film’s ability to objectively reproduce reality in order to legitimize it as an art form, Arnheim appeals to what he thinks is film’s *inability* to objectively reproduce reality. In his book *Film as Art*, Arnheim identifies a multitude of ways in which films not only fail to objectively reproduce reality, but also manage it transform it in a way that is distinctive of film. Films, argues Arnheim, are always limited to a single perspective. Each shot in a traditional photographic film comes from a single camera, which is only capable of providing the viewer one perspective—its own (9-10). One cannot stop a film and walk around the screen to see the other side of the projected scene, as one might be able to do with something like a tree or even a sculpture. Writing in the 1930s, Arnheim knew film as a black and white medium, whereas the world around him was obviously not black and white, but full of color. As a result, Arnheim argues that things which look dissimilar in real life, such as watermelons and blueberries,

might look more similar in a black and white film, since shades of gray don't differ as drastically as green and blue (15). These are only two of Arnheim's many examples of how films fail to objectively reproduce reality in their own distinct ways. Though I could go on, I think these two examples will suffice to sustain the remainder of my discussion of Arnheim.

For Arnheim, not only do films fail to objectively reproduce reality, but they fail to do so in ways that are unique to the film medium. It is in virtue of these particular failures of the film medium to reproduce reality that, Arnheim argues, film is capable of producing artistically significant works of art. Arnheim writes, "a film art developed only gradually when the movie makers began consciously or unconsciously to cultivate the *peculiar possibilities* of cinematographic technique" (35, emphasis mine). Although Arnheim disagrees with Bazin, then, about film's ability to objectively reproduce reality, he, like Bazin, nonetheless appeals to film's unique properties (or limitations) in order to legitimize film as an art form.

Unique Properties and Further Claims

As I have shown above, Bazin and Arnheim disagree with regards to which features of the film medium allow it to produce artistically significant works of art, thereby making it an independent art form. For Bazin, this possibility rests in film's ability to objectively reproduce reality, whereas for Arnheim this possibility rests in film's particular inability to objectively reproduce reality. Despite their disagreement regarding the nature of film's reproductive abilities, however, both Bazin and Arnheim believe that film is an art form because it can achieve artistic affects not possible in any other medium.

For both Bazin and Arnheim, these unique artistic affects are possible because the film medium possesses some property that is unique to it, whether that's the property of being able to objectively reproduce reality better than other media or to deviate and transform reality in a distinctively cinematic way.

From this starting point, Bazin and Arnheim also go on to make some further claims. These claims, likewise, appeal to the unique properties of the film medium. The most famous of these claims has to do with what artists ought to do in the film medium. Since Bazin thinks the aesthetic qualities of film are to be found in its ability to objectively reproduce reality over a period of time, he advocates a style of filmmaking that relies heavily on "realistic" techniques, such as the use of long takes and deep focus. By employing long takes, filmmakers capitalize on the time aspect of Bazin's claim that film is objectivity in time, whereas by employing deep focus, filmmakers capitalize on the objective aspect of that claim. Arnheim, on the other hand, advocates a style of filmmaking generally opposed to the kind of realism advocated by Bazin. Arnheim doesn't think there is anything artistic in objectively reproducing reality, so he calls for filmmakers to deviate as much as possible from reality.

But if filmmakers ought to do the kinds of things advocated by Bazin and Arnheim, then it seems to follow that for Bazin and Arnheim, the films that we ought to value will be quite different. In this sense, not only do Bazin and Arnheim provide normative guidelines for filmmakers, but they also provide criteria for determining which films are successful, and thus ought to be valued. Specifically, the films we ought to value are those films which exploit the unique properties of the film medium, whether that is objectively reproducing reality (for Bazin) or deviating and transforming reality (for

Arnheim). Films that fail to exploit the unique properties of the film medium are to be thought of as cinematic failures. That is, if Arnheim were to watch a film created by a filmmaker influenced by Bazin's views of the medium, he would deem that film a failure, for it fails to deviate from and transform reality in any artistically significant way. Likewise, if Bazin were to watch a film created by a filmmaker influenced by Arnheim's views of the medium, he would deem that film a failure, for it fails to objectively reproduce reality in any artistically significant way.

I have explained how two traditional medium-specificity theorists combine a set of medium-specificity claims to create a framework that allows them not only to determine whether or not a particular medium, film, constitutes an art form, but also to develop normative guidelines for artists working in the film medium, as well as criteria for which films should be thought of as artistic successes. Let me now turn to Gaut's more recent medium-specificity framework.

III. Gaut's Medium-Specificity Framework

Gaut's medium-specific framework is based on three central medium-specificity claims, the explanatory claim (MSX), the evaluative claim (MSV), and the constitutive claim (MSF). Gaut formulates these three claims as follows:

- (MSX) Correct explanations of some of the artistic properties of artworks refer to distinctive properties of the medium in which these artworks occur. (287)
- (MSV) Some correct artistic evaluations of artworks refer to distinctive properties of the medium in which these artworks occur. (286)

(MSF) For a medium to constitute an art form it must instantiate artistic properties that are distinct from those that are instantiated by other media. (287)

Since Gaut's explicit goal is to defend these three claims as both true and interesting medium-specificity claims, it will be instructive to briefly compare them to the claims made by Bazin and Arnheim. Traditional medium-specificity claims can be characterized by the way that they invoke the concepts of "medium" and "specificity," particularly as those concepts relate to the evaluation and explanation of particular art works. In traditional medium-specificity claims, the medium is not only the vehicle through which an artist communicates her ideas, but also a "genuinely explanatory" element of the art works that appear in that medium (Gaut 292). To be more precise, according to proponents of traditional medium-specificity claims, such as Bazin and Arnheim, the medium has *specific* features or properties that play a role in the explanations and evaluations of the art works in that medium. For Bazin and Arnheim, the specific features or properties of the medium that play a role in the explanations and evaluations of the art works that medium are those features or properties that are unique to the medium. In the case of film, the relevant unique features or properties, according to Bazin and Arnheim, are the ability or inability to objectively reproduce reality.

Looking at Gaut's three claims above, it's clear that Gaut puts a lot of stock in what he calls "distinctive properties." Although many theorists use the word "distinctive" synonymously with the word "unique," Gaut does not. Keeping this in mind, it makes sense to ask two general questions:

- (1) How does distinctiveness differ from uniqueness, and can claims which refer to distinctive properties be considered medium-specificity claims?
- (2a) What does Gaut's divergence from traditional medium-specificity claims accomplish, and (2b) are his medium-specificity claims theoretically superior to previous medium-specificity claims in virtue of this divergence?

The First Question: Gaut's Notion of Specificity

In section II, I characterized traditional medium-specificity claims partly by their appeals to unique properties. Gaut, however, denies that a claim or general framework must appeal to unique properties in order to count as medium-specific. Instead, he argues that one's claims or general framework need only appeal to what he calls differential properties.² A property is differential for Gaut if "it distinguishes one group of media, the target class, from another group of media, the contrast class" (291). Unique properties are a subset of differential properties, in which "there is only one member of the target class and the contrast class consists of all other media" (291). One might worry that broadening the scope of acceptable properties in this way might create problems for someone looking to defend a medium-specificity framework, but Gaut denies that this is the case. He writes:

² For Gaut, differential properties *are* distinctive, in that Gaut thinks that our "understanding of [distinctness] should be in terms of differential properties—properties that distinguish one group of media from another group, but that are not necessarily unique to any particular medium" (291-2). For the remainder of this essay, I will use the term "differential" in place of "distinctive."

The notion of differential properties provides a useful analytic framework for discussing the relations between different media, and provides us with the capacity to locate precisely which features figure, for instance, in explanations of the artistic properties of different art forms. (292)

According to Gaut, then, differential properties can do the same kind of work that unique properties can, but without any of the problems commonly associated with the use of unique properties. That is, Gaut thinks that a medium-specificity framework built upon differential properties can accomplish the same kinds of things that people like Bazin and Arnheim attempted to accomplish, all while avoiding the criticisms regularly leveled against traditional medium-specificity claims.³ The primary work that both differential and unique properties can do, according to Gaut, is twofold. First, differential and unique properties provide us with the capacity to locate precisely at least some of the features of a given medium that figure in explanations and evaluations of art works in that medium. Second, since differential and unique properties govern the conditions under which media constitute art forms, they provide us with the capacity to determine which media constitute art forms. For this reason, Gaut thinks that, in general, our “understanding of [distinctness or specificity] should be in terms of differential properties—properties that distinguish one group of media from another group, but that are not necessarily unique to any particular medium” (291-2).

³ For an overview of some arguments against traditional medium-specificity claims, see my appendix on Carroll.

The Second Question: The Superiority of Gaut's framework

I have already mentioned that much of the attention medium-specificity frameworks have received lately has been negative. The most vocal critic of medium-specificity has been Noël Carroll, who argues that media do not, in fact, possess any unique properties. Insofar as that's true, so long as proponents of medium-specific frameworks attempt to incorporate unique properties into their frameworks, those frameworks will be philosophically indefensible. Although the substance of those critiques is beyond the scope of this paper, it's worth noting that Gaut has taken some of the criticisms seriously enough to formulate his version of a medium-specificity framework without appealing to unique properties. In what looks like a clear nod to Carroll (and a rejection of at least some of the claims made by Bazin and Arnheim), Gaut concedes that "there are many false or uninteresting versions of [traditional] medium-specificity claims" (306). However, he thinks that his new medium-specificity framework, and MSX, MSV, and MSF in particular, are neither false nor uninteresting. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that this is not actually that case, and that MSX, MSV, and MSF, even if they are true, are uninteresting.

Gaut's Explanatory (MSX) and Evaluative (MSV) Claims

Gaut anticipates my argument against his medium-specificity framework, though he hasn't quite worked out its implications. He writes:

It might be thought that the substitution of differential for unique properties would eviscerate medium-specific claims of all interest, perhaps rendering them trivial. For if one can group media as one wishes into target and

contrast classes, then it may appear that there are no constraints on theory, unlike the uniqueness case, where only one grouping (one medium, contrasted with all other media) is mandated. (292)

For Gaut, the worry is that, as he puts it, the substitution of differential properties for unique properties eliminates any constraints on his theory. It's not clear exactly what this is supposed to be mean, but Gaut obviously does not see this as a problem, since he thinks that a framework built on differential properties is just as useful as a framework built on unique properties. I'm unconvinced of this. The ability to, as Gaut puts it, group media as one wishes *does* seem problematic, because it looks like that ability is going to eviscerate Gaut's medium-specificity claims of all specificity.

The evisceration of specificity from Gaut's framework follows directly from Gaut's definition of a differential property. Recall that for Gaut, a property is differential if it distinguishes one group of media from another group of media. It follows that *any* property of a medium can be differential. Consider the following two comparisons of film, literature, and painting.

(FL) Film is a medium which employs images. Some other media, such as literature, do not employ images. Thus, the employment of images is a differential property of film.

(FP) Film is a medium which employs images. Some other media, such as painting, also employ images. Thus, the employment of images is not a differential property of film.

Notice that both comparisons refer to the same property of film, the property of employing images. However, the very same property is differential in (FL) but not

differential in (FP). Whether a property is differential in Gaut's sense or not is context sensitive, depending on the specific parameters of the comparison being made.

Notice that the same is not true of unique properties. The uniqueness of a property in no way depends on the parameters of any particular comparison. A property of a medium either is or is not unique. That is, a property of a medium is either only possessed by that medium or not. No amount of creative comparison-crafting can make a unique property not unique or vice-versa. Presumably, this feature of unique properties is precisely why they have been employed in traditional medium-specificity frameworks. Unique properties are not context specific, thus enabling the proponent of a medium-specificity framework to assert unequivocally which specific properties of a medium are relevant in the explanation and evaluation of art works appearing in that medium.

This is a significant difference between differential and unique properties, and it seriously calls into question Gaut's claim that differential properties can be just as useful as unique properties when it comes to formulating medium-specificity frameworks. This is obvious when one reformulates MSX and MSV in light of the discussion of differential properties above. When one does this, one gets two claims which, contrary to Gaut's assertions, do in fact seem trivial, for they seem to claim nothing more than that *some* correct explanations and evaluations of art works refer to *some* properties of the media in which those art works appear. Not only do these two claims appear to be trivial, but they also fail to satisfy the useful theoretical roles that Gaut attributes to traditional medium-specificity frameworks. For Gaut, one of the primary functions of medium-specificity frameworks is to provide us with the capacity to locate precisely at least some of the features of a given medium that figure in explanations and evaluations of art works in

that medium. Differential properties, however, seem to fail at this function on even the most charitable readings of Gaut's claims.

Gaut's Constitutive (MSF) Claim

Gaut's third and final medium-specificity claim is the constitutive claim (MSF):

(MSF) For a medium to constitute an art form it must instantiate artistic properties that are distinct from those that are instantiated by other media. (287)

Insofar as MSF takes the same form as MSX and MSV, it appears to be open to the same criticism that I develop above. That is, if Gaut's use of the term "distinctive" in MSF is to be understood in terms of differential properties, then it seems to follow that MSF says nothing more than that for a medium to constitute an art form is must instantiate *some* artistic property. That hardly seems like a substantive medium-specificity claim, however, since it fails to pick out precisely which artistic properties of a given medium govern whether or not that medium constitutes an art form.⁴

There's good reason, however, to think that Gaut here has reverted to understanding "distinctive" in terms of unique, rather than differential, properties.⁵ For Gaut, MSF "fits naturally with the perspective of an artist confronted with a new medium" (300). He thinks that when an artist is confronted with a new medium, a natural question for her to ask is "what...can [I] do now that is of artistic interest that [I]

⁴ Furthermore, the claim is false, for reasons I give below.

⁵ This isn't entirely fair to Gaut, since he thinks that unique properties are a subset of differential properties. The important thing to note, however, is that MSX and MSV do not refer to unique properties at all, whereas MSF seems to only refer to unique properties.

could not do before?” (301). Notice how strange this question is if we take Gaut to be using the term “distinctive” in the way he’s been using it above, namely in the non-unique sense of “differential.” For a medium to instantiate a differential property is just for it to instantiate a property that distinguishes it from another medium. But if that property is merely differential (and not also unique), then it’s a property that is shared by some other medium. But if that’s the case, then it’s impossible for the artist confronted with a new medium to do anything that she couldn’t do before. To make sense of Gaut’s motivation for MSF, then, it appears necessary to understand “distinctive” in MSF in terms of unique properties. Since MSF refers to unique properties rather than differential properties, it’s not vulnerable to the criticism that I develop above. That being said, I think that MSF remains problematic.

As I noted above, MSF is most often invoked “when a theorist tries to show that an emerging medium constitutes an art form” (300). Although it may be the case that a principle like MSF is often invoked to defend emerging media as art forms, it seems instructive to ask whether or not it is in fact necessary to invoke such a principle. Carroll, for example, argues that a medium’s status as an art form can only be justified by appealing to “works of aesthetic excellence” that appear in that medium (“Medium Specificity Arguments” 19). Carroll argues theoretical principles like MSF are not compelling in the absence of actual examples of aesthetic excellence, for “if a medium has no compelling accomplishments...it is idle to claim it is an established art” (“Medium Specificity Arguments” 19).

Gaut rejects Carroll’s line of reasoning. If Carroll’s arguments are correct, argues Gaut, then it appears that one would be able to defend the ridiculous view that compact

discs are an art form. In support of this view, Gaut argues that one can point to the multitude of works of aesthetic excellence that have been recorded on compact discs. This, he thinks, is a bad argument, because “the fact that a medium contains great works does not show that the medium constitutes an art form. For a medium can contain *recordings* of great works, but is not thereby itself an art form” (301, original emphasis).

Gaut is clearly correct to deny that compact discs constitute an art form, but he’s wrong to think that such a conclusion is a consequence of Carroll’s view. Carroll can deny that compact discs constitute an art form because, as Gaut says, compact discs are “merely a storage medium,” and therefore there have been no works of aesthetic excellence produced in the compact disc medium (302). This might sound like Carroll is simply implicitly assuming something like MSF, but I’m unconvinced that that’s the case.

For Gaut, the relevant consideration for whether or not a medium is an art form is whether or not it instantiates any unique artistic properties. Compact discs fail in this respect, because they don’t instantiate any unique artistic properties. All compact discs do is store musical recordings, but that’s no different than what vinyl records, audiotapes, and MP3 files do. But notice that the compact disc medium fails not only to instantiate any *unique* artistic properties, but also to instantiate *any* significant artistic properties at all. An artist can’t employ the compact disc medium to produce an art work, because there are no artistic properties, unique or not, that the compact disc medium has independent of those works that are stored on it. That is, it may be the case that the musical recordings stored on a particular compact disc instantiate many significant artistic properties, but the compact disc itself instantiates only the property of storing musical recordings. But if a given medium, such as the compact disc medium, instantiates no

significant artistic properties independent of the works that are stored on it, then it follows that one can't do anything artistically significant in that medium. And if one can't do anything artistically significant in a given medium, then it follows that it's going to be impossible for anyone to point to any works of aesthetic excellence produced in that medium. But the inability to point to any works of aesthetic excellence produced in the compact disc medium is all that Carroll needs to say that compact discs do not constitute an art form. Carroll, then, can account for the fact that compact discs don't constitute an art form without having to appeal to something like MSF.

It should be noted that the inability of the compact disc medium to produce any significant art works doesn't follow from the fact that it fails to instantiate any unique artistic properties, as MSF states. In fact, it seems perfectly plausible that there exist media that instantiate no unique properties but are still capable of producing artistically significant works of art—by employing merely differential properties, for example. What those media have to do, however, is instantiate *some* artistic property, but there's no reason to think that the property has to be unique to that medium. One might think it strange that I've just reintroduced a claim that I earlier rejected as an uninteresting medium-specificity claim. Notice, however, that for me, this is a necessary condition for a given medium to constitute an art form, but it is by no means sufficient, like it would be on the medium-specific reading above. For a medium to constitute an art form it has to do more than simply instantiate some artistic property. In order to defend a medium as an art form, one has to be able to point to some works of aesthetic excellence in that medium that employs some artistic property of that medium. This condition is important because it seems odd to claim that there exist art forms that currently have no works of aesthetic

excellence that belong to them. The mere possibility of a medium being able to constitute an art form is not enough to show that the medium is, in fact, an art form, in the same way that the mere possibility that a lump of clay might be transformed into a sculpture is not enough to show that that lump of clay actually is a sculpture. What one needs in both of these cases is actual empirical evidence, which comes in the form of concrete examples of works of aesthetic excellence in those media that are vying for the status of art form, and not a theoretical principle such as MSF.

IV. Conclusion

Although medium-specificity frameworks have found a contemporary champion in Berys Gaut, his new medium-specificity framework fails to provide any interesting medium-specificity claims. All three of Gaut's medium-specificity claims are either trivial or unnecessary. Gaut's medium-specificity framework fails to be a plausible framework for the understanding of art works because it fails to make any non-trivial claims regarding what information is relevant in the explanation and evaluation of art works. Furthermore, Gaut's attempt to capture the conditions under which media constitute art forms turns out to be unnecessary, for it's possible to decide which media constitute art forms without having to appeal medium-specificity at all. As such, Gaut's framework fails to satisfy the functions assigned to medium-specificity frameworks by Gaut in any interesting, non-trivial way, and thus fails as a plausible framework for the understanding of art works and media.

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Appendix: Noël Carroll's Objections to Medium-Specificity Claims

For the last several decades, Noël Carroll has been the most vocal opponent of medium-specificity claims. Since I was not able to include many of his arguments regarding medium-specificity claims in the body of my departmental thesis, I thought it would be helpful to have an appendix in which I explain some of what I consider to be Carroll's most powerful objections to medium-specificity claims. Many of the arguments below will not be directly relevant to the argumentation that occurs within my thesis, but I hope that my discussion of them will provide some context to my debate with Berys Gaut, particularly with regards to some of the theoretical moves that Gaut makes, many of which I think he makes to avoid some of the criticisms below.

The problem of identifying the pertinent medium

To get this argument started, we're going to need to know something very basic about Carroll's view regarding what constitutes a medium. Carroll believes that if a medium is anything at all, then it must be something physical. Thus, if a particular art form possesses a medium, that medium will be some sort of physical thing, whether it is "the material stuff of which artworks are made" or the "implement used to produce an artwork" ("Forget the Medium!" 5). The problem, according to Carroll, is that on this conception of the medium, most, if not all, art forms cannot be said to have just one medium.

Consider the case of film. When we go to the movie theatre, we are likely to refer to anything that gets projected on the screen as a film, just as when we go to the Lucian Freud exhibit at the art museum, we are likely to refer to anything that hangs on the wall

as a painting. But films, like paintings, are not made out of one particular kind of thing. There exist, for example, a multitude of different types of film stocks that cinematographers can employ in the creation of a particular film, all of which will alter the recorded scene in their own unique way. Some will record the scene in color, whereas others will record the scene in black and white. Some will record the scene with lots of grain, whereas others will reduce the amount of grain. Furthermore, Carroll argues that one need not use film stock at all, as in the case of fully-digital films. Even if we exclude fully-digital films from consideration here, however, we still have to account for flicker films, which are “made by alternating clear and opaque leader, sans photographic emulsion” (“Defining the Moving Image” 51). Flicker films, then, like fully-digital films, also do not make use of any photographic film stock.

The medium-specificity theorist also cannot appeal to the camera as the physical thing that constitutes the medium of film, for one can make certain kinds of films, such as scratch films, that do not require the use of a camera at all (“Forget the Medium!” 6). In scratch films, the filmmaker scratches something directly onto the film stock, which can then be projected in the typical way. Stan Brakhage’s *Mothlight* (1963) similarly avoids the use of a camera. Instead of scratching something onto the film stock, Brakhage put leaves, dead insects, flower petals, and other things between two pieces of film, then ran that through an optical printer to create a film strip that could be run through a projector. Both of these processes completely bypass the use of a camera to record events that will be projected later, and yet they are still films, which Carroll thinks shows that the camera cannot be the film medium.

Although I have used the case of film above, it looks like Carroll is going to be to make the same argument when it comes to painting and many other art forms. Like film, Carroll argues that painting as an art form constituted by more than one medium. There is not, for example, just one kind of paint, but a multitude of different kinds of paint, such as oil paints, acrylic paints, watercolor paints, etc. Furthermore, there are many implements that one can use in painting, such as a paint brush, a spatula, or even a finger.

The upshot of Carroll's argument seems to be that given the multitude of physical things that one could choose as the physical thing to constitute the medium of a particular art form, choosing just one seems to be completely arbitrary. There is no principled reason to choose one physical medium over another to constitute a particular art form. Thus, art forms are not associated with a medium with a unique nature, but many possible media, hence the problem of identifying the pertinent medium.

Priority of artistic purpose and use of the medium

According to Carroll, one thesis that medium-specificity theorists hold is that the nature of a particular medium dictates how that medium ought to be used. The nature of the film medium, a medium-specificity theorist might argue, dictates that the film medium ought to be used to further X, where X stands in for whatever that theorist takes to be distinctive of the film medium. To do anything other than X with film, on this account, would be to misuse that medium, since the nature of the medium dictates that one should only further X.

When we actually look at the histories of particular art forms, however, we discover that often contradictory domains of development are grounded in one and the

same medium. Carroll illustrates this by pointing out that both the Russian montagists and the French realists found justification for their contradictory styles in the nature of the film medium. The montagists, who believed that film's emotional force came from the editing together or "collision" of two or more shots, appealed to film's "facility of juxtaposition" whereas the realists, who decried the kind of editing done by the montagists as manipulative and propagandistic, appealed to "the causal relation between image and referent" ("Medium Specificity Arguments" 13). In light of seemingly intractable disagreements such as the one above, Carroll urges us to invert the relationship between the medium and what is done with it. Whereas medium-specificity theorists argue that the nature of the medium determines how an artist ought to use that medium, Carroll argues that artists' use of a particular medium ought to determine how we conceive of that medium. As Carroll himself puts it, "it is our purposes that mold the medium's development and not the medium that determines our artistic purposes" ("Specificity of Media" 27). Our conception of the film medium, then, should not adjudicate between competing styles of filmmaking, such as montage and realism, but account for both of them.

The medium-specificity theorists, then, have it all backwards. The work of film theorists should not aim to discover the nature of the film medium, as it has for the past century. Instead, it should aim to find new possibilities for the medium. In fact, Carroll claims that "our interest in an art form is in large measure an interest in how artists learn or discover new ways of using their medium" ("Specificity of Media" 32). Thus, the medium-specificity project is actually at odds with our proper interest in art forms, and if

successful, would effectively eliminate one of our legitimate reasons for enjoying them, namely observing how they evolve over time.

Earlier, I discussed Carroll's rejection of the view that medium-specificity theorists have any principled way of deciding which medium out of many is the one on which they should base their claims. Carroll's argument in that section further complicates the notion that an art form's medium could dictate how an artist ought to use that medium. If the medium-specificity theorists are correct in arguing that each art form possesses a medium unique to it, and that that medium has a certain nature that governs how it is to be used, then the medium-specificity theorists must hold that each art form has only one such medium—"one such medium" in the sense that it is the one unique medium on which medium-specificity theorists can base their claims. If Carroll is correct, however, and art forms are made up of multiple media, the medium-specificity theorists run into a problem. Not only do the medium-specificity theorists have to sift through all the media that make up the art form in order to isolate the one, relevant medium, but they also have to show why the medium they chose is the one on which we should base their medium-specificity arguments. It's not clear, however, what criteria the medium-specificity theorists could employ to address the above concern.

The medium is not a tool

The argument that the medium ought to be seen as a kind of artistic tool is not an argument made by any actual medium-specificity theorist; however, Carroll believes that it is an unfavorable consequence of their views. Imagine, for example, a medium-specificity theorist saying something like the following:

The medium of X has a distinctive nature with specific capacities—ones that differentiate it from the media of other art forms—and it is precisely these possibilities that the artist ought to explore rather than the effects that are distinctive of the media that identify or individuate other art forms.

(“Medium Specificity” 37)

If an artist wishes to produce an artwork that does X, then, all the artist has to do is open up her copy of *Media for Dummies* and identify the medium that is best suited for handling X. Painting, for example, could be identified as the medium best suited for handling two-dimensionality. Or sculpture could be identified as the medium best suited for handling three-dimensionality. Carroll finds this characterization of the medium deeply problematic. He argues that a particular medium, such as the film medium, is not like a particular tool. Particular tools, such as Allen wrenches, have certain jobs to which they are best put to use, such as turning hexagonal screws. Artists, however, should use the medium in a multitude of ways, to explore all of the possibilities available to them, instead of trying to find one individual purpose for which a given medium is best adapted. Instead of comparing the medium to a tool, like an Allen wrench, Carroll thinks it’s more instructive to compare the medium to human beings. Human beings, unlike tools, “are not designed with a fixed function” and thus can adopt “a range of alternative, even competing, lifestyles” (“Specificity of Media” 36). So too can a medium be used for a range of alternative, even competing, artistic purposes.

Another way of thinking about this point is to remember that Carroll denies that the medium has a particular nature that dictates how one ought to use it. If a medium does not have such a dictating nature, however, then there’s no reason to think that the

medium can only be used for one purpose. Furthermore, as discussed above, not only *can* a particular medium be used for a range of alternative artistic purposes, but one of our legitimate reasons for enjoying a particular medium is precisely to see how it has evolved to be used for a range of alternative artistic purposes. If the medium was simply like a tool and could be characterized by a single, fixed purpose, then we would not be interested in its evolution over time.

Excellence, not efficiency, ought to be the measure by which we evaluate artworks

One positive implication of the medium-specificity view, according to Carroll, is that it appears to allow us to easily develop standards by which to evaluate art works. Good films, for example, are cinematic, which is to say that “they engage in and exploit the distinctive properties of the medium [of film]” (“Medium Specificity” 38). Bad films, on the other hand, are not cinematic, which is to say that “they have failed to take advantage of the special resources and distinctive capabilities of [the medium of film]” (“Medium Specificity” 38).

Keeping this evaluative framework in mind, we can articulate the concept of efficient filmmaking. An efficient filmmaker, in the course of creating a film, attempts to and succeeds in maximizing the film’s exploitation of the distinctive properties of the medium. An inefficient filmmaker, on the other hand, either fails to or does not even try to maximize the film’s exploitation of the distinctive properties of the medium. If we follow the precepts of the medium-specificity theorist, we ought to identify efficient filmmaking with good filmmaking, and inefficient filmmaking with bad filmmaking.

In practice, however, this way of thinking quickly runs into problems. As Carroll points out, as soon as a theorist develops an evaluative framework based on medium-specificity claims, like the one above, the opponent of medium-specificity can identify an art work that fails to meet the evaluative criterion, yet is almost universally lauded as an art work.

Carroll thinks that this is especially true of the history of film. Theorists such as the French realists who claim that the film medium dictates that films ought to be realistic, in the sense that they should employ long-take, deep-focus shots, have to account for how films like Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) have secured their place in the canon. Likewise, theorists such as the Russian montagists who claim that the film medium dictates that films ought to be rapidly edited have to account for how films like Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) have secured their place in the canon. This, according to Carroll, often leads to absurd results, such as theorists biting the bullet and arguing that canonical film classics do not really deserve their place in the canon.

The confusion, argues Carroll, arises out of the medium-specificity theorists' equivocation regarding the status of their theories. According to Carroll, medium-specificity theorists have pitched their theories as being both empirical hypotheses and *a priori*, or what Carroll calls analytic, definitions, sometimes not realizing that they equivocate between the two in the course of their theorizing ("Forget the Medium!" 5).

An empirical medium-specificity hypothesis might take the following form:

(EH) When looking at the history of film, we find that the best films are those that are made efficiently, which is to say that the best films are those

in which the filmmakers sought to and succeeded in maximizing the film's exploitation of the distinctive properties of the medium.⁶

An *a priori* definition would look very similar to the empirical hypothesis, only it would be stated in absolute terms, ignoring the history of film. An *a priori* definition, then, might take the following form:

(AD) The best films are those that are made efficiently, which is to say that the best films are those in which the filmmakers sought to and succeeded in maximizing the film's engagement in and exploitation of the distinctive properties of the medium.

Carroll identifies problems with both of these approaches. For example, if we take medium-specificity theorists to be articulating the empirical hypothesis, then we see that it is easily falsifiable, as shown above by the cases of *The Battleship Potemkin* and *The Rules of the Game*. On the other hand, if we take the medium-specificity theorists to be articulating the latter *a priori* definition, then it seems obvious that the medium-specificity theorists are simply begging the question. If there really do exist art works that are almost universally lauded, yet fail to meet the medium-specificity theorists' *a priori* definition, the medium-specificity theorists cannot simply appeal to the definition they've crafted. They must provide independent reasons for why the films in question should not be considered excellent, reasons that do not depend on their *a priori* definition.

⁶ Since I'm only offering a general formulation, I have kept this part of the hypothesis general. A theorist making an argument of this kind, however, would have to replace that general pronouncement with a specific description of what the distinctive properties of the medium are. This same point will apply below.

Thus, though it initially appears that the medium-specificity theorists' views allow us to easily develop standards by which to evaluate art works, what we actually find, argues Carroll, is that the medium-specificity theorists are able only to account for art works that match their theories. They are unable, however, to account for general excellence, which is what Carroll believes really matters. Simply being efficient, in the sense that the art work in question coheres to the medium-specificity theorists' theories, does not necessarily make an art work good, and the medium-specificity theorists' inability to account for this is a strike against their theories.

A summary of Carroll's view

Carroll believes that most if not all art forms with identifiable physical media do not have a single medium. Furthermore, even if medium-specificity theorists could isolate *the* single, relevant physical medium on which to base their claims, they would still run into problems. Media do not dictate how they ought to be used. The medium should not be put towards a single, identifiable purpose. Instead, our notion of what we can do with a medium—if we even need such a notion—ought to be based on what purposes artists have already used that medium for and what they may use it for in the future. What we will find when we make this kind of inquiry, however, is that no medium is put towards a single purpose. Instead, artists make use of particular media to achieve a multitude of artistic purposes.

When laid out in this way, we can see why Carroll thinks that the conclusions of medium-specificity theorists should be resisted. What medium specificity-theorists do, according to Carroll, is identify a single artistic purpose out of many, such as the

reproduction of reality in the case of film or the exploration of flatness in the case of painting, and claim that *that particular* artistic purpose is the only one dictated by the nature of the medium and thus worth pursuing. However, if we take on board what Carroll has to say, then it appears that all determinations of this sort will “inevitably [be] informed by one’s own prior stylistic preferences” (“Forget the Medium!” 7). Instead of celebrating the multitude of artistic purposes to which a single medium could be put, medium-specificity theorists, on Carroll’s view, arbitrarily choose the one artistic purpose that most closely aligns with their aesthetic preferences, and restrict the entire art form which makes use of that medium to that one artistic purpose.

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