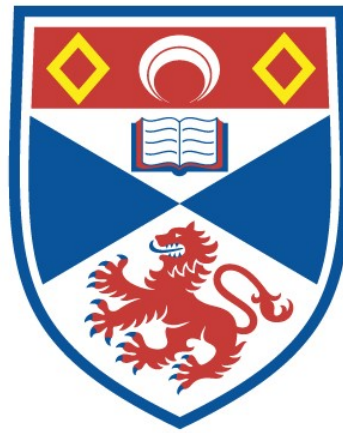# REMEMBER THE MEDIUM!

FILM, MEDIUM SPECIFICITY, AND RESPONSE-DEPENDENCE

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2020

Remember the Medium!

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St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

at the University of St Andrews

September 2019

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Abstract

Medium specificity is a theory, or rather a cluster of arguments, in aesthetics that rests on the idea that media are the physical material that makes up artworks, and that this material contains specific and unique features capable of 1) differentiating media from one another, and 2) determining the aesthetic potential and goals of each medium. As such, medium specificity is essential for aestheticians interested in matters of aesthetic ontology *and* value. However, as Noël Carroll has vehemently and convincingly argued, the theory of medium specificity is inherently flawed and its many applications in art history ill-motivated. Famously, he concluded that we should 'forget the medium' entirely. In this thesis, I reject his conclusion and argue that reconstructing a theory of medium specificity, while taking Carroll's objections into account, is possible. To do so, I offer a reconceptualization of the main theoretical components of medium specificity and ground this new theory in empirical research. I first redefine the medium not as the physical material that makes up artworks but as sets of practices – not the material itself but how one uses the material. I then show that what makes media specific and unique is not certain physical features, but the human responses, which can be empirically investigated, to the combination of practices that constitute media. This relation is one of response-dependence, albeit of a novel kind, which I develop by appealing to social metaphysics. The resulting theory is more complex but also much more flexible and fine-grained than the original and provides insight into a variety of current aesthetic theories.

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Introduction

❖ **Background**

It is common in contemporary aesthetics to differentiate between art and the physical conditions that make art possible. Arthur Danto's famous 'exhibit of indiscernibles' thought experiment introduced to analytic aesthetics the idea that the material that makes up an artwork is fundamentally distinct from the artwork.[1] In fact, the same physical stuff could make up completely different artworks. It could even make up something that is not an artwork at all. There could be six identical red and square paintings next to each other, as in Danto's example, yet four of them could be completely different artworks (one a landscape, one a 'metaphysical' painting, another a minimalist work, and the last one, a still life); one could be an artefact with no aesthetic value but art-historical value (in virtue of the fact that it was a canvas prepped in red lead by Giorgione); one could have no value at all apart from the contextual value of being considered in an exhibition next to these other paintings – in reality that last one is simply a piece of treated cloth with red paint on it. This idea, namely that the physical material does not *make* the artwork, has had diverse and ground-breaking consequences in aesthetics, some of which will be explored in this thesis. The question that most naturally follows from the realization that the physical material does not make the artwork is this: if the relation between the physical material and the artwork is not one of identity, what is the nature of this relation? In a sense, this thesis is an attempt to answer this question.

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[1] Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Common Place,* 1-3.

One of the more intuitive ways of cashing out the complex relation between the artwork and the physical structure of the artwork has been to talk about the medium. The relation between an artwork and its medium is commonly understood as a physical one: the medium provides a set of material and tools which can be transformed, into an artwork. The medium *mediates* between raw, unorganised material and art. However, there is another common understanding of medium, which is confusingly similar to the term 'artform'. We talk about the medium of painting or the medium of film. And so, it seems that the medium refers both to the physical components of art as well as the categories of art constituted by these sets of physical components. Because of this inherent ambiguity, finding an answer to the relation question by appealing to the medium is not so simple.

Some have tried, however, by using a notion called 'medium specificity'. The goal of this notion is to establish a dependence relation between the physical material and the artwork. More specifically, the idea is that the physical material, while distinct from the artwork, sets certain constraints that determine what the artwork can and cannot be. In virtue of what medium it belongs to, an artwork must be a certain way to be a successful instance of that medium. To put it plainly, a painting, in order to be an artwork belonging to the artform of painting, cannot be made of pixels, it must be made of paint. Paint is one of the unique and specific constituents of painting that makes it the medium it is because no other medium has access to it. Paint is the reason why there are great paintings, as trivial as this may sound.

In that sense, Danto's four red squares belong to the *artform* of painting because they rely on the *medium* of painting. But what about the other two pieces exhibited in Danto's exhibit, i.e. Giorgione's prepped canvas and the piece of cloth painted red? It seems like these also rely on the medium of painting and yet cannot belong to the

artform of painting. Here lies one of the many issues with the notion of medium specificity. If appealing to medium specificity cannot give us a distinct way of thinking about the relation between the physical material and art, as opposed to the relation between the physical material and something that is not art, then medium specificity is no answer to the relation question at all. However, this is an oversimplification of the issue, which could lead us to dismiss this odd but important notion entirely.

To better understand medium specificity, we must look at its theoretical journey, which is a strange and winding one. As will be detailed in chapter 1, the German Enlightenment thinker Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is thought to have been the first to formulate the notion of medium, and subsequently to have made the first medium specificity claims.[2] The notion, which is not yet referred to as 'medium specificity' when Lessing discusses it, reappears with the birth of cinema, at the turn of the twentieth century. Then, a new community of film practitioners, theorists, critics and so on, was formed. This community had to organize itself in relation to other art communities. But it faced a challenge. These practitioners, theorists and critics wanted to differentiate themselves from these other art communities to show their importance and value as a group of their own, while also show that their object of practice and study was on the same level as that of other communities – that film was just as much an artform as painting, music and so on.

A straightforward way to do this is to argue that the medium of film, i.e. the physical stuff that makes up film, has unique and specific artistic potential. Just like paint is a great material that can be used to be make beautiful artworks, cinematography, editing, and so on, can be used to make beautiful artworks that are

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[2] Lessing, *Laocoön.*

unlike any other artworks out there. Over the course of the twentieth century, the film community used medium specificity arguments against other art communities who refused to see film as an artform, but also against each other. These disputes within the film community concerned the basic features of film. Different theorists and practitioners could not agree on which of those were specific and unique enough to make the entire medium of film a specific medium. By this point, medium specificity had become exclusively debated within the film community and increasingly obscure to other artistic communities.

Noël Carroll then set out to debunk the medium specificity arguments made about film and he did so successfully.[3] Aestheticians have dismissed, or at best ignored, the medium ever since Carroll told them to 'forget the medium'. But the medium was by no means forgotten entirely within the academic community. Media studies, albeit a much younger subject than philosophy, is an interdisciplinary field that has been relying on the methods of sociology, anthropology, psychology, literary studies, as well as philosophy, to study media, what they are, how they appear, how they interact, etc. There, the medium is certainly not forgotten. This suggests that, in important ways, finding a better solution to the medium specificity problem is a methodological issue. There is no reason to think that academics in media studies are misguided when they choose to focus on this phenomenon. Simply because Carroll brought up some strong objections to a certain conceptualisation of the phenomenon does not mean that a better conceptualisation is unavailable. Being open to different methodologies and theoretical strategies is therefore essential to look past Carroll, towards an improved understanding of the medium and medium specificity.

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[3] See Carroll, 'Forget the Medium', 'The Specificity of Media in the Arts', *Theorizing the Moving Image.*

Moreover, in chapter 1, I show that film theorists and practitioners who relied on medium specificity arguments failed to respond to important objections because the notion of medium embedded in these arguments was itself flawed. At the same time, these film theorists and practitioners relied on their own experiences and preferences regarding film to promote the features (which would be physical given the assumption that media are first and foremost physical objects) they believed to be specific to film. In other words, they were committing inductive fallacies. We might be tempted to think that when philosophers, instead of film theorists and practitioners, discuss the notion of medium specificity, they will not make the same methodological mistakes and that they will recognize when inductive fallacies are taking over claims of the specificity and uniqueness of certain features of media. I personally find this thought quite dubious. While the film community did perpetuate a flawed theory about the medium of film, it would be naïve to think that the members of that community do not have the practical and theoretical knowledge to help in the reconstruction of this theory. Similarly, media studies have made more advancements in the field than philosophy ever has and they did so with the help of a multitude of methodological approaches, many of which are empirical. As such, a properly established set of methodological commitments is indispensable to reconstructing a theory of medium specificity in philosophy.

❖ **Methodology**

➢ *Theory Construction and Conceptual Analysis*

This project should be understood as one of theory reconstruction. The prefix – *re-*construction – is justified as the aim of the project is in part to revise the notion of medium specificity as it has been theorised. But the phrase 'theory construction' itself

is not innocent. It refers to a specific methodological approach, which Kendall Walton describes as a widespread activity, common to philosophers, scientists and even the folk.[4] At its core, theory construction relies on the assumption that human beings, regardless of whether they are philosophers, scientists or folk, seek to understand the world. Thus, they collect data about it, in one form or another. Once this is done, they set about 'organising the data in a perspicuous manner, devising conceptual structures, constructing theories, to clarify and explain the data'.[5] This, essentially, is theory construction. But as Walton recognizes, this approach is not the norm in analytic philosophy. Philosophers working in this tradition have often favoured another method, namely conceptual analysis. Murray Smith describes conceptual analysis straightforwardly as aiming 'to clarify or elucidate the individual concepts, or the conceptual frameworks, by which we understand the world'.[6] He also sums up the difference between conceptual analysis and theory construction quite clearly. According to him, it comes down to a difference in direction of movement between a concept or conceptual framework and the world, and a difference in terms of which one is meant to inform the other. In the case of conceptual analysis, 'goods move only in one direction – aesthetics sets the terms (the conceptual framework) within which empirical research must operate'.[7] In short, the world has little say in the formation of concepts. Instead, they are informed by *a priori* analysis, usually in the shape of intuitions. However, in the case of theory construction, the information goes both

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[4] Walton, 'Aesthetics – What? Why? and Wherefore?'

[5] *Ibid.*, 151.

[6] Smith, *Film, Art and the Third Culture,* 26.

[7] *Ibid.*, 27.

ways: the conceptual framework can inform the empirical research, but the empirical research also informs the conceptual framework independently. Some might reject this understanding of conceptual analysis on account of it being too narrow. Taken literally, conceptual analysis is concerned with analysing and defining our concepts. Part of this project is also to analyse the concept of medium as it has been understood and update our definition. Thus, I am happy to accept a broader understanding of conceptual analysis. However, I am not certain that it truly reflects the philosophical practice. For one, this broad understanding is just that – too broad, and too vague. It does not specify what method is to be followed, i.e. whether concepts should be investigated *a priori* or *a posteriori*. Choosing one or the other depends on a very important assumption about the nature of concepts. Conceptual analysis as it has been practiced, that is narrowly, has assumed that concepts were not simply our mental representations of worldly objects, but abstract entities to be studied on their own. On the other hand, some are attempting to 'naturalize' conceptual analysis to make it compatible with empirical research. Christopher Hitchcock has suggested something along these lines and recently Edouard Machery has devoted a chapter to this enterprise.[8] Accordingly, Machery claims that

> concepts are psychological entities and the distinction between what is constitutive of a concept and what is not is drawn in psychological terms; conceptual analysis does not deliver a priori, analytic truths about the world, but empirical propositions about the mind; and it calls for an empirical, including experimental, methodology, which I will call "the method of cases 2.0".[9]

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[8] Hitchcock, 'Conceptual Analysis Naturalized' and Machery, *Philosophy Within its Proper Bounds.*

[9] Machery, *Philosophy within its Proper Bounds,* 209.

This is quite promising. But for now, I choose to stick with theory construction for several reasons. First, it is more widely endorsed, especially in aesthetics. Given how recent Machery's naturalized conceptual analysis is, I am still unsure whether it is a truly viable path. Second, theory construction has larger aspirations. Its goal is to build structured models that are empirically informed. Within these models, we will find concepts as Machery understands them. But while theory construction has a plan for these concepts Machery does not. So maybe, if there is a place for naturalized conceptual analysis in this project, it is subsumed under theory construction.

Several topics in aesthetics have been reinvestigated as theory construction projects. There is for instance work on imagination and the paradox of fiction[10], aesthetic attention[11], emotions and aesthetic appreciation[12], and so on. I believe a similar rebooting is necessary for the medium and medium specificity. In the early work on the notion presented in the first chapter, we shall see that the medium was only investigated conceptually. Certain necessary and sufficient conditions were attached to this concept and this is how the claim of medium specificity came to be. But as we will see, this approach failed. To obtain the best possible explanation of the medium, and as a result of medium specificity, it needs to be investigated under a theory construction project, not under a conceptual analysis project.

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[10] See Weinberg and Meskin, 'Puzzling over the Imagination'.

[11] See Nanay, 'Aesthetic Attention' and *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception.*

[12] See Prinz, 'Emotion and Aesthetic Value'.

➢ *Naturalism and Explanatory Pluralism*

Another reason why theory construction is attractive is that it is embedded in a larger philosophical project, namely methodological naturalism. According to Smith,

> to approach some phenomenon naturalistically is to seek to place and explain it within the natural order, while the rational-empirical methods of science – framing hypotheses, seeking evidence, considering alternative hypotheses and countervailing evidence – are, on this view, our best bet in realizing this aim.[13]

This fits perfectly with the aim outlined above. If the medium is a natural phenomenon, then it manifests itself within the natural order, in this case at the intersection between certain objects and the human mind. But saying that the medium is a natural phenomenon to be investigated under methodological naturalism lacks precision. A further question to ask is 'what kind of natural phenomenon is the medium and what kind of naturalism should we endorse to investigate it?'.

According to Smith, 'the explanatory ambition of naturalized aesthetics need not be understood as a search for covering laws that govern aesthetic and artistic phenomena, but rather as a search for singular causal explanations of such phenomena'[14]. I do not interpret Smith as saying that it is metaphysically impossible to find laws governing aesthetic and artistic phenomena. The idea is rather that a singular explanation is more fulfilling than a general one in the case of aesthetic and artistic phenomena. This is also advocated by Liao, who argues that aesthetic phenomena require pragmatist and pluralist explanations.[15] Liao reminds us that there are different

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[13] Smith, *Film, Art and the Third Culture,* 22.

[14] *Ibid.*, 220.

[15] Liao, 'Explanations: Aesthetic and Scientific'.

levels of explanation on which one could focus when building a theory. To make this claim, he draws on the view of explanatory pluralism in philosophy of science.[16] Ideally, we would have higher level (e.g. general laws) and lower level explanations (e.g. local recurring events) for all natural phenomena. But pragmatically, what is explanatorily more powerful for a theory of media might be lower level explanations. Thus, we need a method that targets these low level, singular explanations.

To answer the second part of the question, i.e. what kind of naturalism is required to investigate this type of natural phenomena, I turn briefly to the field of epistemology, where most of the debate on naturalism and its extension to philosophy can be found. I do not do so for the sake of illustration as I consider the issue to be one of metaphilosophical interest first, not just of epistemological interest. It is a fact of philosophical history that epistemology was the first field to be 'naturalized', in the modern sense.[17] And although the trend has now reached other fields such as aesthetics, the debate is still overwhelmingly concentrated in epistemology. In fact, it seems that a few of the issues discussed today in metaphilosophy can be traced back to epistemology. However, this is a simplistic understanding of metaphilosophy, and I believe that to properly fulfil its mission, i.e. scrutinize all of our philosophical practices and provide objective feedback, metaphilosophy should be an independent field. Thus, I will discuss naturalized epistemology briefly, but my goal in the long run is to uproot the discussion and make it relevant and applicable to any field of philosophy, with the appropriate adjustments.

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[16] See Mitchell, *Unsimple Truths* and Mantzavinos, *Explanatory Pluralism.*

[17] See Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized'.

In this discussion, epistemologists disagree about the extent to which their discipline should be naturalized, i.e. the extent to which scientific methods should be integrated with philosophical ones. Some have argued for the extreme view, identified as 'replacement naturalism'[18], while others favour the moderate view, i.e. 'cooperative naturalism'. The extreme view, which is Quine's originally, reduces epistemology to 'a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science'[19]. If we extend this to other areas of philosophy, we get the view that philosophy has all of the same goals, and thus should have all of the same methods, as natural science. Applied to aesthetics, the equivalent view would be that aesthetic phenomena are entirely reducible to scientifically observable phenomena. But having concluded just before that the medium might not be a phenomenon scientifically observable in the same way that, for instance, earthquakes and rusting are, the replacement view does not quite suit this project.

The moderate view, therefore, is more plausible. But again, it needs to be adjusted to aesthetics. Simply put, cooperative naturalism holds that, while objects of epistemological investigation are not reducible to those of scientific investigation, empirical information can help. To many philosophers, this will sound like a platitude. After all, many use common sense empirical information to motivate certain philosophical claims. But as we will see in chapter 1, if we investigate the medium and medium specificity this way, i.e. by using common sense empirical information to build our theory, we are at the mercy of many inductive fallacies, sampling biases and so on. Early proponents of medium specificity relied heavily on common sense empirical

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[18] Named as such by Kornblith, *Naturalizing Epistemology*, to refer to Quine's thesis.

[19] Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized', 82.

information and made aesthetic claims based on the fact that paintings are two-dimensional, or that film is a photographic medium and that editing has expressive powers. I shall present these arguments and their failures in detail in chapter 1. And so I warn ahead of time that this version of cooperative naturalism will not do either. Instead, to stay true to theory construction, we need an understanding of cooperative naturalism which accepts that philosophers take their cue directly from empirical information.

Putting the extension question aside, another point epistemologists disagree on is which of the sciences are relevant for philosophy, if we agree that they are. In aesthetics, philosophers have been especially suspicious about neuroscience and its possible contribution to the field. John Hyman, for instance, has famously criticized the work of V. S. Ramachandran and Semir Zeki, who pioneered the field of neuro-aesthetics.[20] On top of debunking Ramachandran and Zeki's examples, Hyman points out how reductionist their approach is. Ramachandran did claim to have found '[a] universal rule or 'deep structure', underlying all artistic experience' and 'a common denominator underlying all types of art' located in the brain.[21] What he is after is clearly a strict law, not even a *ceteris paribus* law. Given what we have just established about the pluralism of aesthetic explanation, this is unacceptable and would still be even if the claim was plausible.

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[20] See Hyman, 'Art and Neuroscience', Ramachandran and Hirstein, 'The Science of Art' and Zeki, 'Inner Vision'.

[21] Ramachandran and Hirstein, 'The Science of Art', 16.

➤ *Triangulation and Cognitive Media Theory*

But does this mean that neuroscience is off the table altogether? I do not believe so. In line with explanatory pluralism, we should accept evidence from different sources and see what place it will or will not take in the resulting theory. Smith has devised an approach which does just this. He calls it 'triangulation' and it 'involves locating or "fixing" the object in explanatory space by (to follow the metaphor) projecting lines from each body of evidence, and following them to see where they intersect'.[22] The bodies of evidence he chooses to include are phenomenological, psychological and neurophysiological. His justifies his choice by showing that each body is crucial to understanding a particular experience, while still being limited in their explanatory power. Forgoing phenomenological evidence would be giving up on a central aspect of what it is to have an experience. Yet, phenomenological evidence is fallible, which is where psychological evidence can pick up the slack. But again, psychological evidence is often open to different interpretations and psychologists are cautious in their conclusions. This is why neuroscience merits inclusion, for those cases where there is simply no telling 'from the outside' what hypothesis the phenomenological and psychological evidence point to. Still, to those who might be tempted to bypass the other bodies of evidence and go straight to the neuroscience, Smith issues a well-known warning: without phenomenal and psychological hypotheses 'neural activity remains theoretically "meaningless" – that is, it remains just a description of brain activity'.[23] Regardless of what does the theoretical triggering, i.e. whether the phenomenon to theorize is first observed phenomenologically, psychologically or

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[22] Smith, *Film, Art and the Third Culture*, 60.

[23] *Ibid.*, 65.

neurologically, we will need the help of all fields and their respective methods to draw near a complete theory. The reason for this, as Smith sums up well, is that 'phenomenology is elusive and intangible; psychology ungrounded and unconstrained; neuroscience blind and inert', hence the co-dependence.

In the interdisciplinary spirit of triangulation, but also in line with the requirements of explanatory pluralism, I will explore different areas of research with potential information about cinematic responses. I will also outsource some of the exploring to a flourishing discipline, namely cognitive media theory. Tim J. Smith defines it as 'an approach to analysing film that bridges the traditionally segregated disciplines of film theory, philosophy, psychology and neuroscience'.[24] Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham add four characteristics, which are particularly interesting:

> a dedication to the highest standards of reasoning and evidence in film and media studies and other fields (including, but not limited to, empirical data from the natural sciences); (2) a commitment to stringent inter-theoretical criticism and debate; (3) a general focus on the mental activity of viewers as the central (but not only) object of inquiry; and (4) an acceptance of a naturalistic perspective, broadly construed.[25]

The interdisciplinarity of their methodology stands out especially well in this passage. As such, I will rely on cognitive media theory as an approach that is itself methodologically pluralist and, in order to reconstruct a theory of media and medium specificity, on the work of those who have implemented this approach. [26]

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[24] T. J. Smith, 'Audiovisual Correspondences in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander* Nevsky' in *Cognitive Media Theory,* 85.

[25] Nannicelli and Taberham, *Cognitive Media Theory,* 4.

[26] Some of the main figures here are Bordwell, Carroll, Tim J. Smith and Murray Smith.

❖ Outline

This thesis begins with a rather narrow issue in aesthetics, namely the role of medium specificity in discussions of film as art. However, as I unpack the topic, its uses throughout the history of film theory and its many issues, medium specificity does not look so narrow anymore. In fact, I conclude this thesis by detailing the many important consequences an appropriate theory of medium specificity could have for some of the most fundamental theories in contemporary aesthetics, as well as for some ideas that will indubitably occupy the minds of aestheticians for the years to come.

The first chapter is dedicated to the historical background of the medium and medium specificity. I recount the birth of the notion of medium itself, as well as its context in the German Enlightenment. As we shall see Lessing, in his essay, *Laocoön,* not only introduces the notion of medium, but makes the first medium specificity claims regarding painting and poetry. While Lessing's contemporaries certainly engaged with his ideas, and this dialogue merits a more precise historical analysis, I then jump ahead to the turn of the twentieth century to examine the early film theorists' arguments regarding the specificity of film. I present the arguments from those who did not consider film to have any artistic potential, which triggered medium specificity arguments about film in the first place. As the status of film as art is no longer contested in the post-war era, medium specificity arguments remain but take on new forms and new advocates, such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Their positions vary in interesting ways from those of their predecessors and as such are also confronted with different difficulties. The last part of this chapter is dedicated to Noël Carroll's extensive efforts to eliminate talks of medium specificity from film theory and philosophy of film. His arguments, while convincing, lead to an unpalatable conclusion, namely to forget the medium altogether.

Chapter 2 aims to respond to Carroll's objections by reconstructing the concepts underlying medium specificity that led to the problems he identified, namely the medium itself, as well as the basic constituents that make up the medium. I argue against the physical conception of the medium and show that an alternative conception, namely the set-of-practices construal, not only resists Carroll's objections but provides us with a theory of media and medium specificity that is explanatorily more powerful than the original version. Unfortunately, as we shall see, the new theory lacks one crucial component compared to the old one, namely a naturalistic basis. With the old theory, the dependence relation between artform and medium was straightforwardly physical. With the new theory, the artform depends on practices, which, as we shall see, are a lot more flexible than the physical material. Given this, a medium cannot be specific and unique because of its practices, which undermines medium specificity itself.

In chapter 3, I look for a substitute naturalistic basis for medium specificity. If the physical material of a medium is not specific enough to ground medium specificity, then perhaps human responses to the practices of media are. In keeping with the spirit of the methodological commitment just made, I present a variety of empirical work conducted in variety of scientific disciplines investigating our responses to the medium of film and its basic constituents. As we shall see, the phenomenon of attention, which is complex and still under extensive research, is perhaps the most important one when it comes to human responses to film. I detail how this applies to some of the most discussed constituents of film such as cinematography, editing and narration. Given the extent of the research available on this topic, my aim for chapter 3 is to simply present some of that research in an organised fashion, fitting for the purpose of reconstruction a theory of media and medium specificity.

Chapter 4 is then dedicated to integrating what we learn in chapter 3 into the new theory. So far, the idea has been that human responses to film and its basic constituents can be a naturalistic basis on which to ground the specificity of the film medium. Therefore, the dependence relation we could establish between responses and the medium is straightforwardly one of response-dependence. However, the variety of those responses is overwhelmingly large. As such, before establishing any kind of dependence relation between those responses and the medium itself, we need to make some distinctions. Based on the research of chapter 3, I identify two types of responses, namely biologically determined and socially determined responses. This in turn leads to a hybrid form of response-dependence that can accommodate both type of responses. Finally, I end chapter 4 with a reformulation of medium specificity, which concludes the theory reconstruction project motivating this thesis.

However, this is not the end of the story. It is one thing to remember the medium, but it is another to reintegrate the medium into aesthetics. The reconstructed theory of media and medium specificity developed in chapters 2-4 has some important consequences for contemporary aesthetic theories. This is why in chapter 5 – the final chapter – I explore the various theories and debates that would be impacted by the integration of my theory in aesthetics. I look at some debates that have existed for a long time in the field, e.g. definitions of art, criticism, as well as some much newer ones, e.g. the art and craft distinction, creativity, style. What I show is that an adequate theory of media and medium specificity is essential to fully understand these phenomena and produce theories powerful enough to capture their complexity. Medium specificity is not simply one amongst many interesting theories in aesthetics. It is in fact embedded in the very fabric of the field.

Chapter 1 What is medium specificity, and how does it apply to film?

1.1 Introduction

The notion of medium specificity was not born with film but was antecedent to it by many years. To illustrate this, the first section of this chapter will be focused on the initial formulations of the notion and its different commitments. Nonetheless, the most developed and interesting discussions regarding medium specificity appear in the writings of film theorists, and what is most peculiar about this fact is that throughout the history of film theory, independently of some the important theoretical turns, the appeal to medium specificity by film theorists is almost systematic. So not only has this notion been most widely applied to film theory, it is also everywhere in film theory. The second section of the chapter will explore the motivations of film theorists to appeal to the notion in the first place and then to continue to do so as the medium of film itself evolves. Finally, bearing in mind this history of medium specificity, I will present recent objections to the notion of medium specificity, most notably those of Noël Carroll, and draw the apparent conclusions for this notion.

1.2 Origins of Medium Specificity

To understand the film theorists' arguments about the medium specificity of film, we must turn to its first formulations. Not only will we find a number of similarities between the eighteenth-century formulation of medium specificity, and its appropriation by early and mid-twentieth-century film theorists, but also recognize analogous attitudes and methods. So let's turn to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's treatise

from 1766, *Laocoön.* Subtitled *An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,* Lessing's text is an attempt to determine the specific and distinct effects of these two art forms on their audiences, as well as the aesthetic ends and values of each, given their specific effects. Lessing's essay is named after the Hellenistic statue of *Laocoön and His Sons,* also referred to as the Laocoön Group. It represents an episode of the Trojan Wars, recounted by Virgil in the *Aeneid,* in which a Trojan priest, Laocoön, and his two sons are killed by two serpents for attempting to prevent the Trojans from falling into the trap laid by the Greeks. Lessing uses this specific example to discuss the differences between artforms. While both Virgil's poem and the statue deal with the same subject, they do so with very different artistic constraints. This leads Lessing to discuss which artforms is better suited to the subject matter. Overall, the *Laocoön* is fundamental to the field of aesthetics, and more precisely to the study of medium specificity because it introduces two things: first, a new conception of art, and second, the notion of the medium itself. Both of these will be key in the efforts of early film theorists to legitimize film as an art.

Image 1-1 Laocoön and His Sons

Let's start with Lessing's conception of art. I say 'conception' instead of 'definition' as Lessing is offering a general idea of how we should understand art rather than a precise set of conditions to determine whether a particular object is an artwork. We can begin by gaining insight on Lessing's text by considering the historical and literary context of the *Laocoön*. Lessing, an Enlightenment thinker, was trying to demarcate himself from a deeply rooted trend in the philosophy of art, dating back to Simonides of Ceos, 'the first person to compare painting with poetry, [was] a man of fine feeling who observed that both arts produced a similar effect upon him'[27], and to Horace's famous line '*ut pictura poesis'*, which implied that poetry should be considered, interpreted and valued on par with painting.[28] However, as Rensselaer W. Lee notes, the idea of a correspondence between painting and poetry was mostly developed by Renaissance artists and critics, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Charles du Fresnoy, Ludovico Dolce, or Gian Paolo Lomazzo, who wrote treatises on the question as well as exemplified it in their artistic practices.[29] So when Lessing sought to highlight the differences between painting and poetry, he was attacking a theory established long before him.[30] Nonetheless, the correspondence theory, as it came to be known, still had sympathisers during the Enlightenment period. Therefore, Lessing might have been directly addressing, among others, his contemporary Charles Batteux, who argued

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[27] Lessing, *Laocoön,* 3.

[28] 'As is painting, so is poetry', Fairclough, *Horace.* For a more precise interpretation of Horace's famous phrase, see the translator's introduction to Lessing's *Laocoön,* xii.

[29] Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis.*

[30] It is important to note that Lessing was not alone in that project. Most notably, James Harris's *Three Treatises* was influential for the *Laocoön.*

in his treatise *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle,* published twenty years earlier than the *Laocoön,* in 1746, that we can simplify the study of normative aesthetics to one activity, i.e. the imitation of beautiful nature.[31] The consequence, according to Batteux, is that all arts share the same ends and should try to achieve the same effects. This is a systematic, or unifying, conception of art, based on the definition of art 'x is a work of art if and only if x imitates beautiful nature'. [32] Lessing, on the other hand, has a pluralist conception of art, where 'the signs of art must […] bear a suitable relation to the thing signified'.[33] However, this conception of art, which is directly opposed to Batteux's, still relies on a similar definition of art, i.e. that art must imitate nature. According to John Pizer who studied the history of Lessing's reception of Batteux's treatise, this might be due to the fact that Lessing initially endorsed Batteux's ideas, but distanced himself from them later on.[34] It would be a mistake to consider this an irrelevant historical anecdote, as we will find a similar pattern in the early discussions of medium specificity in film theory, where proponents of film as art still endorse the same definition of art as their opponents.

With that in mind, let's examine Lessing's conception in more detail. I have claimed that he holds a pluralist conception of art. How so? Lessing's goal is to draw distinctions between the arts, particularly painting and poetry. In that respect, it is a

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[31] Young, *Charles Batteux.*

[32] Of course, Batteux did not invent this definition of art but inherited it from the Renaissance writers, who themselves adapted it from their predecessors such as Aristotle. Lee offers an interesting discussion of the evolution of the imitative definition of art throughout the Renaissance, from literal imitation to idealised imitation.

[33] Lessing, *Laocoön,* 78.

[34] Pizer, 'Lessing's Reception of Charles Batteux', 29-43.

pluralist conception of art, as he believes there are several principles of art corresponding to the different art forms, as opposed to a single principle unifying them all. He also believes that these distinctions between art forms are based on the specific 'signs', or 'means' of each art form. By 'signs', Lessing means the physical characteristics proper to each art form. Thus, he describe the different signs for painting as opposed to poetry as 'figures and colours in space rather than articulated sounds in time'. [35] It follows that painting and poetry are distinct art forms, which are ruled by distinct principles, precisely because the former is a simultaneous art form while the latter is a sequential art form, i.e., the former is experienced all at once, while the latter is experienced through time. Painting represents objects, which Lessing calls 'bodies', in space, or 'side by side', whereas poetry represents 'actions' in time, one after the other.

But Lessing is not just giving us reasons to think about the arts in a more relative and distinct manner. By individuating art forms on the basis of their physical features, Lessing is effectively creating the notion of medium. The medium of an art form, according to Lessing, is precisely this set of physical features upon which the art form depends, e.g. the colours and shapes of painting, and the words and sounds of poetry. It is however distinct from the art form in that the art form utilizes the physical properties of the medium for its own end, i.e. 'the thing signified', which is not an end of the medium itself. But the relation between art form and medium is not as simple, as an art form is actually dependent on its medium. This allows Lessing to claim that the physical features of the medium determine to some extent the purpose of the art form. So for instance, painting, precisely because of its simultaneous and fixed nature,

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[35] Lessing, *Laocoön,* 79.

can use only 'a single moment of an action in its coexisting compositions and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive'.[36] Similarly, poetry, because of its sequential nature,

> can use only one single property of a body. It must therefore choose that one which awakens the most vivid image of the body […] from this comes the rule concerning harmony of descriptive adjectives and economy in description of physical objects.[37]

As such, the medium of an art form distinguishes it from other art forms by setting up physical limits to what it can and cannot achieve, and has the power to set aesthetic rules or principles for the art form. The idea that we can derive the norms of an art form by identifying and describing the physical characteristics of its medium is without a doubt the most important contribution of the *Laocoön* as it establishes the core of the notion of medium specificity. For the sake of argument, I employ here the definition of medium established by Lessing, and used by his followers in order to flesh out the theoretical consequences of such a definition. However, let it be said that this will not be the definition endorsed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Lessing's work can be interpreted within a wider attempt to build a normative study of the arts, as well as a hierarchy among the arts. By determining norms for each of the arts to comply with, Lessing and his contemporaries also established their limits. This, in turn, could inform the long-standing debate about which art is the finest. Lessing's own conclusion was that poetry is superior to painting because the physical limits of the medium of poetry are fewer than the limits of the medium of painting.

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[36] *Ibid.*, 80

[37] *Ibid.*, 80.

This was going against the state of affairs among Renaissance artists and critics, notably da Vinci, who considered painting as superior to poetry.

The same tendency to compare and rank the arts can be found in Clement Greenberg's Modernist revival of medium specificity. In his essay 'Towards a newer Laocoön', Greenberg claims that

> There can be, I believe, such a thing as a dominant art form … [and] when it happens that a single art is given the dominant role, it becomes the prototype of all art: the others try to shed their proper characters and imitate its effects. The dominant art in turn tries itself to absorb the functions of the others.[38]

For Greenberg, this is a direct consequence of individuating, and thus limiting, art forms on the basis of their medium. He argues that artists can come to confuse the limits of their medium, because of certain conventions or trends governing their art at a given time, and attempt what is not specific to their medium. Thus, their art form becomes inferior to another art form that remained 'pure' and only explored effects specific to its medium. Consequently, Greenberg identifies the succession of dominant arts, throughout western art history, considering in detail the times and causes for each shift. This point deserves a mention because this comparative, and one might say competitive attitude of art critics and theorists will appear again in the writings of early film theorists.

The last point I wish to consider on the origins of medium of specificity concerns the methods employed by those formulating it. I have just mentioned that Greenberg offers a historical account of the dominant arts, i.e. arts that remained faithful to their medium, or 'pure'. This is not a gratuitous point on the part of

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[38] Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoön', 24.

Greenberg. In fact, he uses this retrospective account to justify his beliefs as an art critic. As a critic, Greenberg promoted artists in the abstract expressionism movement, such as Jackson Pollock, Hans Hoffman and others. He argued that abstract painting was not only the dominant art of his time, but also the purest art form to emerge in Western culture. The reason for this, according to Greenberg, was that abstract painting, with its tendency to simplify the drawing, to emphasize lines, shapes and primary colours, etc., is the finest instantiation of the two-dimensional and enclosed nature of the medium of painting. Greenberg went so far as to call abstract painting an 'instinctive accommodation to the medium'.[39] So, it seems, his arguments on medium specificity and purity offer support for his claims about the value of certain artworks. But it could as easily be the other way around: Greenberg's convictions as a critic of the value of certain artworks could explain his arguments about medium specificity and purity. And this might in turn question the strength of these arguments, as we could suspect him of committing some kind of inductive fallacy. Interestingly, if we look at Lessing's method for his claim, we might in fact come to see that the second option is more convincing.

Lessing was an art critic like Greenberg, as well as a playwright. In other words, he was not merely a theorist, but also a practitioner. In fact, his *Laocoön* is mostly constituted of criticisms of Hellenistic sculptures and of Homer's poetry. For instance, Lessing exemplified the superiority of sequential art forms like poetry over simultaneous art forms like painting or sculpture by pointing out Homer's descriptive style. Homer, Lessing contends, does not describe the beauty of Helen by juxtaposing adjectives just as painting would juxtapose shapes and colours, but instead describes

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[39] *Ibid.*, 35.

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the effects of her beauty on others. Thus, according to Lessing, poetry is superior to painting in that its medium allows it to suggest more to the imagination that painting could ever represent. However, Lessing was not merely using classic literary examples to justify his theoretical claim. He actually had some contemporary concerns to motivate his arguments, namely the trend of descriptive poetry (*Schilderungssucht*) spreading in Germany at the time. As a critic, Lessing opposed this movement, particularly the work of Albrecht von Haller and his famous poem *Die Alpen*.[40] Just like in the case of Greenberg, this suggests that Lessing's theories might be undermined by his method. As Wilfried Barner notes, Lessing is continuously alternating between what he presents as deductive arguments, located more specifically at the beginning of his treatise and in chapter sixteen, and what looks more like inductive claims, i.e. his aesthetic criticisms.[41] So it seems that Lessing's definition of an art medium, and therefore, his conceptualization of medium specificity are meant to serve his goals as a critic, rather than as a philosopher, or theorist, of art.

The reason I have outlined the methods first used in conceptualizing medium specificity is that, unsurprisingly, similar inductive methods are also used by film theorists and filmmakers when they talk about the film medium. If we can spot a weakness in these early theories, we might also be able to spot it in the later theories

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[40] For an overview of the literary context of *Die Alpen*, see Holmes, 'Reizende Aussichten: Aesthetic and Scientific Observation in Albrecht von Haller's *Die Alpen*'.

[41] Barner, 'Le Laocoön de Lessing'.

and explain some of qualms of opponents of medium specificity in film.[42] As such, it is sufficient for now to point to the fluctuation between deductive and inductive language in the early arguments for medium specificity, without yet cashing in its consequences in terms of the methodological reliability of these arguments.

Before moving on to medium specificity applied to film, let's take stock of the different points, attitudes and methods set out by the first formulators of medium specificity for their successors. First, we saw a tendency to oppose views about specific art forms and media without changing the conceptual framework of the discussion. For instance, Lessing shared with Batteux and his Renaissance predecessors a similar definition of art, while being opposed to their theories concerning art forms. Second, Lessing introduced a *physical* definition of the medium. This point is essential to the notion of medium specificity, as it also legitimizes the idea that the aesthetic norms of an art form are determined by its physical features, i.e. its medium. Third, in Lessing's and Greenberg's arguments, the purity of the medium follows from the physical definition of the medium: if aesthetic norms can be derived from the physical features of the medium, then these norms should be followed and no physical features that do not belong the medium should be exploited by the artist. Fourth, establishing the specificities of each art form goes hand in hand with establishing limits for each art form as well as a hierarchy between the arts. The fifth and final point to remember for what is to follow is the reliance on inductive fallacies, such as biased sampling, to justify claims about medium specificity.

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[42] I am not implying here that inductive methods are philosophically weak. Rather, I am trying to show that these early medium specificity arguments are underlined by biased judgements, all the while being presented as principled generalizations.

1.3 Medium Specificity for Film Theorists

1.3.1 *Film as Art: initial attacks and appeals*

I said at the beginning of this chapter that the notion of medium specificity was not born with film but that, interestingly, those who had the most use out of it were film theorists. In fact, the notion of medium specificity, implicitly or explicitly, already appears in the earliest theoretical discussions about film, which had the task of legitimizing the art status of film against certain naysayers.[43] These early discussions were defensive for the simple reason that film inherited some of the aesthetic prejudices that targeted photography. So before examining the arguments that early film theorists put forward to prove that film was an art form, we must first look at the arguments of the naysayers.

Noël Carroll, in his attempt to trace the original appeals to medium specificity in film theory, identifies two main arguments against the art status of film.[44] Let's call the first one the Argument from the Fine Arts. This argument is a direct adaptation of an objection initially addressed to photography, and as its name indicates, is defended by artists, critics and other figures involved in the fine arts. They claimed that film was merely a recording medium, unlike the fine arts, which rely on representative media, and therefore could not express any artistic skill or point of view.

However, one version of this argument that Carroll looks at does not come from the artistic leaders of the time, but from avant-garde movements. In that respect,

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[43] To clarify, the art status of film does not entail that all films are art. It simply means that films can be art, and that effectively, some are.

[44] Carroll, *Philosophical Problems*, 20-29.

the proponents of this version of the Argument from the Fine Arts are less concerned with the question of artistic skill but more with the definition of art to which a photographic or cinematic art form would subscribe. People like Baudelaire argued that photography, and by extension film, could not be an art form because it would allow for the *mechanical* imitation of nature, to constitute art.[45] For Baudelaire and his peers this is extremely problematic because it would ratify the general mimetic tradition of the fine arts themselves. As we have seen, the idea that art must imitate nature has been the canon since long before Lessing – a canon these avant-garde artists and theorists are precisely trying to get rid of.

So, the Argument from the Fine Arts sets out a number of obstacles for film theorists. To overcome them, they would need to argue that film can show artistic skills and intentions. But they would also need to specify the definition of art they endorse in order to respond to the avant-garde version of the Argument from the Fine Arts. And as Katherine Thomson-Jones notes, early film theorists, i.e. silent-film theorists, reacted to this version of the argument by denying the basic realistic nature of the film medium, and instead presented 'an authoritative articulation of the anti-realist principles of silent-filmmaking'.[46] In other words, silent-film theorists endorsed the same anti-mimetic definition of art as avant-garde theorists, and within this shared conceptual framework argued against these theorists on the question of film being an art form. This is exactly what Lessing did with Batteux and his Renaissance predecessors. Again, we see a tendency to oppose views about specific art forms while accepting the same general concepts about art. One might argue that this is an easier

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[45] Carroll cites Baudelaire's *Aesthetic Curiosities,* as well as Croce's *Aesthetic.*

[46] Thomson-Jones, *Aesthetics and Film,* 2-3.

argumentative method, i.e. attack the opponent on her own territory, but it is by no means the only strategy, as we will see mid-century film theorists like André Bazin criticising the anti-realist principles of silent-film theorists by highlighting the aesthetic value of mechanically recording reality.

The second argument that Carroll observes being made against film being an art is the Argument from Theatre. For the proponents of this argument, just like for the proponents of the Argument from the Fine Arts, film cannot be an art because it is mere mechanical recording. However, this time, film is considered to be a mechanical recording not of reality but of another art form, i.e. theatre. According to the Argument from Theatre, film is at best the duplicate of an art form, but not an art form itself.[47] As Carroll duly notes, the types of film that the proponents of this argument were targeting were indeed mere recordings of theatrical performances of the time, usually produced by Le Film d'Art, a production company associated with the French national theatre, the Comédie-Française. However, this argument still solicited a response from silent-film theorists.[48] In response, they argued that film was very different from the mere mechanical recording of theatrical performances. In fact, they went as far as to argue that film had more representational capacities than theatre

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[47] A more elusive version of this argument is reported by Bazin in *What is Cinema?* Vol.1, 95, he claims that 'the leitmotiv of those who despise filmed theatre, their final and apparently insuperable argument, continues to be the unparalleled pleasure that accompanies the presence of the actor'. The idea that in theatre the actor is physically present, contrary to the screen, somehow legitimates the superiority of theatre over film.

[48] While these arguments are mostly contained to the era of silent cinema, they still had some longevity in the twentieth century. For instance, one of the most important text on the relationship between film and theatre is Sontag's essay from 1966, 'Film and Theatre'.

itself. In the efforts of silent-film theorists to distinguish film from theatre and establish the art status of the former, we often see claims about the limits of theatre in comparison to the possibilities of film. This is reminiscent of a certain methodological attitude we already found in Lessing and in Greenberg. That is, talking about the distinctness of art forms leads to pointing out the limits of these art forms and to establish a hierarchy among them.

Image 1-2 L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise (1908), french silent film produced by Le Film d'Art

Keeping in mind these two main arguments against film being an art form, and the general methods endorsed by film theorists to respond to them, let's examine a few of the actual arguments offered to legitimate the art status of film. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the proponents of these arguments appealed to specific features of the film medium. That is, they endorsed the physical definition of the film medium, and looking at the physical features of film, they pointed out which are unique to it and how aesthetically valuable they are.

The most explicit defender of the art status of film was probably Rudolph Arnheim, whose 'strategy was therefore to describe the differences between the images

we obtain when we look at the physical world and the images perceived on the motion picture screen. *The differences could then be shown to be a source of artistic expression'.* [49] In an effort to respond directly to the Argument from the Fine Arts, and more precisely to the avant-garde version of the argument, Arnheim argued in the first section of *Film as Art,* 'Film and Reality', that there are at least six physical properties of the film medium which confirm the difference between film and recordings of reality.[50] These six properties, which he describes in the six subsections of 'Film and Reality' are 'the projections of solids upon a plane surface', the 'reduction of depth', 'lighting and the absence of colour', the 'delimitations of the image and distance from the object', the 'absence of the space-time continuum', and finally the 'absence of the nonvisual world of the senses'. Arnheim then went on in the following section, 'The Making of a Film', to describe how each of these physical properties of the medium can be used for artistic ends. For instance, the filmmaker can use lighting and the absence of colour in a film to create visual contrasts between characters, locations and so on. As such, she can produce certain effects that are not only non-existent in nature, but that also bear aesthetic value and exhibit intention and skill.

However, as Carroll notes, 'rather than asking "What does the film medium, given its material structure, represent [imitate] most perfectly?" Arnheim asks "Where does the film medium fall short of perfect reproduction?"'. [51] So it seems that Arnheim was more focused on establishing that film is an art form *because* it does not imitate or record reality, than on simply finding what makes film a distinct art form. In other

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[49] Arnheim, 'On the Nature of Photography', as quoted by Carroll, *Philosophical Problems,* 37.

[50] Arnheim, *Film as Art.*

[51] Carroll, *Philosophical Problems,* 35.

words, he was limiting his own medium specific arguments precisely because he was presenting these arguments within the same conceptual framework as his opponents. This of course does not undermine Arnheim's contribution to the legitimation of film as art, but it exemplifies one of the methodological weaknesses I have identified in discussions of medium specificity.

On the other hand, while Arnheim argued that film was not the mechanical recording of reality, others attempted to determine what film actually was, if not the mechanical recording of reality. In an effort to define the film medium, and thus establish its specificity, early film theorists and filmmakers identified three essential features of the film medium, i.e. shots, editing and sound.[52] For instance, Jean Epstein argued that the capacity of the film medium to capture a moment in close-up is 'the soul of cinema'[53], because it allows the spectator to experience a moment of *photogénie,* i.e. 'an experience of having a close-up of the human face, of what it could reveal about a character's consciousness that exceeds language and other media of expressivity'.[54] On the aesthetic value of the close-up, Brian Price also refers to filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who wrote on the capacity of the close-up paired with slow, accelerated and reverse motion, to magnify and decode visual phenomena.[55]

The second essential property of the film medium considered in the early days of film theory is editing. Here, Sergei Eisenstein is the most prolific thinker, most notably with his argument that in editing shots with different contents in certain ways

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[52] I am following here Price, 'The Latest Laocoön'.

[53] Epstein, 'Magnification', as quoted by Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 52.

[54] Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 52.

[55] See Vertov, 'The Council of Three'.

(for Eisenstein, in conflicting ways), the filmmaker could produce new ideas in the mind of the spectator – ideas that were not initially represented in any of the independent shots. So editing allows films not only to represent content but also to produce content. To summarize this idea, Price cites Eisenstein: 'In my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another'.[56] In this way, a physical property of the film medium, i.e. editing, produces a specific aesthetic effect, i.e. the montage, that is unique to film as an art form and exhibits artistic skill and intention. I will conclude here my short examination of the examples given by early film theorists to respond to the Argument from the Fine Arts. Naturally, much more could be said on the variety of these arguments, especially regarding sound, but for now it serves more as an illustration of medium specific arguments of the time than an exhaustive overview.

Image 1-3 Montage in Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin (1926)

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[56] Eisenstein, 'The Dramaturgy of Film Form', as quoted by Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 54.

Now, we still need to consider responses to the Argument from Theatre. These naturally tend to be merged with other medium specific arguments about film. So for instance, by pointing out the expressiveness of the close-up or the aesthetic possibilities of montage, film theorists would also point out that these effects could not be achieved by theatre and were unique to film. Once again, the arguments against theatre tend to establish a qualitative distinction between the two media. For instance, here is D. W. Griffith vehemently claiming the aesthetic superiority of film over theatre:

> Moving pictures can get nothing from the so-called legitimate stage because American directors and playwrights have nothing to offer. The former are, for the most part, conventional and care nothing for natural acting. They don't know how to make use of even the material they have, limited as that is. […] As for American playwrights, we can get our ideas from the same sources they do. We need to depend on the stage for our actors and actresses least of all. […] For range and delicacy, the development of character, the quick transition from one mood to another, I don't know an actress now on the American stage, I don't care how great her reputation, who can begin to touch the work of some of the motion picture actresses.[57]

Griffith's tone here is hardly impartial. While Griffith was instrumental in establishing the status of film among the arts, we can see that his strategy for doing so was to undermine the aesthetic value of theatre by pointing out its failures in the American context. This is a strategy we have seen before. However, there is still one recurring argument directed against the Argument from Theatre worth examining. This argument has to do with the physical constraints of theatre. For instance, Hugo Münsterberg, another theorist determined to find the unique features that made film

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[57] Griffith, 'A Poet Who Writes on Motion Picture Film'.

an art form, argued that

> … theater is bound not only by space and time. Whatever it shows is controlled by the same laws of causality which govern nature. This involves a complete continuity of the physical events: no cause without following effect, no effect without preceding cause. This whole natural course is left behind on the screen.[58]

Similarly, for Erwin Panofsky, the fact that the film spectator's point of view changes with the camera movements, whereas the theatre spectator is bound to the same point-of-view for the length of the performance, 'opens up a world of possibilities of which the stage can never dream'.[59] And these possibilities are naturally rooted in the formal properties of the film medium, for instance editing, which allows for this discontinuous use of space and time. Therefore, film is more than the mere recording of theatrical performances precisely because it is subject to less formal constraints than theatre. We have seen this argumentative strategy before. Lessing, in trying to establish the differences between poetry and painting, argued that the medium of painting had more formal constraints than the medium of poetry and for that reason, poetry was a superior art form. It seems that the process of establishing the specificity of one art form by appealing to the physical properties of its medium systematically leads to limiting other art forms. But if we consider how these art forms have evolved throughout the history of art, these limits can seem time-sensitive. Theatre is still constrained by reality in a lot of ways, however Münsterberg was thinking of performances where the location and time of a scene could only be changed when the curtain was down to maintain the theatrical illusion. Panofsky also thought that the

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[58] Munsterberg, 'The Means of the Photoplay', as quoted by Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 48.

[59] Panofsky, 'Style and Medium', 19.

theatrical illusion was much more fragile than the cinematic illusion because of the physical constraints put on the spectator of a play. These arguments now seem irrelevant in the face of contemporary theatre, which often does not respect these physical constraints: sets change in front of the spectators, costumes do not necessarily reflect the period of the script, plays can be interactive, site-specific theatre removes the sitting point-of-view, and so on. Here, we might start to see how this comparative method is by nature temporary and eventually needs updating, as it is only justified as long as the art forms do not evolve. But art forms do evolve, one obvious way being through technological advancement. As such, silent-film theorists like Arnheim or Münsterberg cannot really hope to maintain their medium specific arguments in the face of sound technology, something that Bazin made sense of theoretically and aesthetically.

1.3.2   *After Film as Art: later appeals and the filmmaker as film theorist*

So far, we have identified a number of the arguments and methods of the original formulators of medium specificity in early film theory. These would be completed and confirmed in post-war theory, notably with the writings of Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Just as much as Arnheim, Münsterberg or Eisenstein, these two theorists were concerned with the essential properties of the film medium, but they deny what their predecessors claimed those properties were. I will briefly describe what Bazin and Kracauer considered as the medium specific properties of film. However, what is of greater interest are the reasons for their disagreement with their predecessors and how they proceeded to make their points. In other words, I am looking for the methodological tendencies of medium specific arguments in post-war film theory.

As I have mentioned briefly before in an attempt to show the relativity of the different claims about the specificities of film, Bazin argued that film is a unique art form precisely because it is a particularly objective, i.e. directly representational, medium, whose nature and aesthetic value is to represent reality.[60] Bazin himself made similar arguments about photography:

> Photography and the cinema on the other hand are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism. No matter how skillful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that human hand intervened cast a shadow of doubt over the image. […] For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.[61]

To fully extend the argument to film, Bazin advocated certain cinematic techniques, like deep-focus (i.e. large depth of field, where much of the image appears in focus), wide shots, long, uninterrupted takes and a moving camera, as promoting realism. For Bazin, the films of Jean Renoir, such as *La Règle du Jeu*, were perfect examples of the type of realism he was defending.

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[60] See Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*

[61] Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', 7.

Image 1-4 La Règle du Jeu (1939)

One should also note that these techniques, especially the long take and the moving camera, are directly opposed to the expressive use of editing advocated by Eisenstein.

So what are the argumentative grounds for cinematic realism? As Price notes, Bazin and Kracauer argued for cinematic realism because they understood film as an extension of photography.[62] As Kracauer pointed out, 'films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties; like photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality'.[63] From this, we can see that they endorsed the physical definition of the medium in their medium specific arguments precisely because they believed they could draw the aesthetic ends of film from its photographic

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[62] Orgeron notes that, predating Bazin and Kracauer's arguments about photography and film, Benjamin already claimed in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' that 'for the first time in the process of pictorial reproduction, photography freed the hand of the most important artistic functions which henceforth devolved only upon the eye looking into a lens'. See Orgeron, 'Visual Media and the Tyranny of the Real', 87, quoting Benjamin, 233.

[63] Kracauer, *Theory of Film,* as quoted by Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 60.

form.[64] This is an instance of the first main tendency I have identified in the history of the notion of medium specificity. The second recurring attitude exhibited by Bazin is the comparative approach to medium specificity. In trying to find what film does best, theorists also identified what film does better than other art forms, thus limiting what other art forms should be doing. So, in the case of realism, because film is so ideally suited to represent reality, it frees 'the plastic arts from their obsession with likeness'.[65] This is naturally in the same line of ideas as Greenberg's modernist claims about the abstract nature of painting. And as such, it can be linked to the idea of the purity of the medium. That is, if we can identify what film does better than other art forms, then we should restrict, or at least encourage filmmakers to only do these things. Otherwise, their films will not be truly 'cinematic', and thus of lesser aesthetic value as films. Obviously, this tendency to attribute aesthetic value to the essential properties of film is not just found in Bazin's writings, but in most medium specific claims about film. So the same goes for all the early film theorists mentioned before. The montage for Eisenstein is not simply the prerogative of film as an art form, it is also what is most artistic about it, and thus should be employed by filmmakers to its fullest extent.

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[64] It is worth noting that this argument has also been cashed out in terms of transparency. Transparency in aesthetics is the idea that certain media, such as photography or film, allow us to 'see through' the work, directly into the world. The camera lens is essentially a window into the world, instead of an intermediary between the world and us. If this idea is taken seriously, then photography and film are inherently more realistic than other media, in virtue of the physical features that make these media transparent. See Currie, *Image and Mind,* especially chapter 1 and 2, for a discussion, or Walton, 'Transparent Pictures'.

[65] Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', as quoted by Price, 'The Latest Laocoön', 59.

This leads me to the last tendency I want to point out in medium specific arguments. When film theorists argue that certain essential properties of the film medium, and thus certain techniques and styles, should be exploited by filmmakers above all else, they do not do so entirely *a priori*. In fact, most have specific examples to refer to as a means of showing what is aesthetically superior about certain properties of the medium. For instance, Bazin points to the films of Orson Welles for his use of long takes or to those of Jean Renoir for his uses of the deep focus. But the appeal to examples should not itself be surprising in aesthetic theories. What is more interesting is the fact that all theorists, with a few exceptions, who appeal to medium specific arguments, are themselves practitioners of film. That is, they are filmmakers or film critics, either way involved at a practical level with the medium. Epstein, Louis Delluc, Vertov, Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, Bela Balazs, Bazin and many others fit in this category. Again, this should not be too surprising as those who had the most to gain in legitimizing the art status of film were the people aspiring to be the artists of that medium, or who otherwise had an aesthetic interest in it. Thus, it is not the motivations of these theorists that are in question. Rather, it is their theoretical methods. When they start putting forward certain styles and techniques, which they naturally endorse themselves as practitioners, as the 'essence' of the film medium, we should start to worry. And our worry is similar as it was with Greenberg's grounds for his endorsement of abstract expressionism. The worry is that their arguments involve inductive language, which is not an issue of its own, but it seems that their inductive inferences are particularly prone to being wrong, as we can observe regular retractions in the history of film theory. Instead of a continuous and gradual evolution, in parallel with the technological advances of the medium itself, we see a series of theoretical volte-faces. A reason for this might be the fact that the observations at the basis of the

inductive reasoning of filmmakers and theorists bear some political and national restrictions. One might also think that a filmmaker would be leaning towards theories justifying her aesthetic preferences and purposes, and thus might be victim of some kind of confirmation bias. At any rate, the samples they use to make their inductive claims are biased, i.e. they selected examples that already proved their point. As a result, we should rethink normative arguments based on this type of inductive observations of physical media.

1.4   Criticisms of Medium Specificity

Noël Carroll is arguably the most vocal opponent to the use of the notion of medium specificity in art. In 'Forget the Medium!', Carroll reveals what he sees as the political motive behind the resurgence of this notion of medium specificity for film.[66] According to him, the point of legitimizing the status of film as a proper art medium was to make film worthy of academic attention. Thus, film theorists argued that film was a *unique* art medium, and so should be studied as an independent discipline and have its own specialists. Indeed, as we have seen, the question of the medium specificity of film was far from neutral, and medium specific claims often rely on inductive inferences. Filmmakers had to legitimize their own practice in the face of other art critics and theorists, but also in the face of the relevant institutions with the economic means to develop the cinematographic industry. As Vachel Lindsay asserts: 'THE MOTION PICTURE IS A GREAT HIGH ART, NOT A PROCESS OF COMMERCIAL MANUFACTURE.'[67] More interestingly he adds: 'The people I

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[66] Carroll, 'Forget the Medium!'.

[67] Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 30. His emphasis.

hope to convince of this are (1) The great art museums of America […] (2) the departments of English, of the history of the drama, of the practice of the drama […] (3) the critical and literary world generally'.[68] It is evident here that Lindsay's goal is social and political. However, this alone should not undermine medium specific claims entirely, so let's turn to Carroll's more extensive arguments against this issue.

First, what is Carroll's interpretation of medium specificity? For one, he endorses the idea that media are individuated by their physical structure. He identifies media as '(1) the materials (the stuff) out of which works are made and/or (2) the physical instruments employed to shape or to otherwise fashion those materials'.[69] On this construal, the medium of film is individuated by its materials, i.e. the film strip, and/or the camera, as the instruments which capture light to shape (emulsify) the strip and form images.[70] Then, Carroll also understands the medium specificity claim as being determined by the idea of the purity of the medium, which entails that all the aesthetic constituents of a film must be unique to it. It also entails that filmmakers are recommended to exploit only the unique constituents of film in order to make a successful film. This is precisely because, as Carroll points out, the constituents of film being unique, they are 'ostensibly identifiable in advance of, or independently of, the uses to which the medium is put'.[71] It now becomes clear where the idea of a recommendation to filmmakers comes from within the original articulation of the

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[68] *Ibid.*, 30.

[69] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures,* 35.

[70] Carroll notes that it is not always the case now, but he remains silent as to whether bitmaps could be considered the 'physical' material of digital images.

[71] Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media', 18.

medium specificity claim. If the unique constituents of a medium are set independently of any concrete instance of the medium, then an artist wishing to work within a particular medium must respect these constituents and focus exclusively on them. Pushing this idea a little further, we have to accept that an artist's own use or practice of a medium has no determining power on the medium. Either the artist respects the unique constituents of the medium and produces an artwork instantiating the medium, or she does not respect these constituents and what she produces does not instantiate the medium she intended to work with. This second scenario is problematic precisely because the work produced is not a work of art as it intended to be. This point is crucial in Carroll's overall critique of the medium specificity claim.

By distinguishing between the two main premises behind the medium specificity claim, i.e. the physicality and the purity of media, the structure of Carroll's arguments is already set up. So let's begin with his arguments against the physicality of media. Although Carroll does not state it explicitly, he recognizes a dilemma in the claim that media are individuated by their basic physical features. Here is the first horn of his dilemma. As we have seen, proponents of medium specificity claim that the physical features of a medium determine what its artistic content should be. So for instance, in the case presented by Lessing, poetry should represent action because of its sequential nature, which is one of its physical features. But as Carroll notes, 'it is far from clear that one can move so neatly from the physical medium to the *telos* of the artform'. [72] Surely, it seems intuitive for the case of poetry that its sequential nature gives it the ability to represent events unfolding through time. But it is a different thing to claim that the sequential nature of poetry dictates the poet to represent action, or

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[72] *Ibid.*, 7.

that the photographic nature of film dictates the filmmaker to favour realism. In short, there is a causal link missing in the reasoning of the medium specificity claim. Moreover, Carroll holds a twofold definition of a medium, which I have quoted. According to him, media are constituted of the materials that make up artworks, as well as the instruments that shape those materials. On this construal, the causal problem identified above expands, as the proponent of medium specificity would have to claim that the 'telos' of the artform can be derived from both the materials and the instruments of the medium. To which Carroll responds with the example of literature: 'if some sort of writing instrument, e.g. a typewriter (or to be more up-to-date, a word processor), and some material surface, say paper, are the customary, basic materials of the novelist, what can we extrapolate from this about the proper range of effects of the novel?'.[73] In short, the physical features of a medium, i.e. its materials and its instruments, cannot give specificity to the medium. Here, the problem of technological determinism identified before resurfaces. Not only is it odd in itself to think that the aesthetic ends of an art form can be found in the physical properties of its medium, but the fact that these physical properties can change drastically without creating a new art form proves that the 'essence' or the ends of an art form cannot depend on the physical properties of its medium.

Now let's consider the second horn of the dilemma. Carroll argues that if we were to renounce the physical definition of the medium, in an attempt to avoid the issues presented in the first horn of the dilemma, we would have no way of individuating a medium. If the physical characteristics of a medium cannot count as its determining constituents, then what does? And without these determining

[73] *Ibid.*, 7-8.

constituents, we cannot establish the specificity of an art form on the basis of its medium.[74] Ultimately, this leads Carroll to argue that when we talk about art forms and their aesthetic properties, we should forget the medium.

This radical conclusion is also supported by a series of arguments Carroll presents against the idea that only the properties that are unique to a medium should be exploited for aesthetic effects, i.e. that art forms should remain pure. So for Carroll, not only is it problematic to argue that the physical properties of a medium determine the aesthetic ends of its art form, but it also does not make sense to claim that these aesthetic ends have to be unique, or specific, to that medium. Carroll's first argument in that sense relies on the fact that there are many examples of artworks purposefully overlapping effects belonging to different media. These artworks cannot be simply rejected from their art form, or deemed aesthetically inferior because they utilize effects that are not strictly speaking unique to their medium. The reason for this, according to Carroll, is that the purpose of an art form is determined by the artist, not by the medium.[75] Therefore, whatever purpose we set for an art form at a given moment will determine what properties of the medium are to be exploited. As Carroll notes, sometimes the purpose of artwork is best fulfilled by imitating the effects of other art forms. If we did not accept this, we would have to grant that hyperrealist paintings, one instance among many, are not really paintings, or at least are a bad example of painting. A consequence of the medium specificity claim was that the artist had no control over her medium. Now, the artist can choose whatever properties of different media best suit her artistic purpose and juxtapose them in her work.

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[74] *Ibid.*, 8.

[75] *Ibid.*, 9.

In the same line of thought, Carroll's next argument is that it is impossible to appeal only to the unique features of a medium, simply because the different basic properties of a medium can call for contradictory lines of development.[76] Nowhere is this more obvious than in the opposition between Eisenstein and Bazin: editing and cinematography, i.e. moving picture photography, are both unique and basic properties of the film medium, yet they lead to incompatible effects. Which is to be favoured? The response is that the artist will choose which to favour on the basis of her own artistic purposes because no specific purpose can be set by the medium itself. Similarly, Carroll points out that the idea of recommending artists to respect the unique properties of the medium, which in the first place is supposed to ensure aesthetic excellence, actually goes against that very thing. The recommendation part of the medium specificity argument seems to assume that 'what a medium does best will coincide with what differentiates media (and art forms)', but as Carroll notes, that is not always the case.[77] For instance, narration is a property common to the media of both novels and films. It also seems that both films and novels are very good narrative art forms. So here we are faced with a case where a basic property common to different media is also a property that these media excel at. If we were to follow the proponent of medium specificity, we would have to either deny narration to one of the art forms, or deny it to both as this property cannot differentiate them. As Carroll notes, this is a ridiculous conclusion. Here again, it is up to the filmmaker to decide what basic property of the medium to use or not, and if narration can provide artistic excellence, or is simply suited to the particular purposes of the filmmaker, it would be absurd to

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[76] *Ibid.*, 10.

[77] *Ibid.*, 12, as well as *Philosophical Problems,* 83.

set it aside solely because it is not unique to the film medium. Not only would this be absurd, but for Carroll, it would be contradictory with the definition of the medium itself:

> in demanding the purity of the medium, the medium-specificity proponent acts as though the medium were valuable for its own sake or intrinsically valuable, rather than being only instrumentally valuable. But that flies in the face of what it means to be a medium in the first place.[78]

When Lessing distinguished between the arts and established the notion of medium, his goal was to allow artists to maximize the quality of their work, not the opposite.

This is also connected to the idea that grounding the aesthetic ends of an art form in the unique properties of its medium not only limits this particular art form but also other art forms in comparison. As I have mentioned before, when we take realism to be the purpose of filmmaking, it follows that painting should focus on nonrepresentational styles. But this argument might seem absurd in the face of centuries of representational excellence in painting. So when Modernist painters choose to focus on nonrepresentational styles, it is because they believe this aspect of their medium suits their own artistic purposes better, but not because it is what the medium does uniquely best.

1.5   Conclusion

As it seems, Carroll has driven the final nail in the coffin of medium specificity. He has shown the conceptual mistakes at the root of medium specificity. He has also

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[78] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures,* 47.

shown that 'the normative reach of the doctrine of medium specificity is indefensible'.[79] This normative reach is indefensible precisely because it is derived from the physical definition of media, which according to Carroll, would be the only way of individuating media. We have also seen how this way of individuating media is ultimately limiting, by both overdetermining one art form, and by underdetermining others in comparison. But these limitations are by necessity time-sensitive and always relative to a certain artistic practice. This was shown by the inductive methods of theorists to legitimize certain states of affairs. At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that the notion of medium specificity counted most of its followers in film theory. And unsurprisingly, we have seen exhibited to a greater degree all the tendencies that were only starting to appear in earlier formulations of the notion. As such, we should also have seen all the flaws of the notion in its application to film. The reasonable course of action would thus be to take 'the case of film as a cautionary tale'[80], and ultimately 'forget the medium'.[81]

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[79] *Ibid.*, 51.

[80] *Ibid.*, 51.

[81] Carroll, 'Forget the Medium', 9.

Chapter 2 What is Medium Specificity and How Does it Apply to Film, Revisited

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I continue the conceptual work started in the first chapter on medium specificity and its application to film theory. However, after having previously considered the shortcomings of the notion, I now attempt a revision of the notion in general, as well as of its various definitional commitments. In the first section, I focus on the definition of medium underlying the notion of medium specificity. I move on from the physical definition seen in the last chapter to what has been called the 'artistic medium'. I highlight the differences between the two definitions and show that the latter does not face the issues encountered by the former. I later turn to a central component of the notion of medium specificity, namely the basic constituents of media. Originally understood as physical properties, I redefine these basic constituents in accordance with the artistic medium. I also turn my attention to a different type of basic constituents, namely differential properties, which were neglected under the physical construal of basic constituents. I then show that the new construal of basic constituents, in accordance with the artistic medium, has more explanatory power than the physical construal. I conclude by considering what we have gained and what have lost in reformulating medium specificity, in order to understand what we might still need to complete this project.

2.2 Alternative Definitions of Medium

2.2.1 *Physical medium and artistic medium*

In the previous chapter I explained how Lessing created the notion of medium by directing our attention towards the 'signs' or 'means' of art forms, that is, the physical features that distinguish one art form from another.[82] This understanding of the medium prevailed in the subsequent writings of film theorists, up to Carroll's critique of medium specificity. Recall his definition: 'media, on this construal, are (1) the materials (the stuff) out of which works are made and/or (2) the physical instruments employed to shape or to otherwise fashion those materials'.[83] As we have seen, this physical understanding of the medium has so far been one of the most central assumptions in the medium specificity literature. However, only a few lines after giving his definition, Carroll makes note, in brackets, of something interesting:

> (Here it is important to emphasize that, for the most part, given the nature of the debate regarding cinema as it has evolved, we shall be discussing the physical media from which artworks are constructed and not what might be called the *artistic* media – that is to say, the conventions, such as the reversal of fortune in tragedy, which are employed in the production of certain genres of artworks. The reason for this is simply that conventions cross media, materially or instrumentally construed.)[84]

What is interesting is that, according to Carroll, there is a distinction between the physical medium and what he calls the 'artistic medium.' The former is individuated by physical matter and instruments, as indicated by his definition, and the latter by conventions and practices. Further, he restricts his objections regarding medium

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[82] Lessing, *Laocoön,* 78.

[83] Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, 35.

[84] *Ibid.*, 36.

specificity to the former notion, i.e. the physical medium. He is probably right to do so given that the medium specific arguments he addresses also seem to be restricted to the physical medium.

Yet, the fact that Carroll concedes another possible understanding of a medium is puzzling. If this understanding is available to us, and always has been, then why has Carroll, like the early proponents of medium specificity, been so focused on the physical definition of a medium? One way to answer this question would be to recall that certain proponents of medium specificity, such as Greenberg, were aiming for the particularly strong claim that the aesthetic goals of an art form are predetermined by the physical features of its medium. If Greenberg had endorsed the artistic medium instead of the physical medium, his claim would be that the aesthetic goals of an art form are determined by the artistic conventions of the art form. This is obviously a much less powerful claim and, in fact, a claim dialectically opposed to what Greenberg wanted: a non-relative norm for aesthetic goals.

So endorsing the physical medium makes sense for at least some proponents of medium specificity. But does it for its opponents? Carroll shows that Greenberg's claim is false and that the physical construal of a medium is irrelevant to our study of art forms. So why does Carroll concede that there is another possible understanding of the medium when he aims to eradicate the talk of medium from our theories of art forms? Carroll's good faith in admitting this possibility points us in a new direction. We have established, with Carroll, that the physical construal of the medium leads medium specific arguments into an impasse. But, contrary to Carroll's belief, there is a way of backing out of this impasse, by substituting the 'artistic medium' for the physical medium.

Before any attempt to apply this new construal of the medium to the notion of medium specificity, we should explore the literature on the question. In this literature we find a distinction between the material of an artwork and the practices and conventions surrounding it. For instance, Berys Gaut construes the medium not as some physical material, but as 'constituted by the set of practices that govern the use of the material'.[85] He is not alone endorsing this distinction. Similarly, Lopes describes an art medium as 'a set of practices for working with some materials, whether physical, as in sculpture, or symbolic, as in literature'.[86] In the same line of thought, David Davies draws the line between what he calls the '*vehicular* medium' and the '*artistic* medium'.[87] Interestingly, while Gaut grants that only the latter counts as a medium, Davies, like Carroll, allows for two different conceptions of the medium. I will elucidate this difference later on. Davies favours the term 'vehicular medium' over physical medium in order to include musical, literary or even conceptual artworks when talking about the material used by the artist to communicate (i.e. 'vehiculate' artistic content). Words, sounds and ideas are indeed not physical – not in the way that clay or paint are physical – (Lopes describes them as 'symbolic' material), yet we consider them to be the basic constituents of the artforms mentioned above. So whether or not the material of an art form is considered to be a medium in itself, we should include both physical and symbolic material in this category.

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[85] Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art,* 288.

[86] Lopes, 'Digital Art', 110.

[87] David Davies, 'Categories of Art', 226.

2.2.2   Why the artistic medium?

Having carved out this distinction, let's see what the 'artistic medium' can do for us. As claimed by several of the writers cited above, an artistic medium is a 'set of practices', which surrounds or governs the physical or symbolic material of an artwork. Simply put, for now, an artistic medium is determined by how one usually uses, or chooses to use[88], a particular material to communicate artistic content, not by the material itself. The first thing to notice about this definition of an artistic medium, in comparison to the definition of a vehicular medium, is that it is much less limited. A vehicular medium, as understood by Davies, is a closed set of material or immaterial components, whereas an artistic medium, construed as above, is an open set of artistic choices and uses. Let's take ceramic art as an example. The basic components necessary to make a piece of ceramic art include different types of clay and minerals, different types of paints and glazes, water and heat. Given that Carroll's general definition of a medium includes the instruments used to shape its material, let's allow for a variety of modelling tools, brushes and stencils to be part of the closed set of the medium of ceramic art as well.[89] The artistic medium of ceramic art will be determined by all the techniques and styles used by ceramic artists, throughout time (e.g. from prehistoric pottery and its coiling method, to the pottery wheel and moulds) and throughout the world (e.g. from Chinese hard-paste porcelain to European soft-paste porcelain). The implication is that the artistic medium of ceramic art is much less

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[88] The conditions surrounding this choice will be clarified later.

[89] This inclusion is only temporary, as I will later on argue against Carroll's particular definition of a medium.

limited than its vehicular medium[90], as new techniques and styles rely in part on the socio-cultural context of the artist, as well as her personal creativity, and not on physical constraints. And if we recall, one of the issues presented in the previous chapter with early medium specific arguments, which were based on the vehicular notion of medium, was that these arguments constrained art forms to a certain time-sensitive state and prevented them from evolving with the technological progress made in their medium. Thus, if we were to substitute the vehicular notion of a medium for the 'artistic' notion in medium specific arguments, we could avoid these types of limitation. Again, I will explore this terminology of 'vehicular' and 'artistic' medium further in the next section and elaborate on the difference between Gaut's singular account of a medium and Davies' dual account.

One reason to think that this artistic notion of a medium will fit medium specificity arguments better is that it is not subject to time-sensitivity and general artistic limitations, which appeared in the previous chapter. Another reason is that the notion of artistic medium allows us to solve one of Carroll's main issues with medium specificity, namely that the material of an art form cannot prescribe its aesthetic norms. Perhaps the most central claim of medium specificity, found in all the instances mentioned in the previous chapter, is that the aesthetic ends of an art form are already determined by its vehicular medium. But against this claim Carroll rightly noted that 'it is far from clear that one can move so neatly from the physical medium to the *telos* of the artform'. [91] More precisely, the issue was that something physical cannot in and

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[90] This, however, does not imply that vehicular media are entirely limited, as they too can expand, e.g. from celluloid to digital film. It is only the case that they are more limited than artistic media.

[91] Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media', 7.

of itself dictate a norm. Now, if we replaced once again the vehicular medium by the artistic medium, it becomes clearer how one can move from the artistic practices surrounding an art form to its *'telos'*. The causal link missing in the original claim is no more, as what prescribes the norm is not physical, but conventional in nature.

However, if we concluded our exploration of the artistic medium with the claim that the artistic practices of an artform prescribe the aesthetic ends of this artform, we would essentially be claiming that what we do is what we should do. This obviously cannot be true at all times and is generally unhelpful for our project of reformulating medium specificity. In fact, there is no reason to think that, for a particular artform, there exists a single set of aesthetic ends towards which all the artistic practices of that artform somehow converge. This is strongly related to another issue raised by Carroll in his critique of medium specificity arguments. In the arguments he examines, the '*telos*' of the artform, which is found in its physical medium, must determine the artist's actions. But for Carroll, what comes first is in fact the artist's intentions, not an overarching goal to be attained. As he puts it, 'the evolution of the medium will depend on the purposes we find for it. The medium has no secret purpose of its own'.[92] And the purposes we find for a particular medium will be what the artist wishes to communicate with it. Davies reminds us of this when arguing for his dual conception of a medium, that is, the vehicular medium and the artistic medium. As he points out, 'applying pigment to a canvas, for example, produces a pigment-covered canvas, yet we take the painter to have represented a certain subject or expressed or exemplified certain qualities in the painting'.[93] To reinforce this point Davies reminds us that in the

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[92] *Ibid.*, 9.

[93] Davies, 'Categories of Art', 226.

vocabulary we use to describe art works, this distinction between non-expressive and expressive features is represented.[94] For instance, we talk of 'brushstrokes' and 'impasto' as opposed to 'marks' in order to indicate an artistic intention behind a particular physical feature of a painting. Another example he mentions is the use of the word 'design' as opposed to 'pattern', which also points to the presence of artistic intention at work within the vehicular medium. So for Davies, the fact that we generally talk about intentional agency regarding the physical features of artwork is evidence for the claim that there is indeed another type of medium, namely the artistic medium. But it is also evidence for the claim that the artistic medium is not the sole prescriber of the aesthetic ends of the art form, as might have been suggested in the previous paragraph. Instead, as Davies puts it, 'it is through its visible surface *apprehended in terms of brushstrokes and design* that we relate the artistic vehicle of a visual artwork to an artistic content that it articulates'.[95] As such, the switch from the vehicular medium to the artistic medium in medium specific claims does not entail a symmetrical reversal of roles: the fact that the vehicular medium was the sole prescriber of the aesthetic norms, and therefore of the artistic content, of the art form in previous claims does not entail that the artistic medium plays the same role in our new claims. Instead, the role played by the artistic medium is that of a source of artistic expression for the agent.[96]

In Davies' quote just given, I emphasized the idea that the physical features of the artwork, which belong to the vehicular medium, are 'apprehended in terms of

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[94] *Ibid.*, 226.

[95] *Ibid.*, 227, my emphasis.

[96] I am using 'expression' here very broadly to refer to any sign of the artist's agency, which could include representational properties.

brushstroke and design'. This implies that when faced with an artwork, in this case a visual artwork, the physical features we perceive are, if all goes right, understood as being expressive.[97] These features signify something for the observer and their significance is determined within the artistic medium, precisely because the artistic medium is created by what Davies calls 'shared understandings'.[98] This can also be explained by the words of Joseph Margolis, to whom Davies refers. Margolis explains the relation between an artistic medium and its vehicular medium as follows: an artwork is the product of an artistic medium, whereas the vehicular medium only produces a physical object. But to explain how one object can have two identities[99] (the artwork and the physical object), Margolis claims that the artwork is 'embodied' in the physical object.[100] To recognize the artwork embodied in the physical object, we make 'an automatic *ontological* adjustment: we shift from reference to a purely physical medium whose properties yield, in the relevant sense, to "purely physical explanations" to reference to the art object essentially composed of *dance steps, brushstrokes,* or the like …'.[101] The properties composing the artwork, which as Davies reminded us imply some intentional agency, are successfully detected by the observer because 'the artistic and appreciative traditions of a culture prepare both would-be artists and would-be

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[97] I will detail the success conditions of this understanding in a moment.

[98] Davies, 'Categories of Art', 227.

[99] This question needs to be understood in the light of Margolis' context, i.e. the development of institutional definitions of art, particularly Danto's. The question of the double identity of the artwork became salient when Danto argued that an object cannot be identified as an artwork by relying on its perceptual features.

[100] Margolis, *Art and Philosophy,* 40.

[101] *Ibid.,* 42. His emphasis.

audiences to construe ordered physical material as artistic media'.[102] So the success conditions of the ontological adjustment, or simply put, of the acknowledgment of the physical object as an artwork, depends on the context of the observer. If the observer, given her cultural context, has access to the artistic medium producing the artwork, i.e. to the pool of shared understandings and goals that constitute the artistic medium, then she can not only recognize the artwork embodied in the physical object, but she can also recognize the 'patterns of purposiveness', as Margolis calls them, or the traces of intentional agency in the work.[103]

So far, I have given several reasons to think that the artistic notion of a medium avoids many of the issues encountered by the physical notion. For one, the artistic medium does not limit the use of different materials by an art form over time and over any other circumstantial state of affairs. The artistic medium also allows for the purpose of an artwork to be set by the artist, her cultural context and the context of her audience rather than by some mandatory physical material. Now, this might not yet convince medium specific proponents to replace the physical notion of a medium in their claims for the artistic notion. To understand why the latter notion will actually benefit medium specific arguments, let's return to the reasons why medium specificity came to be in the first place. The notion of the medium was created to offer distinctions between art forms by showing their specificities and, through these distinctions, to elevate certain practices to the status of artform. This was, and can still be, the goal of medium specificity. So as we can see, the artistic medium comes after the artistic practice and depends on it. The artistic practice has existed for a long time

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[102] *Ibid.*, 41.

[103] *Ibid.*, 41.

and has evolved with the help of a multitude of circumstantial conditions. The notion of medium was then formulated to track consistencies in our artistic practices, which can then help us understand and organize them better. As Davies reminds us, 'artworks, like tables and chairs, are artifacts, and our ways of grouping them reflect our practices and interests rather than "joints" in nature that we take such groupings to register'.[104] Therefore, if we want to resist Carroll and keep the notion of medium as a way of grouping our artistic practices as they evolve, we need to move on from the purely vehicular construal to the artistic construal. If anything, the artistic medium seems much more fitting for the original purposes of medium specificity that the vehicular notion may have seemed at first glance.[105]

2.2.3   *Artistic medium and artform*

I would now like to anticipate an issue with the artistic medium and at the same time take the opportunity to clarify the terminology established so far. In replacing the vehicular medium with the artistic medium one might want to say that we have erased the difference between the medium and the artform. Before, there was a clear distinction between an artform, roughly a specific human practice with aesthetic goals, and the physical medium, namely the material used in that practice. Now, if we define the medium as a set of artistic practices, what is the difference between the artform and the medium? Gaut foresees this problem and adds that without a way of

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[104] Davies, 'Categories of Art', 225.

[105] I do not consider any claims about the purity of artforms such as Greenberg's to be part of the original purposes of medium specificity. Rather, they can be understood as an unfortunate consequence of the physical construal of media.

distinguishing the medium from the artform, we would essentially be returning to Carroll's conclusion of abandoning the medium for the artform.[106]

Gaut's answer to this issue lies in his use of the term 'medium'. As I mentioned earlier, while Davies believes that there are two different types of medium, the vehicular and the artistic, Gaut would only ascribe the word medium to Davies' artistic medium, i.e. the set of practices surrounding an artform. For Gaut, the vehicular medium can simply be referred to as the material. But given this issue of distinguishing the medium from the art form, it is safer to go with Gaut's terminology rather than Davies'. The reason for this is that the category 'artistic medium' or 'art medium' is too restrictive and becomes undistinguishable from the artform. But on Gaut's definition of a medium the set of practices constituting that medium is not restricted to artistic practices.[107] Instead, it represents a larger set of practices, some of which are not artistic. Let's consider again the example of ceramic art, which is quite eloquent for this particular point: the conventions of this medium span over artistic and non-artistic objects. Interestingly, it is often difficult to separate the artistic conventions of ceramic art from its non-artistic conventions. Ceramic dishes can often be considered art objects, and their makers artists. Yet, this does not take anything away from their function as dishes. So to say that a medium can be constituted of both artistic and non-artistic practices does not mean that these practices are exclusively artistic or non-artistic. Ultimately, the ratio, so to speak, of artistic uses to non-artistic uses of the

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[106] Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art,* 289.

[107] Which in fact shows that it is not just a question of which category to call 'medium' but rather of how to demarcate the categories themselves. Davies and Gaut do not just have different terminology, they have different categories.

practices constituting a medium can vary greatly. Some media are almost exclusively used for non-artistic purposes (Gaut uses the example of telephone communications, which could conceivably be used in a piece of conceptual art). The important point to take away from this is that these variations are grounded in the intentions of artists and the shared understandings between artists and audiences.

Finally, let's return to Carroll's definition of a medium. As we have seen he considers tools and instruments to be part of the material of an artform. But we cannot accept this now, given all the definitional work done for the notion of the medium. Under our construal, tools and instruments must be on the side of the medium, i.e. of the set of practices, rather than on the side of the material. First of all, tools and instruments can be shared across different media. Second, the conventional use of a tool or instrument can be artistic or non-artistic. And third, the tools and instruments of an art form can change, that is the conventions of the medium can change, without creating a new artform. These three points clearly indicate that tools and instruments fall in the category of medium established here with the help of Gaut and Davies.

2.3   Basic Constituents and Differential Properties in the Film Medium

A lot of talk in the medium specificity debates naturally surrounds the notion of the medium itself. But this medium was only created to make sense of something more basic. Lessing called this the signs or the means of art forms. Carroll calls it 'the basic elements or constituents of the medium'.[108] And given that the aim of this chapter is to revise the different components of our conception of medium specificity, I must

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[108] Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media', 8.

now pay attention to these basic elements. For Lessing, and until Carroll, these basic elements were understood as physical properties of certain artforms. For instance, Lessing talked about the spatiality of painting and the temporality of poetry. It now becomes clear how the physical notion of the medium came about: to organise physical properties a physical notion was needed. But now that we have reformed the medium, we can also reform the basic properties.

2.3.1 *The physical properties vs. the sets of practices*

So how should we construe the basic constituents of the medium? The early film theorists faced the challenge of proving that the physical properties of films, which include photography, montage, acting, and so on, could produce artistic effects. The strength of their argument had to rely entirely on the medium itself, not on their individual capacities as filmmakers. The point was to show that film itself, not its different uses, had artistic potential. For instance, they would highlight certain physical aspects of the medium as being essentially artistic – remember for instance the six physical differences between film and mere recording presented by Arnheim. But it is precisely this choice to, seemingly, remove the artist and her use of the medium from discussions about the artistic potential of film that Carroll criticises.[109] For him, the artist's use takes priority over the constraints of the medium and his general objection to the physical medium extends to the physical conception of basic constituents. But given that Carroll has not given an alternative to the physical medium, he cannot find one for the basic constituents either. He asks: 'once we abandon a supposedly

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[109] I say 'seemingly' because as seen in the previous chapter, personal, social and cultural biases are very much involved in these choices.

physicalist account of the medium, how are we to determine what the basic elements or constituents of the medium are?'.[110] But with the definition of a medium presented in the previous section, we now have an answer to this question. Having rejected Carroll's defeatism about the medium, now construed as a set of practices, we can identify the basic constituents of the medium, not as physical features, but as practices.

A lot of reasons for adopting the set-of-practices construal of the medium, and thus to understand the basic constituents of the medium as practices, have already been examined in the previous section. Therefore, I want to focus here on understanding the precise differences between a basic constituent construed as a physical feature and as a practice within a set. These differences should not be too unfamiliar as they have appeared at different points of this chapter, but I wish to gather them all here for precision and salience.

The first difference is that the presence or absence of a specific practice in an art form can highlight a deliberate choice, whereas the presence or absence of a specific physical feature does not. I noted that the physical construal of the medium in the early medium specificity arguments placed the artistic potential in the medium itself, not in the filmmaker's hands. The filmmaker did not have a choice in using, let's say, editing as a mode of expression because without it the film would not have been art, so the story goes. Alternatively, if we construe editing not just as a physical feature of film but as a practice of filmmaking, then using editing in an expressive way becomes an artistic choice and its repeated use becomes a technique or even a style. Note that I am not claiming that all practices present in an artwork are the result of an artistic choice.

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[110] Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media', 8.

I am only saying that while under the physical construal none of the basic constituents are deliberate[111], under the set-of practices construal, some of them can be.

The second difference is the fact that a chosen practice within a set can highlight a certain function of the medium. Under the physical account of medium specificity, physical features set goals for the artist. But under a set-of-practices account, practices can showcase a certain function of the medium, i.e. not something it should be doing, but something it can do well. For instance, Bazin believed realism was the goal of film precisely because of the photographic nature of the medium. He thus favoured certain techniques like deep-focus, wide frames and long takes. Now, if we think of realism as a function of the medium and not as a goal determined by its physical features, we open the possibilities of realizing this particular function of the medium. Here we can draw a brief analogy with functionalism in philosophy of mind. One important premise of functionalism is the multiple realizability thesis. If we individuate mental states only by the role they play, then they technically could be realized in several ways. Similarly, if a practice of the medium can be specified only by the role it plays, then it could be realized in several ways. The realist tendency of cinema has had many instantiations that had nothing or little to do with the photographic nature of the medium. Practices such as location shooting, using non-professional actors, having semi-improvised

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[111] Here, a proponent of the physical construal might respond by saying that there can be deliberation in choosing the material of the medium, e.g. choosing celluloid over digital film. But there are two ways to object. First, I am not certain that proponents of the physical construal would see the two material options as belonging to the same medium. After all, silent-film theorists had difficulty accepting sound films as part of their medium and some contemporary filmmakers still debate whether digital cinema is on par with celluloid. And second, even if they did, none of the basic constituents within the chosen option would be deliberate.

scripts, focusing on social issues, etc. have all been used in realist movements such as Italian neorealism or British social realism. And while some of the filmmakers involved in these movements have also used the practices advocated by Bazin, the realism of their films is instantiated just as much by these photographic practices as it is by the practices mentioned above. In fact, filmmakers have also found ways to be make realist films by appealing to techniques in direct opposition with Bazin's preferences. For instance, some Italian neorealist filmmakers like Blasetti and Visconti made use of soviet montage techniques. A good example of this is Visconti's *La Terra Trema*.[112]

The third, and in my opinion most interesting, difference is that a chosen practice within a set refers meaningfully to the set. The first and the second differences show that the presence of a certain practice in an artwork can mean different things (by which I mean can express function, intention, etc) that would not be explained if we only looked at the physical features. I believe that this meaning is accessible precisely because we are looking at the practices within a larger set. The significance of a practice, i.e. what it can express, the role or function it plays in the overall work, etc., is enhanced because it stands in relation with many other practices. However, there are different ways of referring meaningfully to the set. A practice can be meaningful because it is in accordance with the set or because it is in contrast with the set. One example of a practice in accordance with the set is the use of Dutch tilts, i.e. shots where the camera is deliberately tilted, often paired with a tight frame, in film noir and horror. First used in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the Dutch tilt has come to signify tension and psychological discomfort, so much so that the technique has

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[112] See Wagstaff, *Italian Neorealist Cinema.*

now become a cliché.[113] Every subsequent use of the Dutch tilt can refer to all the different uses of this practice in noir and horror and comes to have a certain meaning in virtue of this and not in virtue of any essential feature of the medium.

Image 2-1 Clockwise, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), The Third Man (1949), 12 Monkeys (1995) and Do The Right Thing (1989)

On the other hand, an example in contemporary filmmaking of a practice in contrast with the set is the explicit use of 'external footage sources'. For instance, the viewer will be taken away from the familiar perspective of the third-person camera to GoPro, smartphone or even drone footage. This is made explicit by a number of things: the angles, the quality of the image, sometimes even graphics used to recreate the settings visible on the camera screen. One recent example of such technique can

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[113] See Sipos, *Horror Film Aesthetics.*

be found in Ridley Scott's *The Martian.* The main character's isolation on Mars is illustrated through his daily video logs and GoPro footage, technology being his only mode of communication.
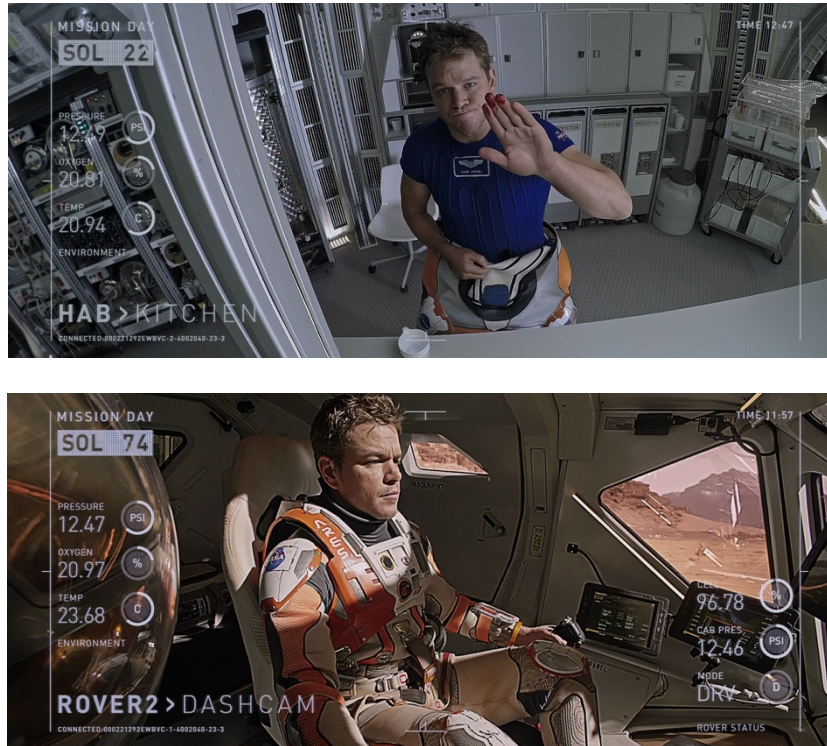
Image 2-2 The Martian (2015)

This is an excellent example of a contrasting practice as it goes against several assumptions strongly held by filmmakers and viewers: (1) that the film is a somewhat transparent object in the sense that the viewer pretends there is no recording equipment between her and the action filmed, (2) that there is no acknowledgement in the film that the action is recorded and (3) that films have some kind of visual continuity.[114] In external footage cases, the viewer is made aware of the recording

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[114] Naturally, there are many examples of films breaking any one of these conventions. For instance, a character talking directly to the camera used to be one of these contrasting practices. Interestingly, it has now become a well-known practice of the set and audiences recognize it when it occurs. The

equipment, the recording equipment often interacts with the action (e.g. a drone image is disturbed by an explosion) and visual continuity is purposefully disrespected for various effects. Note that the practice of using external footage sources is not exclusively an artistic practice. Drone footage has primarily a military purpose and GoPro footage mostly a recreational purpose. This vindicates the notion of medium proposed by Gaut, as a more general category not to be identified with the art form.

2.3.2   *Practices and differential properties*

I now wish to turn my attention to a special group of basic constituents that can only be fully appreciated if we construe them as practices and not as essential physical features. Gaut calls these 'differential properties – properties that distinguish one group of media from another group, but that are not necessarily unique to any particular medium'.[115] Film is a particularly good case study of this. Think about some the basic constituents of film: photography, acting, screenwriting, music. None of these practices are unique to film, and yet they are extremely significant to the medium. It is then clear that if we are to revise the notion of medium specificity from its application in film, a study of differential properties is essential.

Now, differential properties might seem problematic for the proponents of medium specificity. The original medium specificity arguments talked a lot about the uniqueness of media. Some proponents of these arguments identified media by the

difference with external footage sources is that they break all the conventions mentioned at the same time and in a way not witnessed before. But it should not be long before it too becomes an accepted practice, as modern audiences start to recognize it as such.

[115] Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art,* 291-292.

features that were unique to them, while others argued more strongly that artists should only be concerned with the features that are unique to their medium. Carroll rightly objected that this line of argument has unpalatable consequences, as features deemed essential to different media could not be used by an artist solely because they were not unique to one medium. His example was the practice of narration, important to both novels and films. It would be unacceptable to argue that only one of these media can make use of narration simply to satisfy uniqueness. Carroll reminds us that the medium specificity arguments have two components, excellence and differentiation, and that they rely on the assumption that the features satisfying one of the components always satisfy the second.[116] But in the case of differential properties, such as narration for film and literature, this is obviously false, as several media can excel at it and be identified by it. Ultimately, Carroll wants us to prioritize excellence and the overall artistic effect instead of the differentiating constraints of the medium, the cost being any medium specific claim as well as the notion of medium itself.

This is not a cost I am prepared to pay, especially because I believe that Carroll has misunderstood the nature of differential properties. Carroll is construing narration as a physical feature used by certain media. But we have now agreed to construe basic constituents of media as practices. And practices belong and refer to a set. Therefore, narration in literature belongs and refers to the set of literary practices, whereas narration in film belongs and refers to the set of cinematographic practices. Carroll, on the other hand, seems to construe narration as an isolated and defined constituent to be plugged in to which ever art form requires it. But construed as a practice, narration is not isolated. It adapts and responds to other practices in the medium.

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[116] Carroll, 'The Specificity of Media', 12-13.

Narration in film is different from narration in literature because both media will produce different combinations of practices. In film, narration interacts with cinematography, acting, music, etc., while in literature narration relies on a whole different set of techniques and practices.[117] I mentioned earlier that film is almost entirely composed of differential properties, but these are still specific to film: photography in film is not just photography, it is cinematography. Acting in film is not just acting, it is screen acting, i.e. a discipline of its own that requires specific training.[118] The same goes for the other basic constituents, screenwriting and film scoring. What differentiates each media is precisely the specific *combinations* of the practices, not the practices on their own. And what the media excel at are also these combinations, not the use of a single practice.

In fact, we find that critics focus on these combinations in evaluating artworks. In her review of Maren Ade's comedy *Toni Erdmann,* Catherine Wheatley writes 'Patrick Orth's camerawork is mostly minimalist, the better to show off the astounding performances' and later 'so there is liberation – genuine liberation – in the characters' ostensible reconciliation towards the film's end, as the camera, for the first time, takes

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[117] For a helpful overview of the differences between narration in novels and narration in films, see Chatman, 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (And Vice Versa)'.

[118] For an early discussion of the differences between stage and screen acting, see Kracauer, 'Remarks on the Actor', excerpted from *Theory of Film,* 93-101, in Knopf's *Theater and Film,* 323-332. This quote sums up his ideas: 'Stage actor and screen actor differ from each other in two ways. The first difference concerns the qualities they must possess to meet the demands of their media. The second difference bears on the functions they must assume in theatrical plays and, film narratives respectively', *Theater and Film*, 323.

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flight for an extended tracking shot'.[119] Here the critic is clearly showing how the cinematography serves both the acting and the narration. She is not evaluating these elements independently because then we would miss out on a crucial aspect of filmmaking, i.e. using combinations of practices, including differential properties, to achieve certain artistic effects.

As a result, the problem Carroll highlighted, namely that differential properties lead medium specificity arguments to unpalatable conclusions, is not an issue anymore because differential properties take part in combinations specific to each medium. But I think there is more to differential properties than just the fact that they are not as problematic as Carroll thought. I believe that just as practices refer to each other meaningfully within a set, differential properties can also make meaningful connections between media. Sure, screen acting is different from stage acting because of how it interacts with the other practices of film. But a critic could perfectly say that the acting in a film is theatrical. The implications of a judgement like this are not necessarily negative, that is, the critic is not necessarily saying that the actors are doing something they should not. Simply, it means that the actors are using the differential practice of acting in a way that refers to the occurrences of the practice in another medium, namely theatre. This reference can have aesthetic merit or not. For instance, Wong Kar-wai's use of colour relies on what is called 'smudge-motion', a cinematography technique which uses long exposure to produce a blurred effect. The technique has been compared to Modernist and Futurist aspirations for painting. Yet, critics still remind us that his use of colour blends particularly well with his soundtracks, producing as a

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[119] Wheatley, 'Toni Erdmann', 89.

result a well-known signature style.[120] This is a particularly successful example of a cinematography practice referring meaningfully to both other media and other practices within its own medium.

Image 2-3 Wong Kar-wai, top: Fallen Angels (1995), bottom: In the Mood for Love (2000)

2.3.3   The explanatory power of the practices construal of basic constituents

Having just examined differential properties and Carroll's misconstrual of them, we can now see with more clarity the limit of defining the basic constituents of media in terms of physical features. What does it mean for something like narration to be physical? Even with Lopes' addition of symbolic material, does construing the basic constituents as merely physical gives us the best possible explanation of the role the

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[120] See Nochimson, *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai.*

constituents play in the structure of artworks and of media? These questions require an answer here precisely because the goal of this chapter is to revise the different components of medium specificity so that the notion resists Carroll's objections, but more importantly so that it provides better explanations of how we categorize and evaluate artworks. As such, in this section I will explore the conditions required for a theory to have more explanatory power than another and show that these conditions are met by the practices construal and not by the physical construal of basic constituents.

The problem is that there is no unified account of explanatory power. There are many explanatory virtues accepted more or less widely in the literature, as well as a few specific accounts designed to fit only certain types of theories.[121] Therefore, we need to determine the explanatory virtues that do concern us. In other words, what do we want for the best possible explanation of basic constituents? What we are looking for, i.e. a theory of medium specificity, is not a scientific theory exactly, but a theory about a human phenomenon. Therefore, it does not have quite the same epistemic aims. I have stressed several times the fact that the notion of medium is man-made. Its purpose is to reflect something about our artistic practices, interests and needs, as they evolve, not to track a law of nature. For instance, an explanatory virtue such as predictive power is not really our concern here. However, something like the ability to accommodate a large number of observations, let's call it robustness, would be helpful to us. Also of use would be an explanation that can accommodate new and surprising observations, i.e. flexibility. After all, we are following an ongoing phenomenon, which has taken surprising turns in the past. Our theory needs to be flexible enough to not

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[121] See Strevens, *Depth* or Glymour 'Probability and Explanatory Virtues'.

fall apart at the next one. To this, we can add precision, factual accuracy and integration.[122] Precision concerns the amount of information about the phenomenon provided by the explanation. Artworks and their relations to their media are complex phenomena, especially if we pay attention to the differential properties and the new developments in mixed and hybrid media. Therefore, fine-grained explanations are required. Factual accuracy is quite self-evident but still needs to be spelled out. As I have said, we will be working with observations of our use of media and of their practices. These observations need to track the phenomenon in question as accurately as possible, which means that we must make sure they are not influenced by cognitive biases or other detracting factors. Lastly, the degree of integration refers to how well the explanation fits in a larger (and sanctioned) theoretical framework. Basic constituents, as their appellation indicates, are constitutional features of artworks and art forms. Our understanding of them will have ontological consequences for these other important categories. As such, the construal we choose must be consistent with at least some of our most plausible theories of art. Naturally, because we are not investigating a scientific phenomenon, we cannot be too demanding on integration. In our case, integration will be hard to measure, but because it is a matter of degree all we need is to show that one explanation is more integrated than another, and I believe that this can easily be done here.

So, how does the practice construal compare to the physical construal according to this set of criteria? First of all, we must recognize, trivially, that the physical construal of the basic constituents of the medium, especially of film, does not

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[122] These last three virtues come from an account of explanatory power developed by Ylikoski and Kuorikoski, 'Dissecting Explanatory Power'.

have the hindsight that we do. The amount of observable phenomena is much greater now than it was when the physical construal was developed. Then, the artistic possibilities of film were mostly unknown. Therefore, it is understandable that artists and theorists tried to infer as much as they could from the few observable uses of the medium (hence the inductive issues highlighted before). But now, we have the opportunity not only to make many more inferences than was possible before, but also to recognise incorrect inferences where they occurred. This does not entirely keep the problem of induction at bay, but we can still consider ourselves on safer ground than before.

Moreover, the amount of observable data is only going to increase. So, in order to avoid the mistake of the physical construal, we need an explanation that can accommodate unanticipated developments. In other words, the explanation needs to be flexible. In this regard, the practices construal is much more advantageous than the physical construal. I have shown in the previous chapter that the physical construal led to time-sensitive understandings of the medium as it could not accommodate for technological advancements. For instance, silent-film theorists put forward arguments that could not be maintained in the face of sound-technology. Similarly, Bazin's claims about the photographic nature of film cannot be maintained in the face of digital technology. This lack of flexibility is entirely due to the physical construal as it individuates the medium based on its historical or current physical state. However, on the practices construal, there is no such internal limit, especially because the practices available in the medium are not necessarily artistic practices.

On to precision: can we say that the physical construal achieved a greater degree of precision than the practices construal? I have said that the physical construal used a smaller set of observations to reach its conclusions. But I also believe that it

lacked precision regarding the observations it did make and the explanations that followed from these observations. For instance, how fine-grained was Bazin's claim that film is essentially a realist medium? He based his claim on the observation that, film being an extension of photography, it is a photographic medium. But photography is also a photographic medium. So does Bazin mean to say that film is essentially a realist medium exactly in the same as way as photography is? I have shown that to be inaccurate, as filmmakers have found non-photographic ways of being realist, but it also lacks precision because it gives an explanation that would suit both photography and film. In principle, this explanation does not have to be false, but it is too coarse-grained and does not give us all the relevant information. A more fine-grained claim would be to say that film makes use of a differential property, i.e. photography and pairs it with other properties in specific combinations, some of which can produce a realist effect.

Now, when it comes to factual accuracy, I believe the practice construal is also better off than the physical construal. In the first chapter I noted that a lot of the medium specific arguments based on the physical construal were prone to false inductions. In most cases, one physical feature among many in the medium was selected and presented as an essential feature of the medium. From there, claims about the goals of the medium were made. As we have seen, certain biases were at the root of these false inductions, possibly confirmation and authority biases, as well as some mere exposure effects. These arguments were sensitive to cognitive biases because the artists and theorists who produced them had high stakes in the success of their claims. They did not simply seek to describe their medium, they also attempted to shape it for their own purposes. On the other hand, the only goal of the practices construal is to describe as closely as possible the structure of our media. It is not attached to any

particular artistic or theoretical goal. Therefore, we can assume that it will be less prone to the inductive fallacies that were inherent to the physical construal.

Finally, there is integration. I am using this criterion more loosely than philosophers of science, who often bring it up in relation to the idea of the unity of science. I, for certain, am not attempting a global theoretical framework of the arts. All I wish is for my explanation of the basic constituents of media to be consistent with some current and plausible theories of art or at the very least to not commit itself to implausible theories. To begin, it is the case that the physical construal of media as it has been developed commits itself to implausible theories. It is committed to an extreme version of formalism because it claims that all the aesthetic potential of an artwork is derived from certain physical features. This commitment to extreme formalism relies on another unpalatable commitment, namely class-essentialism, which asserts 'the possession, essentially, of some specific property by all members of a class (as a condition of class-membership)', as identified by Peter Lamarque.[123] As we have seen in multiple instances, there are always counterexamples to what is considered an essential property to all members of a medium. And given that flexibility is another of our *desiderata* for a theory of medium specificity, we cannot accept class-essentialism, nor extreme formalism.

But it is not just the case that the physical construal is committed to implausible theories. It is also the case that the practices construal can be integrated in a plausible theoretical framework. When mentioning the three main differences between a physical feature and a practice earlier, I said that a practice can manifest an artistic

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[123] Lamarque, *Work and Object,* 101.

choice. I am not especially committed to an intentionalist view of art here, but at the very least the practices construal allows for moderate intentionalism if one wishes to make it a decisive part of our theoretical framework, which would be more plausible than extreme formalism. I also said that a practice can manifest a function of the medium. Again, I am not committed to aesthetic functionalism, especially to its most extreme version, i.e. the reduction thesis, or austere functionalism.[124] But there is space in the practices construal for a weaker, and more plausible, version of functionalism. This is not entirely conclusive, but I will rest for now on the idea that the practices construal is better integrated than the physical construal. Chapter 5 of this thesis will be dedicated to fleshing out the implications of this new theory of medium specificity for aesthetics overall. Until then, I think it is safe to conclude that the practices construal is a more powerful account of the basic constituents of media than the physical construal because it takes into consideration more observations, can accommodate change and is more precise, accurate and integrated.

2.4 Limits

Now, it is one thing to say that one construal has more explanatory power than another. It is another for a construal to be the right explanation, regardless of explanatory power. Sure, the set-of-practices construal is much more plausible than the physical construal and medium specificity is better off with the former construal than the latter. But in redefining the medium and its basic constituents, we modified the notion dramatically, which means that some of the original aims of the notion must

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[124] See Hansson, 'Aesthetic Functionalism' for a discussion of the different positions on functionalism and an argument in favour of a moderate view, i.e. aesthetic duality.

have been lost. The first big difference is that the notion used to be prescriptive, while it is now purely descriptive. This is an important loss for the original proponents of medium specificity, but one we must live with if we want to avoid Carroll's objections and have a theory with actual explanatory power. After all, the project of individuating media and understanding their structure is not prescriptive by nature. As we have seen, it is only because the principles of individuation were physical that, through some kind of naturalistic fallacy, certain theorists construed medium specificity prescriptively. Moreover, it is not because media and art forms are 'self-consciously invented' categories as Carroll reminds us, that the motive of this invention must be prescriptive.[125] When Lessing formulated his claims, he was responding to a description of the arts, namely Batteux's, which he deemed inaccurate. He then offered us a theoretical model to understand the structure of art works and their relations to each other. Thus, I do not believe that letting go of the prescriptive component of medium specificity will be the death of it. In fact, focusing on the descriptive mission of medium specificity might be bring us closer to its original aim than its prescriptive versions.

However, with the practices construal, we might still be losing one important asset of the physical construal – its straightforward naturalism. Physical features were the first natural candidates for individuating media. They were easily identifiable by artists and audiences and their effects more or less tested and understood (think for instance of the methods of Soviet montage). From there, a strong dependence relation could be established between physical features and media. We have seen why it ultimately fails, but we cannot deny the initial appeal of such a simple strategy to

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[125] Carroll, 'Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts'.

individuate media. On the other hand, can the new construal developed here establish a similarly strong dependence relation between basic constituents and media? One might argue that if we understand media as sets of practices and allow for new practices to constantly enter the set on the basis of artistic intentions and functions, it becomes difficult to see what is specific about one medium. To this, I have given something of an answer by pointing out that practices refer meaningfully to each other within their sets and that it is these meaningful combinations which individuate media. But then I have also pointed out that differential practices can be used in a medium to refer meaningfully to other media. So it seems that under the new construal, we do not have a strong dependence relation between practices and media. This was of course somewhat intentional, as theoretical flexibility was prioritized. Nonetheless, a strong dependence relation between media and their basic constituents was a crucial aspect of the notion of medium specificity and we seem to have lost it. What we need is a better sort of natural ground for medium specificity as I have revisited it, something to externally justify the reformulation of the notion and its usefulness for aesthetic theories. The next two chapters will be dedicated to finding these natural grounds and establishing a dependence relation between them, media and their basic constituents.

2.5 Conclusion

In the conclusion to the previous chapter, it seemed that Carroll's pessimistic claims about medium specificity were unavoidable. This is why, in this chapter, I have not attempted to respond directly to Carroll's objections. Instead, I tried to revise the notion he was attacking in the first place so that his objections would not apply any more. I began by arguing for an alternative definition of medium. While Carroll was focused on attacking the physical definition, he did not think that the notion of

medium specificity could be salvaged if we defined media not physically but as sets of practices. Pushing the implications of this new definition, I also revised the construal of the basic constituents of media endorsed originally by proponents of medium specificity. Not only does this revised version of medium specificity avoid Carroll's objections, but it is overall more plausible than the original version – I have shown this by comparing the explanatory power of both versions and by concluding in favour of the new one. All that is missing now to justify the purpose of medium specificity as I have reformulated it are natural grounds for the notion.

Chapter 3 Empirically Investigating Media and Responses

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I put in motion the first phase of a theory reconstruction project for the notion of medium specificity. I systematically proposed alternative definitions for the different components of the notion, including the medium itself, now understood as a set of practices. I also argued that the theory of medium specificity I began to outline had more explanatory power than its original formulation. However, I also admitted that under the new formulation, medium specificity had lost some ground. That is, there was simply not much left of the specificity part of medium specificity. Under the old formulation, there was something physical to point at to show the specificity of a medium. We have lost this particular physical ground, but that does not mean that we cannot find another. To begin this process, I will examine empirical work on the relations between our minds and media – how we perceive and process them – and attempt to find an adequate natural ground there. The next chapter will be concerned with properly grounding medium specificity in the mind by establishing a dependence relation between minds and media, but for now I focus on bringing up the relevant information to do so. In order to structure the vast amount of empirical data available, I will present evidence for each of the three main components of my theory, as identified in the previous chapter: the medium itself, the basic constituents or practices, and the differential properties.

3.2   The Mind and the Medium

The goal of this section is to understand how the mind experiences the phenomenon of medium as a whole. As I have indicated in the introduction, in order to get the adequate empirical foundation to build a new theory of medium specificity, I need to explore each aspect of the notion, going from the general, i.e. the medium itself, to the specific, i.e. the practices of the medium

When it comes to appreciating art, which usually requires experiencing it, Walton has taught us that the category to which an artwork belongs is essential.[126] In fact, we do not just recognize the category of an artwork when we perceive it, but we directly perceive the artwork in its category. What he calls 'category' includes 'media, genre, styles, forms, and so forth'[127], which in our picture would correspond to media as sets of practices and subsets of practices. Although Walton describes his idea as a 'psychological thesis', which it is, he does not bring up any empirical evidence to defend it. He does however bring up what he calls '*causes* of our perceiving works in certain categories',[128] which sound like reasonable psychological hypotheses. First, Walton claims that perceiving a work in its category depends on our exposure to that category. Second, he includes testimony as influencing our perceiving a work in a particular category. Third, the context in which we are introduced to a work will have a similar influence on perceptual categorization. In fact, these causes come close to describing psychological and neurological findings. In their model of aesthetic

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[126] Walton, 'Categories of Art'.

[127] *Ibid.*, 339.

[128] *Ibid.*, 341.

experience and appreciation, Leder et al.[129] include, among a lot of other things, some evidence that can corroborate Walton's three claims. And since presenting all the evidence of interest for this section is a daunting task, this seems like a safe enough place to start.

Leder and Nadal describe their model as a 'descriptive information-processing model of the components that integrate an aesthetic episode'.[130] They have identified different stages of an aesthetic episode, from input (i.e. perceptual experience) to output (i.e. aesthetic judgement and aesthetic emotion). They have also identified a large number of different variables that can influence the processing at different stages (e.g. context, social discourse, previous experience). Regarding Walton's first claim, namely that personal experience influences perceptual categorisation, we need to look at the first three stages of the model and in particular at the implicit memory integration stage.[131] This latter stage is particularly interesting for our purposes because it implies that the identification of the category of an object happens unconsciously. This would corroborate Walton's idea that we do not recognize the category of an object but that we automatically perceive it. As the model shows, explicit classification depends on this implicit processing. Leder and Nadal also posit that this stage is directly influenced by previous experience, a variable difficult to measure, but visible in the studies presented below.

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[129] Leder et al. 'A Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgments' and Leder and Nadal, 'Ten Years of a Model of Aesthetic Appreciation'.

[130] Leder and Nadal, 'Ten Years', 443.

[131] The 'implicit' is absent on figure 1 but Leder and Nadal still refer to this stage as 'implicit memory integration' in the paper, similarly to the original model.

Pre-classification
Artwork, Object of
aesthetic Interest

Context: Museum - Gallery - Aesthetic Experiment - Private Spaces

Social Interaction
Discourse

previous
experience

domain specific expertise
declarative knowledge
interest, personal taste

Memory
Integration

Explicit
Classification

Perceptual
Analyses

Perc. Fluency
Complexity
Contrast
Symmetry
Order
Grouping

Familiarity
Fluency

Prototypic.

Content

Style

Cognitive
Mastering

Art-specific
Interpretation

Self-related
Interpretation

Evaluation

Cognitive State
Understanding
Ambiguity

Affective State
Satisfaction
Pleasure

Aesthetic Judgment

Aesthetic Emotion

Emotional Affective State

Continuous Affective Evaluation

automatic   deliberate

Model of Aesthetic Experiences (adpated from Leder, Belke, Oeberst & Augustin, 2004). Painting by HL.

Figure 3-1 Leder and Nadal's model of aesthetic experiences

During this implicit processing, Leder et al. and Leder and Nadal have included different effects. The first one is prototypicality. The prototypicality of an object depends on how much it exemplifies the category to which it belongs. For instance, the Hektar lamp from Ikea is a very prototypical lamp, with a flat round base from which stems a long and straight neck supporting an adjustable round head. On the other hand, the 'torn lights' designed by Billy May, are not, as they are camouflaged fixtures meant to look like tears in a wall.

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Image 3-1 Left, Ikea Hektar lamp; right, Billy May's torn lights

Psychological evidence show that people value prototypical objects. These findings support the Preference-for-Prototype theory developed by T.W.A. Whitfield, according to which there is an increasing monotonic function between beauty and prototypicality for certain categories.[132] Leder et al.'s reasoning is that if this theory is true, then prior experience of a category is necessary to recognize an object as prototypical of that category. Along with evidence of the effect for non-aesthetic objects (e.g. faces, colours), Leder et al. mention a study by Paul Hekkert and P. C. W. van Wieringen, who measured the preference-for-protoypicality effect on experts and non-experts with Cubist paintings.[133] A more recent study was conducted by Andràs Farkas, which showed how non-experts can learn a new artistic category (in this case, surrealist style in painting).[134] The participants were school students (14 and 17 years old) who had no prior knowledge of the style they were being exposed to. Farkas

[132] Whitfield, 'Predicting Preference for Familiar, Everyday Objects'.

[133] Hekkert and van Wieringen, 'Complexity and Prototypicality'.

[134] Farkas, 'Prototypicality-Effect in Surrealist Paintings'.

divided the participants in two groups and exposed them to thirty surrealist paintings. After four rounds of exposure, the first group was exposed for another two rounds to the thirty initial paintings as well as ten considered more prototypical than the initial thirty. The second group was exposed for another two rounds to the thirty initial paintings as well as ten considered less prototypical. The students were able to discriminate between the most typical and the least typical and rated the ten most typical higher than the thirty initial paintings, and the least typical lower than the thirty initial paintings. Another interesting aspect of this study is that it pairs familiarity, or mere exposure, with prototypicality, both of which are present in the implicit memory integration stage.[135] It is not clear that mere exposure has anything to do with experience, at least long-term experience of other objects, but if it operates as an aid for prototypicality, then it is relevant.[136]

Another related effect, not included in the model, is novelty. We might think that prototypicality is cutting it too close to stereotypicality, which would generate negative, rather than positive affect. But we also might think that the more familiar we are with a category, the more we are able to enjoy novel category members. Unfortunately, there is no research on this effect for 'traditionally' aesthetic objects, but there is for industrial design. Hekkert, Snelders and van Wieringen found that people prefer novelty as long as it does not affect typicality, or, phrased differently, they prefer

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[135] Mere exposure is the effect by which the more a subject is exposed to a stimulus, the more value she will ascribe to the stimulus.

[136] I will not discuss mere-exposure further as the measures taken of this effects for art are ambiguous at best. See Meskin et al. 'Mere Exposure to Bad Art'.

typicality given that this is not to the detriment of novelty.[137] Preferred are products with an optimal combination of both aspects. This confirms a principle used in industrial design called MAYA (Most Advanced Yet Acceptable), which also explains why Billy May's torn lights are considered a valuable work.

The last effect included in the implicit memory integration stage is fluency.[138] The effect only appears in the updated version of the model, both under the perceptual analyses stage as perceptual fluency and under the memory integration stage as fluency (Leder and Nadal must be referring to the broader phenomenon known as processing fluency, of which perceptual fluency is a kind), and unfortunately, they do not really discuss it. This might be because it is an elusive phenomenon, at least more so than familiarity, prototypicality or novelty. Indeed, in early work on perceptual fluency, Rolf Reber, Norbert Schwarz and Piotr Winkielman only define it as a 'subjective feeling' that increases liking and leads to positive judgements.[139] More recently, they define it as 'the ease of identifying the physical identity of the stimulus'.[140] According to the literature on the subject, it seems that fluency depends on both objective and subjective factors. That is, objects can have features that we process particularly fluently (small amount of information, symmetry, etc.). But we can also possess qualities that will allow us to process certain objects more fluently. In this case, we are after the

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[137] Hekkert, Snelders and van Wieringen, 'Most Advanced Yet Acceptable'.

[138] Fluency replaced peak shift effects in the original model. Peak shift effects were studied by Ramachandran and Hirstein, 'The Science of Art', but it has been shown that they largely overestimated the importance of these effects for aesthetic experience. It is thus not surprising that Leder and Nadal replaced them by a broader but more interesting phenomenon, i.e. fluency.

[139] See Reber, Winkielman and Schwarz, 'Effects of Perceptual Fluency', 45.

[140] Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman, 'Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure', 366.

subjective factors. If personal experience of a category can give us perceptual fluency for objects belonging to that category, then Walton's claim will be further supported. For instance, there is some evidence suggesting that prototypical stimuli are easier to process in virtue of our familiarity with their category.[141] Unfortunately, the overall empirical picture is not as simple. The objective features promoting fluency can sometimes seem to be contradicting, or at least moderating, the subjective features. Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman address this issue in their general investigation of fluency. They admit that on the one hand simple visual stimuli are easier to process, thus providing the satisfactory feeling of fluency. On the other, they reasonably presume that expertise increases fluency. Yet, it has often been demonstrated that experts prefer complex visual stimuli as opposed to novices who prefer the simpler ones.[142] For Reber, Schwarz and Winkielman, it is still reasonable to assume that expertise increases fluency for complex stimuli, despite the fact that they lack objective fluency, possibly because objective and subjective fluency operate on different levels and do not necessarily overlap. Thus, experts could still experience subjective fluency when facing stimuli that lack the objective features of fluency.

A related phenomenon, not mentioned by Leder et al., can shed some light on the role of fluency in perceptual expertise, and that is holistic processing. Richler, Wong and Gauthier define holistic processing as 'the tendency to process separate features as a single unified whole [which] can help us discriminate between objects within a

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[141] See *ibid.*, 372, mentioning Reber, Stark and Squire, 'Cortical Areas Supporting Category Learning' and others.

[142] Reber et al. mention McWhinnie 'A Review of Research on Aesthetic Measure'.

category'.[143] Initially associated with face recognition, holistic processing has now been observed in other individuating situations. So far, the suggestion is that holistic processing indicates expertise in individuating objects within a category. In other words, experts in certain domains can identify objects of that domain by focusing on general, instead of specific, features that will be markers of the domain. They see the whole picture instead of a mixture of parts.

But just like perceptual fluency, the empirical evidence can be contradictory. In recent work on perceptual expertise of Chinese characters, it was shown that novices do not attend selectively to the characters, while expert readers do.[144] For Richler, Wong and Gauthier the fact that novice readers do not selectively attend is not sufficient to show that they holistically attend. The reason for this is a qualitative difference between the holistic attention that experts are capable of and what novices exhibit in certain contexts. Holistic processing in experts is more automatic and stable than the equivalent observed in novices. The similarities with fluency are now fairly evident. They are both implicit, automatic processes that occur at the beginning of a perceptual episodes, and they are both constitutive of perceptual expertise. However, their relation to each other is not entirely clear yet. Wong and Gauthier found a correlation between the two types of processing only in experts (fluency reported in novices co-occurred with a decrease in holistic attendance).[145] Thus, we can only conclude that perceptual expertise is in part constituted by holistic processing and

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[143] Richler, Wong and Gauthier 'Perceptual Expertise', 129.

[144] Hsiao and Cottrell, 'Not all Visual Expertise is Holistic'.

[145] Wong and Gauthier, 'Holistic Processing of Musical Notation'.

fluency, but we cannot assert the symmetrical claim that both processes necessarily indicate expertise.

At this point, we should take stock of the limits encountered so far. Leder et al.'s model is perhaps the most advanced model of aesthetic experience proposed in the literature, but it also falls short in many ways. For one, the model does not include some of the effects I have mentioned, such as novelty and holistic processing. Naturally, the model does not claim to describe the phenomenon of aesthetic experience in its entirety. But given that novelty and holistic processing are closely related to effects which are mentioned in the model, namely prototypicality and fluency, they would make excellent candidates for the next update of the model.

There is however a deeper issue, which is the measurability of the effects in the first place. As Leder *et al.* admit, the difficulty lies in the fact that they vary according to individual experience. Thus, experimental studies are often imprecise on the question. Studies on experts are less common, but they are still a step in the right direction. So far, the research only points to general processing differences between experts and non-experts.[146] It is natural to assume that the cause of these differences is a difference in experience. We are just unsure about the relation between different kinds of experience and different kinds of perceptual categorisation. It does not help

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[146] For instance, Leder et al. in 'What Makes an Art Expert?' show through facial EMG data that expertise attenuates emotional response to both positive and negative stimulus. In other words, experts are more emotionally detached from the artworks they are experiencing than laypeople. An interesting hypothesis is that their emotional processing is toned down because they are paying closer attention to other elements of the artwork, such as style. This could mean that experts are capable of more fine-grained perceptual categorization, an intuitive, but difficult to pin down, conclusion.

that often, the 'expert' participants in these studies are art history students. Their expertise is usually measured by giving them a test, which only measures the amount of declarative knowledge they bring to the study. We do not really know of the effects of long-term familiarity, know-how, and so on., which characterize expertise more broadly.

An unexplored possibility to test this is the case study. If what we really want to know is the effect of long-term experience, in all its shapes, on aesthetic perception, emotion and judgement, then the depth and precision of information achievable with case study research might be a promising start. Potentially, following the aesthetic education of an individual, or a group of individuals, in context, with the methodological tools of case study research could bring forth information we have so far ignored. The question is, could these benefits outweigh the methodological hindrances usually associated with case studies (time, cost, replicability, etc.)?

The main takeaway though, is that experience, of one sort or the other, is psychologically central to appreciating objects within their category. And if we posit that successful appreciation requires successful perception, then the prototypicality, novelty, fluency and holistic processing effects indicate that Walton's first claim is correct. Experience gives us perceptual fluency, which allows us to categorize objects adequately and to identify their degree of typicality and novelty.

His second and third claims, i.e. that testimony and context play a role in determining our experience of art categories, can be treated together in Leder et al.'s model, as they relate to two interrelated variables, namely social interaction discourse and context. In Leder et al.'s model, information is not processed linearly. There are many feedback loops, indicated by the direction of the arrows, to allow for overlapping and simultaneous processes and for variables to take effect at different stages. Overall,

this gives the model flexibility, which is methodologically preferable, and characterizes an aesthetic episode as an integrated experience, which satisfies plausibility. Social interaction discourse and context are two of those variables influencing different stages of the experience. For our purposes, the most interesting influence they have is on a stage that Leder et al. have called 'pre-classification', which occurs before the aesthetic object is perceived. At this stage, subjects have received relevant information from the context they are in and the social discourse they have engaged in. Doing so, they prepare themselves to perceive the stimulus as belonging to an aesthetic category, thereby warranting an 'aesthetic attitude' (i.e. prolonged viewing time, positive judgments).[147] This obviously does not tell us if context and social discourse can prepare the subject to perceive a specific aesthetic category, such as the category of film or the sub-category of arthouse film. And although it is highly plausible that the more specific the context becomes (e.g. a small independent cinema), the more specific our expectations will be (e.g. an arthouse film), it does not prove that the information gained during pre-classification can do so much for perceptual categorisation. Luckily, the model shows that social discourse has some indirect influence on the implicit memory integration phase. According to Leder et al. social discourse gives us domain specific expertise and declarative knowledge, e.g. someone explaining to us the distinctive features of exploitation cinema and pointing them out in the work of

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[147] The term 'aesthetic attitude' here does not directly refer to the eighteenth-century theory, but to a psychological hypothesis that elaborates on it. Brieber et al., 'Art in Time and Space', have shown that context is a modulating factor in aesthetic experience. According to their study, subjects in a museum context spend more time viewing artworks and report more positive aesthetic experiences than subjects in a laboratory context.

Nicolas Winding Refn, which in turn penetrates our experience of the category of exploitation films. And as shown earlier, experience is central to perceptual categorization. This is in a good example of the nonlinearity of the model. In fact, it is also an example of its circularity. Social discourse is also fed by the overall output of an aesthetic episode, namely aesthetic emotion and judgement. This means that through the mechanism described above, the output of previous aesthetic episodes will constitute experience, which itself will inform the implicit categorisation of new artworks. This brings us back to Walton's first claim, namely that one's that personal experience influences perceptual categorisation.

3.3 The Mind and the Practices

3.3.1 *Attention and cinematography*

It is now time to explore the way the human mind identifies and understands what I have called – after Carroll – the 'basic constituents' of media, and later the 'practices' that make up media. The key phenomenon to tackle here is that of attention. Often, philosophers interested in the human response to art, focus on the idea of an overall impression or experience of an artwork. Sometimes, they look into the foundations of this overall experience or impression and observe that it depends on a type of cognitive process, during which only some of the stimuli offered in any given situation are selected to be processed. The resulting experience is not of the artwork as a whole but of a feature or features of the artwork. The study of this type of cognitive process, namely attention, is ubiquitous in psychology and increasingly so in empirical aesthetics. Film, in particular, has elicited a large amount of research in the psychology of attention. However, our luck ends here, as attention is still a very complex phenomenon to study. Psychologists do not simply study attention, but rather

different varieties of attention that occur in different contexts.[148] They examine the triggers of attention, and whether these are internal or external, automatic or not. The processes of attention also vary depending on which sense is studied – visual attention is quite different from auditory attention, and so on. And what about cross-modal, e.g. audio-visual, attention? The difficulties ahead should start to be more obvious, given that film, of all media, is a perfect storm of stimulating devices.

But we must start somewhere, so let's pick out one of the basic constituents of film and see how it captures the viewer's attention. A good starting point would be cinematography and its basic unit, the frame. A film frame is a still image, which is juxtaposed to many other frames in order to produce the illusion of motion when each of the images is presented quickly, in succession. This process relies on the optical phenomenon called 'persistence of vision'. The explanations of this phenomenon vary and are subject to debates. The usual explanation given, especially in filmmaking manuals, is the following, formulated here by James Monaco: 'the brain holds an image for a short period of time after it has disappeared, so it is possible to construct a machine that can project a series of still images quickly enough so that they merge psychologically and the illusion of motion is maintained'.[149] This is a simple and intuitive explanation. However, the correct physiological explanation lies with motion-selective neurones, given here by George Mather:

> Each of these [motion-selective] neurones compares
> information arriving from two adjacent locations on the
> retina. By virtue of the neural connections between the
> retina and the cortex, each motion-selective neurones

148 For an excellent overview of the different varieties of attention, see Styles, *The Psychology of Attention,* in particular the introduction.

149 Monaco, *How to Read a Film,* 130.

basically detect sequential activation of adjacent retinal locations. Motion pictures contain shapes and objects that shift position discretely from one frame to the next in the sequence. Provided that they are not too large, these position shifts are an effective stimulus for motion-sensitive neurones. The resulting response creates the usual conscious experience of movement and the motion picture appears to come to life.[150]

In practice, filmmakers had to figure out the rate at which shapes and objects could shift position without this shift becoming noticeable. This is called the flicker-fusion threshold, i.e. the point where a succession of image fuses and appears continuous rather than flickering. Silent films were shown at a rate anywhere between 16 to 24 frames per second. However, this rate was not entirely sufficient to make the flicker disappear (a common experience for anyone who watches silent films nowadays). The flicker only disappears at a rate of 50 images per second, which is why films are now usually shown at a rate of either 48 or 72 frames per second, with each frame appearing either twice or three times in a row.[151] For my purpose here, i.e. understanding the human responses to film practices, it is crucial to note that the human response to movement in cinematography is neurological, which means that the average human brain, with the relevant motion-selective neurones, will experience the illusion of motion in film.

Another basic constituent of cinematography is the film shot, which can be defined as a series of unedited frames. One important way in which shots have been studied is through average shot duration (ASD) analysis (sometimes referred to as average shot length, i.e. ASL), which entails dividing the total running time of a film

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[150] Mather, *The Psychology of Visual Art,* 100.

[151] *Ibid.,* 101.

by the number of shots it contains. [152] ASD analysis has been used to draw conclusions about styles, periods and more recently about viewer attention. James Cutting, Jordan DeLong and Christine Nothelfer in particular have shown that ASD over the last seventy years of Hollywood film history has gradually decreased and homogenised.[153] This is interesting because, as they have found, the new shot length patterns are starting to match human patterns of attention. Attention by definition comes and goes. This creates a fluctuating pattern which has been measured as a $1/f$ pattern, otherwise called pink noise.[154] This pattern has been widely observed (e.g. tides, music, heartrate, neural signals, etc.) and Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer 'suggest, as have others, that $1/f$ patterns reflect world structure and mental process' [155] at large. The fact that shot length patterns are getting closer to a $1/f$ pattern indicates that certain film practices are being deployed, possibly intentionally, [156] to offer viewers an experience consistent

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[152] See Salt, 'Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures'. ASD analysis comes from an approach to film studies called 'cinemetrics', which essentially uses statistical software to measure and visualize film data such as shot length, but also editing practices, colour patterns and so on. There are some limits to what cinemetrics can do, but given that I am committed to explanatory pluralism, statistical analysis should still count as an interesting source of information.

[153] Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer, 'Attention and the Evolution of Hollywood Film'.

[154] $1/f$ patterns require a more technical explanation than I can provide here, so I refer the interested reader to either the explanation provided by Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer in their paper, or to a post by Cutting on the *Cinemetrics* website entitled 'In Reply to Barry Salt on *Attention and the Evolution of Hollywood Film*'.

[155] Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer, 432.

[156] This is not explicitly claimed by Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer, although others have pushed towards this conclusion.

with their attentional capacities.[157] Whether this will be a more positive experience, the researchers are agnostic. However, they do claim that it should help viewers engage with the narrative and provide the feeling of being 'lost' in the film, an experience I will elaborate on in the next part of this chapter.

What does this mean for us? First of all, Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer conducted their study on an impressive scale – they analysed shot lengths and the resulting patterns in 150 films. This means that the data they present is pertinent to a significant part of the medium of film. Second, the Hollywood style, which they focus on, has undeniably shaped the practices of the whole medium.[158] By no means does it represent all of the practices in use in the medium, but it does represent a set of very basic practices in use in a lot of other subsets of the medium. In the previous chapter I claimed that practices referred meaningfully to their set, i.e. the medium they feature in, and that there are different ways this could happen. Some practices are in accordance with the set – they are well embedded and regularly used, while others are in contrast with the set – they are newly introduced and contradict other established practices. In each case, the practices offer something meaningful about the whole set.

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[157] It is important not to interpret this data as saying that films whose shots do not exhibit this attention pattern do not capture viewers' attention. As we will see, there are plenty of ways in which filmmakers achieve this goal, shot length being only one of them.

[158] The classic Hollywood style is often defined by its invisible cinematography, relying on practices such as continuity editing, which itself deploys many different techniques all designed to avoid viewer disorientation. Any history of continuity editing practices, for instance in Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: an Introduction,* will show how old and ubiquitous they are. For a study of continuity editing in the context of attention, see Tim J. Smith's doctoral thesis, *An Attentional Theory of Continuity Editing,* which predates the Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer studies.

In the case of the Hollywood style, we have a lot of practices which are very much in accordance with the set. Therefore, any film using these specific practices or other practices in contrast with them will have engaged with this style to a lesser or greater extent. For these reasons, the practices associated with the Hollywood style, such as shot length practices, are in part constitutive of the medium of film. Therefore, Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer's conclusions about attention and ASD in Hollywood films are perfectly relevant to understand how minds process media and their basic constituents.

Now, the degree of technicality demonstrated by Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer is not always necessary to understand how filmmaking practices relating to shots interact with our attentional capacities. Filmmakers in fact rely on a large variety of rules and conventions, which they justify by appealing to notions of folk psychology (and often, to notions of Gestalt psychology). Dismissing those would be a great mistake given how ubiquitous they are in the practice. These rules and conventions make up the body of practical knowledge of the film community and as such, are taught, tested and relied upon. The interesting part is that filmmakers describe these rules as attention grabbing. Aspiring filmmakers are taught that these are essential to capture and, more importantly, maintain their viewer's attention throughout their work, and that to be familiar with these rules is the key to do so creatively. [159] I am now

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[159] It is not uncommon to find articles in film journals, magazines or blogs describing, for instance, the '9 Simple Photography Composition Techniques That Captivate The Eye', or 'Red Hot & Feeling Blue: An Exploration into the Psychology of Color in Film'. These examples are two posts on the website No Film School written by V Renée, an editor of the site. No Film School describes itself as 'the leading worldwide community of filmmakers, video producers, and independent creatives. No Film School is

going to examine some of these rules and how they are thought to be guiding our attention by those who apply them. Some of the most basic are the rules of shot composition. Composition refers to the way an image is visually structured. To that effect, filmmakers have a number of elements to keep in mind: the rule of third, framing, leading lines, angles, placement, density, etc. Each guides our attention in different ways and often do so in combination with each other. Leading lines for instance are natural lines that guide the eye from one part of the frame to another. Often, these are paired with object placement according to the rule of third, which establishes approximate points of interests in the frame by dividing the image into thirds vertically and horizontally. The leading lines can then connect these points of interests, thereby drawing our attention from one significant object to another. Another set of rules, albeit more elusive, have to do with *mise-en-scène*. This very broad concept refers to the arrangement of everything in a frame. In that sense, it covers composition, but it also goes much beyond it and includes lighting, colour palette, set design, costumes, etc. *Mise-en-scène* is meant to be as broad as it sounds in order to push filmmakers to think about their shots holistically and to consider the global effects of the necessary collaboration of all film practitioners. And again, these effects are often combined to manipulate the viewer's attention in more or less different and subtle ways. For instance, one aspect of *mise-en-scène* involves determining a dominant subject in the scene for the viewer to focus on. This can be achieved with object placement or

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where filmmakers learn from *each other* — "no film school" required'. It is clear that this type of online community is sharing practical knowledge with its members and, given the experience of its contributors, should be taken seriously.

size, focus, lighting, camera angle and proxemics, colour, or a mixture of all. However, all of these aspects of *mise-en-scène* can also establish a subsidiary contrast, i.e. what the viewer will focus on after the dominant subject. And by determining the order in which the viewer pays attention to objects of a scene, filmmakers can create power relations and other important features for the narration of the film. While the attention-guiding capacities of these conventions have not all been empirically tested, they seem to have the benefit of being effective and are being used for this particular reason.

That being said, these attentional structures within cinematography have been mostly established and cultivated by Western practitioners for Western audiences (as well as by Western-influenced practitioners for Western-influenced audiences). The question is, do these attentional structures only exist in the minds of Western and Western-influenced audiences? If that is the case, it might be difficult to claim that these structures are constitutive of the whole medium of film. In fact, there is a substantive amount of evidence of cross-cultural differences in attentional capacities.[160] This large body of evidence suggests that the attention of Western audiences is directed at the focal objects of scenes, while Asian audiences pay more attention to the background of the scene and the relationships between objects and background. There is also additional evidence suggesting that these attentional structures are embedded in the artistic representations of these different cultures, meaning that visual art forms in the Western tradition promote object-focused styles while Asian art traditionally promotes context-inclusive styles.[161] In particular, Neil Cohn, Amaro Taylor-Weiber

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[160] See Masuda and Nisbett 'Attending Holistically Versus Analytically', Nisbett and Masuda, 'Culture and Point of View' and, Nisbett and Miyamoto 'The Influence of Culture'.

[161] See Masuda et al. 'Placing the Face in Context'.

and Suzanne Grossman studied the attentional structures in panels (i.e. individual frames) of both American and Japanese comics, which, as they argue, are an ideal unit to study attention. [162] They also point out that a similar argument has been made for film shots, which is why I find their work specially interesting for the purposes of this section. In fact, they chose to analyse their corpus of comics under two dimensions. The first one, which they call the 'attentional category' of the panel, is concerned with the amount of meaningful information in the panel and distinguishes between active entities, which deal with the main event occurring over a sequence of panels, and inactive entities, which only depict background elements. Within active entities, panels can be characterized as either macro (depicting several active elements), mono (depicting one active element) or micro (depicting less than one active element, e.g. a close-up). Inactive panels are characterized as amorphic. This classification can apply to any sequence of images carrying information. But the second dimension they use to analyse comic panels refers explicitly to film shots. They classify panels according to different film shot types, which overlap with attentional categories: long, full, medium and close shots and finally close-ups.

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[162] Cohn, Taylor-Weiner and Grossman, 'Framing Attention in American and Japanese Comics'. For further information on the structure of comics and how it relates to attention and other cognitive capacities, see Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics.*
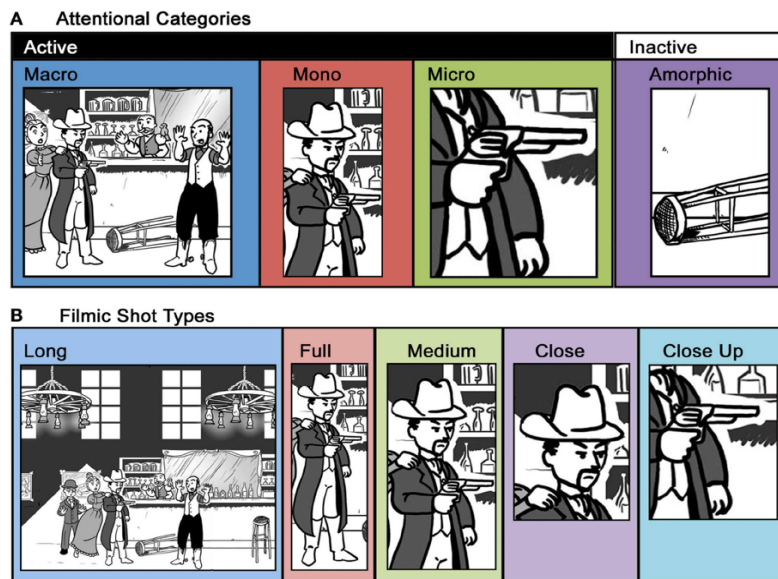
Image 3-2 Cohn, Taylor-Weiner and Grossman's classification of frame types

These shot types are well known to film theorists who use them to describe the way in which the elements of a scene are presented (as opposed to the amount of information in a scene), e.g. by showing an entire room, a whole character, a character from the waist up, a character's face or a specific detail of the scene.[163] Although this might seem like too thorough of a description of the classification used in this study, it will become useful in the next section when I discuss differential properties and their combinations.

As for the results of the studies, across both dimensions the findings pointed in the same direction as previous work on the issue. That is, American audiences have a more 'objective' focus, i.e. with panels giving out more information to be processed,

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[163] And again, filmmakers understand the psychological effects each of these types of frames have on viewers. To that effect, see another post by V Renée on *No Film School* entitled 'The Psychology of Framing: How to Compose Shots to Tell Stories'.

while Japanese audiences have a more 'subjective' focus, i.e. with panels giving out less information to be contextualized and more inferences to be drawn. Japanese manga contained more Monos than any other types of panels and more Monos than American comics. They were also dominated by close shot types. On the other hand, American comics were dominated by Macros. Overall, Japanese manga tend to depict details of scenes and single characters while American comics focus more on full scenes.

So does the evidence of cross-cultural differences in attentional structures negatively affect the prospect of grounding medium specificity in audience responses to media? I think not, but it does invite certain precisions about the nature of media and our relations to them. The fact that media adapt to the attentional capacities of their audience is precisely the point that this section is trying to establish for the case of film. Given that attentional capacities differ across cultures, it follows that the properties of media apt to manipulate attention also differ. Flexibility and context-sensitivity, as I have mentioned several times, are crucial requirements for my reconstruction of medium specificity, because it is the only way to avoid some of the pitfalls identified by Carroll in the earlier notion. One way these requirements can be fulfilled is if media adapt to different modes of reception. And this example of cross-cultural differences in attentional capacities and in framing practices does just that.[164]

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[164] An excellent overview of the cultural differences in cognitive processing of film can be found in Barratt, 'The Geography of Film Viewing'. Additionally, he provides a nuanced discussion of the consequences of these differences for the cognitive studies of film viewing, as well as of the future avenues of research.

3.3.2   Attention and Editing

Moving on from cinematography, let's examine how the mind attends to another crucial practice of film, namely editing. Not only do filmmakers capture their viewers' attention by designing shots that appeal to their attentional capacities, they also arrange these shots to maintain that attention and guide it along a narrative. To this end, they use what William Seeley and Noël Carroll refer to as 'attentional engines'.[165] In their cognitivist study of *Rear Window,* they focus on one of these attentional engines, namely variable framing, which they define as 'a mechanism for changing the viewing position – which for convenience we will call the camera position – on the emerging course of events and/or states of affairs in the movie world'.[166] Editing is one way of changing the viewpoint of a scene, but they also identify other practices relating to the individual shots, such as camera movement and lens movement, as participating to the overall mechanism of variable framing. According to Seeley and Carroll, this mechanism relies on three basic functions: indexing, scaling and bracketing. The first one refers to the practice of 'pointing' at something, for instance by cutting to close-up of an object or by inserting an establishing shot with a panning or zooming effect.[167] This practice establishes that whatever is being pointed at is of significance, a signal the viewer is able to recognize. The second and third functions, i.e. scaling and bracketing, are often,

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[165] Seeley and Carroll, 'Cognitive Theory and the Individual Film', 238.

[166] *Ibid.*, 238.

[167] A textbook example of indexing would be the Ken Burns effect, a practice widely used in documentary filmmaking, when still images are embedded in the montage. While preserving movement, a pan or a zoom on an image, for instance faces in a crowd or a group photograph, directs the viewer's attention towards an important element of the narrative, such as a certain protagonist.

but not always, consequences of indexing in the sense that by pointing at an object, the scale of the shot is now determined by this object (e.g. it becomes bigger, or more central in the shot). By indexing the scale, other elements of the scene previously visible are now 'bracketed out' of the shot to avoid distractions. Along with this particular attentional engine, film editors can also employ point-of-view techniques, which in their least elaborate form consist of juxtaposing a shot where a character is looking at something off camera and a shot showing the object of the character's gaze. Another fundamental editing practice designed to maintain attention is the match-action cut, whereby a scene is shot from different angles and as it unfolds, these different angles are juxtaposed, a classic example being someone opening a door and then shown entering the room on the other side.

At this point, it is important to add that these editing techniques are effective because they usually work on a lot of people. Tim J. Smith and others have studied the phenomenon of attentional synchronicity, whereby viewers' gaze is highly synchronised when attending to dynamic scenes. This has been measured by observing the gaze location of film viewers and with fMRI analysis.[168]

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[168] See Smith, *An Attentional Theory of Continuity Editing,* and Smith and Henderson, 'Attentional Synchrony in Static and Dynamic Scenes', as well as Hasson et al. 'Intersubject Synchronization of Cortical Activity During Natural Vision'.

3.3.3   Attention and Narration

All these attentional engines are designed to maintain the viewer's attention during scenes, which are the narrative units of films.[169] It becomes clear now that these editing practices serve another film practice, namely narration.[170] By 'blinding' viewers to some of its technical features, film exhibits a capacity of 'narrative transportation'.[171] According to Matthew Bezdek and Richard Gerrig, narrative transportation 'captures the psychological processes that occur when people experience an engaging narrative'.[172] Attention is crucial to these processes as an engaging narration focuses the viewer's attention on the events depicted while minimizing her processing of the outside world. Bezdek and Gerrig identify a basic structure for most film narratives, namely a succession of 'hot spots' and 'cold spots'. Hot spots are characterized by heightened emotional engagement, such as suspenseful scenes, and cold spots by relative calm scenes, with low emotional engagement. Bezdek and Gerrig showed in a series of experiments that hot spots in a film narrative are moments of attentional

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[169] Smith and Henderson, 'Edit Blindness', have shown that viewers will miss a third of match-action cuts in a scene, but only a tenth of cuts between scenes. This goes to show that the editing techniques used within a scene are much more geared towards maintaining attention than those employed between scenes. Edit blindness is thought to be a type of change blindness, a well-studied phenomenon by which viewers fail to notice significant changes in dynamic scenes.

[170] For an overview of the role of narration on film, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film.*

[171] Narrative transportation was coined by Gerrig in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* and was first explored in the context of literature.

[172] Bezdek and Gerrig, 'When Narrative Transportation Narrows Attention', 60. For similar studies, see Bezdek et al., 'Neural Evidence that Suspense Narrows Attentional Focus' and Cohen et al., 'The Power of the Picture'.

narrowing, whereby attention is highly restricted and secondary stimuli are neglected. As a primary task, their participants were asked to watch different film excerpts containing both hot and cold spots. While doing this, they had to complete a secondary task, which was to monitor various auditory probes. During hot spots, the reaction time of the participants to the auditory signals were significantly lower than during cold spots. This further supports the idea that narrative structures and content adapt to our attentional capacities. Further evidence on this point will be brought in the next section, so I will close for now the discussion of attention and narrative practices in film, keeping in mind that the surface of this issue has barely been scratched.

3.3.4   *Attention and differential properties*

Before concluding the discussion of attention altogether, I wish to examine one last set of properties in film and how they interact with our attentional capacities. These properties were introduced and defined in the previous chapter, but this section will give us the opportunity to observe how these actually operate in films. So, as mentioned before, differential properties are practices of a medium that are not specifically unique to it (for the case of film, that is almost all of its practices), but can adapt to the medium and its other practices to create unique combinations. For instance, composition is a practice shared by painting and photography and through photography it is shared with film. It would be naïve to think that some of the rules of composition in painting have not also been adopted by photography and film. But it would just as naïve to think that one could study composition divorced from the medium where it is being adopted and from the other practices of that medium. And thus, we can expect that some of the attentional strategies deployed by differential properties will be shared across media, but also that they will vary depending on the

specific combinations the differential properties form in a given medium. For instance, Cohn, Taylor-Weiber and Grossman were studying cross-cultural differences in the attentional strategies deployed in the panels of comics. As detailed before, they analysed panels partly in the same way as a film theorist would analyse film shots. This was a useful tool for them precisely because framing is a practice shared by films and comics, among other media.

Another example can be drawn from the empirical work already mentioned in the previous sections. When talking about attention and narration, I appealed to Gerrig's transportation theory according to which engaging narratives capture a viewer's attention by focusing her processing capacities on the narrative while minimizing these same capacities for her immediate surroundings.[173][174] The interesting part about transportation theory is that it can be applied to both literature and film because both involve narrative practices. The factors contributing to narrative transportation have been widely studied for literature: empathy for certain characters, the development of mental imagery, etc. However, given that narration in film is not conveyed in all the same ways as it is in literature, the factors that will contribute to transportation will not all be the same. In film, narration is not only supported by the script, which, like in literature, can trigger empathetic feelings and mental imagery, but also by visual and audio features. The body language of the actors can carry crucial information about the state of the characters at a certain point of the story, a panning shot over a desolate landscape can say a lot about the location but also the mood of a

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[173] Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds.*

[174] This is taken to be a very important feature of narratives because high levels of attentional are regularly recorded in a variety of narrative cases.

scene, and so on. At this point, it should come to no surprise that all the features of film have the capacity to interact with each other and participate to an overall effect, a capacity that filmmakers use all the time to tell their stories.

Even features that might be less obviously connected to the narration do in fact participate. For instance, Kristi A. Costabile and Amanda W. Terman, studied the effects of film music on narrative transportation and obtained some interesting results.[175] In a first experiment, they divided their participants between two groups: the first group watched a short film about a woman remembering her life with her husband before taking him off life support, with the accompanying soundtrack. The second group watched the same film without the soundtrack. To measure their participants' responses, the experimenters used Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock's transportation scale, which is based on Gerrig's theory.[176] On this method, the participants are asked numerous questions about their engagement with the narrative on several dimensions, which they must answer on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). As Costabile and Terman had hypothesized, the participants in the first group reported higher degrees of narrative transportation, evaluated the

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[175] Constabile and Terman, 'Effects of Film Music on Psychological Transportation and Narrative Persuasion'.

[176] Green and Brock, 'The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives'. There exist several versions of this scale and alternative questionnaires, but the one proposed in this paper remains a central tool to measure narrative transportation. However, as we have seen with Gerrig, another way of measuring this effect without having to rely on a participant's self-report is to give her a secondary task to perform while engaging in the narrative. Delayed responses or even failures to notice the secondary stimuli indicate a high degree of transportation.

protagonist more favourably and identified with her more. They believe that those last two features are effects of a strong engagement with a narrative.

In a second experiment, Costabile and Terman sought to investigate whether affectively congruent soundtracks play a greater role in transporting the viewer than an affectively incongruent soundtrack. In other words, they hypothesized that if the music 'fits' the content of the narration, a viewer is more likely to experience narrative transportation. A fitting soundtrack helps viewers to interpret a story appropriately and thus to engage with it. In this experiment, they chose a different short film which did not have an original soundtrack. The story depicts the feelings of frustration and shame of a teenager having to care for her invalid grandfather. Under the first condition, participants watched the film with a congruent soundtrack, i.e. negative-affect inducing music, due to the dark nature of the film. Under a second condition, participants watched the film with incongruent music, i.e. positive-affect inducing music. And finally, some of the participants watched the original film, that is without any soundtrack. Again, as they had predicted, the congruent music condition heightened the experience of narrative transportation for the participants. Engagement was even higher in that condition than in the control condition where the film was shown as it was intended, namely without any music. That being said, engagement in the control condition was still higher than in the incongruent music condition, suggesting that while soundtrack is crucial for narrative transportation, it is only so when the music fits the content of the story, i.e. when it is used as the interpretative tool it can be.

What this example shows is that when it comes to eliciting certain responses, filmmakers make use of the fact that differential properties are co-dependent. They rely on each other to enhance the overall desired effect. In this case, the desired effect

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was narrative transportation, thus the narrative and musical practices combined to produce this effect. There is even evidence that the desired effect can fail if one of the properties in the combination is taken away. For instance, edit blindness, the effect whereby viewers fail to notice editing practices such as match-action cuts, thereby providing immersion in the action, is dependent on other film practices. Smith and Janet Yvonne Martin-Portugues Santacreu manipulated different film clips to isolate the key factors at play in the phenomenon of edit blindness.[177] In their study, they identified key visual features contributing to 'hiding' a cut: pre and post-cut movement, the latter being more important. That is, if the editor makes a cut from one shot to another, but the second shot does not have motion, then the cut is noticeable. In the example of match-action cut I gave previously, a character opening a door and walking in on the other side, imagine the first shot, i.e. the character's hand going for the handle. Then, in the second shot, imagine if instead of walking through, the character was standing still in the room he just walked in. According to the gaze tracking and behavioral measures Smith and Martin-Portugues Santacreu obtained, edit blindness would fail in such a case. However, they also measured another very interesting effect. According to their findings, the visual features which contribute to edit blindness are only effective 'if combined with the continuous perceptual scaffold of a soundtrack'.[178] In other words, edit blindness, regardless of the presence or absence of pre and post-cut movement, was less effective if the soundtrack was removed. Smith and Martin-Portugues Santacreu take this to show that audio plays a critical role in the success of

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[177] Smith and Martin-Portugues Santacreu, 'Match-Action'.

[178] *Ibid.* 336.

edit blindness and that editors implicitly rely on it to support narrative engagement by providing a sense of continuity where it is visually lacking.[179]

Smith describes another very interesting example, which aims to show how differential properties work together as well as the fact that filmmakers implicitly know how to use and combine them.[180] Smith demonstrates that Eisenstein is one of these filmmakers who understand intuitively how viewer attention works. But more than that, he shows that Eisenstein analysed, without the support of empirical work, his own use of differential properties in his films. The striking example in question is the scene of the 'Battle on Ice' from *Alexander Nevsky*. Eisenstein, in his book *The Film Sense,* analysed a sequence of this scene, before the battle, when the Russian soldiers look into the distance at their enemies. Eisenstein claims that in this particular sequence, he created audio-visual correspondences, with the aim of maintaining focus and tension. Smith quotes Eisenstein describing these audio-visual correspondences as 'relat[ing] the music to the shots *through identical motions* that lies at the base of the musical as well as the pictorial movement'.[181] The idea is that the lines created visually in the shots, which guide the viewer's eye, somehow correspond to the 'lines' created by the rising notes in the score by Sergei Prokofiev. Eisenstein even provides a diagram which aligns the picture frames of the scene, the score, a diagram of the composition of the shots and a diagram of what he believes is the movement of the eye throughout the scene.

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[179] For further discussions of the role of soundtracks in our responses to films, see Boltz, 'The Cognitive Processing of Film and Musical Soundtracks' and Mera and Stumpf, 'Eye-tracking Film Music'.

[180] Smith, 'Audiovisual Correspondences'.

[181] *Ibid.*, 87, quoting Eisenstein, *The Film Sense,* 135.
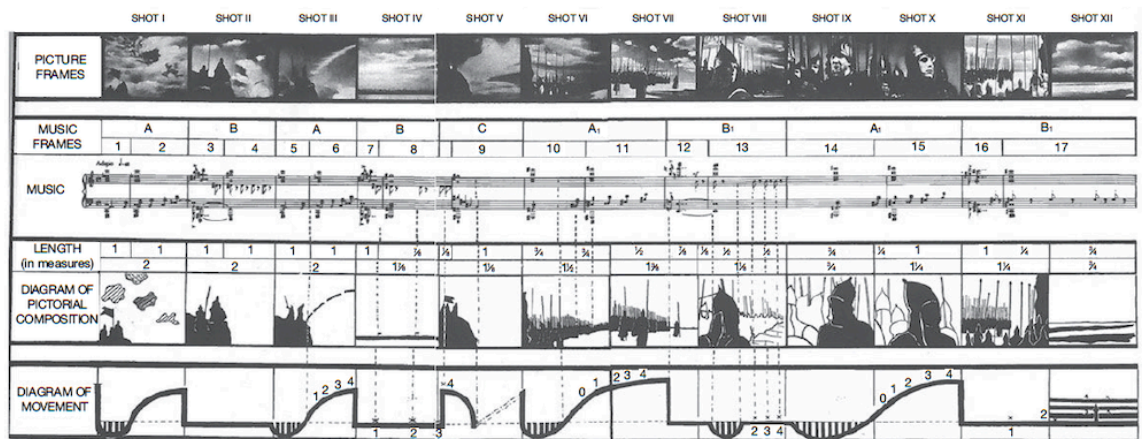
Figure 3-2 Eisenstein's diagram of audio-visual correspondences in Alexander Nevsky (1938)

If Eisenstein is right and these audio-visual correspondences do occur, and if they do contribute to a heightened experience for the viewer, we will have a prime example of differential properties, in this case shot composition and music, combining to create a unique effect, as well as proof that skilled filmmakers have the practical knowledge to manipulate these combinations. Unfortunately, the results of Smith's study were not conclusive. What Smith did find, was that Eisenstein was mostly right about visual attention: he predicted correctly most of the features of the composition that capture viewer attention, as well as some of the rise and falls in gaze between shots. However, the connection between visual and auditory attention is tenuous. While there are 'correspondences' between the score and the shots, it does not seem that the score guides the gaze of the viewers – something Smith found by including a silent condition in his study in which gaze patterns were similar to those in the auditory condition. More plausibly, the score simply mirrors the composition.

However, there are still some interesting takeaways to the experiment. First, Eisenstein did make some successful predictions about the way music and composition interact, and thus exhibits deep understanding of differential properties

and the way they combine to create novel effects. Second, Smith points out that he only measured attentional effects through eye-tracking, which can only track overt attentional shift (i.e. shifts made by the eyes physically moving). He suggests that the audio-visual correspondences could in fact cause covert shifts (i.e. attentional shifts occurring without eye movement), which would have to be measured behaviourally. If anything, the study should be seen as opening up a very interesting avenue of research in cross-modal effects. Third, Smith suggests that there might be other types of shot sequence that might be more apt to guide our attention through audio-visual correspondences. He is thinking of montage sequences, which rely heavily on these correspondences and for which the audio is usually primary. Again, this only calls for further research and does not undermine the idea that differential properties are co-dependent. In fact, this conclusion on Eisenstein's predictions could be extended to this whole section: when it comes to our responses to the properties of media, in particular the way differential properties combine to capture our attention, current research is insufficient but very promising.

3.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to review and arrange some of the empirical literature regarding our responses to the medium of film and its properties. The findings I have included might be regarded as more than sufficient for a philosophical project, but in fact I have only scratched the surface. That being said, my hope is that I have managed to present some of the necessary information on each of the crucial aspect of my topic. The structure of the chapter reflects this hope: to understand medium specificity naturally, we must examine a medium, its components, and how its components interact, all naturally. For the first part of this process, I have mentioned a few

psychological phenomena that play a role in our general assessment of media, e.g. when we categorize objects according to their medium and make judgements about whether they are good candidates for a medium or not. For the second and third parts of this process, i.e. examining the components of film and how they interact, I highlighted one crucial phenomenon: attention. As I have shown, attention is simply ubiquitous in our processing of the individual features of film, such as cinematography, editing or narration, but also in our processing of the specific combinations that these features create, such as edit blindness and narrative transportation. I believe that the information presented here will be sufficient to finally complete a new theory of medium specificity with natural grounds.

Chapter 4 Medium, Medium Specificity and Response-Dependence

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter was dedicated to presenting a variety of empirical findings surrounding our responses to media as well as our responses, in particular our attentional processes, towards media practices. This was done in response to a weakness highlighted at the end of chapter 2. Recall that the new definition of medium meant that medium specificity would lose its natural foundation, i.e. the physical features that made a medium specific, and thus its original strength. So, I endeavoured to find alternative grounds for medium specificity in human responses to media and their practices, in the hope that another natural source would make it regain some of that strength. But so far, I have only presented empirical information from various sources without detailing how this provides grounds for a new theory of medium and of medium specificity. So what are we to do with all this empirical information? And how is it going to play a part in the project of reconstructing a theory of media and medium specificity? In other words, how do we put all the pieces together?

This is what I set out to complete in this chapter. As usual, it is important to recall the desiderata put in place for this chapter by the previous ones: first, we must uphold certain methodological commitments, in particular the commitment to construct an empirically-led theory, and second, we must keep track of the definitional and empirical information set up in chapter 2 and 3. With this in mind, here is how I conceive the task of 'putting all the pieces together'. The pieces are the following: (1)

the medium itself, (2) the practices that make up the medium – how they 'make up' the medium is precisely what this chapter will determine, and (3) the responses to these practices, as seen in the previous chapter. To put these pieces together we must figure out how the existence of each depends on the others, e.g. how changes in one will affect the others. But this is complicated by the fact that we do not just have two elements to connect, but three, thereby creating a more complex structure with different possible hierarchies, asymmetries, directions of dependence and so on. As such, this chapter will explore the nature of this structure, its constitutive elements and their bonds, and explain how the existence of media is grounded in certain practices, which themselves depend on the specific responses of audiences. Following this, I will recall some of the steps medium specificity has gone through in this thesis, and further, I will argue that medium specificity can be found in the specific combinations of certain practices, combinations which themselves depend on specific responses, thereby tying in the new theory of medium to medium specificity.

4.2 Grounding Media

At the very least, it is evident from the previous chapter that there is some kind of important connection between what makes a medium, i.e. its practices, and our minds, in particular certain psychological processes that occur in response to these practices. The question remaining is 'what is the nature of this connection?'. Given that this connection involves media and our responses to them, we can safely assume that this connection is some kind of response-dependence, minimally construed. By this I mean that media and their practices are in some way dependent on our responses to them. Admittedly, this is very vague. The notion of response-dependence is a complex and ambiguous one, but this should not be a reason to abandon it for this project. In fact,

many have considered response-dependence to be particularly helpful when theorizing about certain aesthetic phenomena.[182] The notion has been used to discuss, for instance, values of different kinds and secondary qualities – things that we deal with regularly in aesthetics.[183] Yet, this still requires detailing, which is why in this section, I explore different ways of conceiving of response-dependence in the context of media and assess whether the traditional conception can work for this project. Finally, I turn to the field of social metaphysics to complement the traditional conception and offer a more tailored picture of the relation we can observe between media, their practices and our responses.

4.2.1   *Response-dependence and biologically determined responses*

As I have said, response-dependence can be very minimally formulated as the claim that for something to be response-dependent it must depend in some way on our responses to it. What type of things can be response-dependent (e.g. properties, concepts, terms, etc.), in what way they must be dependent on responses (e.g. ontologically, epistemically, semantically, etc.), what the responses must consist of (e.g. beliefs, judgements, conscious or unconscious processes, etc.), and finally, whose responses matter in this dependence relation (e.g. individuals or groups), is all up for debate. That being said, Rafael De Clercq identifies the traditional conception of response-dependence (henceforth TRD), in line with Mark Johnston and Crispin Wright, as the following: 'a property P is response-dependent if something of the

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[182] See for instance Watkins and Shelley, 'Response-Dependence about Aesthetic Value'.

[183] For a run-through of response-dependence and its different instantiations, see Haukioja, 'Different Notions of Response-Dependence'.

following form is true: X is P if and only if for any subject S: if conditions C obtain, then S judges that X is P.'[184] It is important to mention that De Clercq specifies, after Wright, that conditions C cannot be 'whatever-it-takes' conditions, that is any condition that will make the response-dependence relation obtain in any given case.[185] Instead, they must be 'a detailed and constructive account of the circumstances in which 'best opinion' is conceived'.[186]

Let's try to apply, and perhaps adapt, this conception to our project: determining what makes a film a film. Following TRD, x is a film if and only if for any subject S: if conditions C obtain, then S judges that x is a film. In this case, we could specify conditions C in the following way: S has normal perceptual capacities and is experiencing x under normal viewing conditions. As De Clercq states, the responses we are looking for are those of *any subject S,* constrained by conditions C. So, the first thing to note about applying TRD to the case of film is that the status of an object as film would depend on the response of any audience member who has normal perceptual capacities and is experiencing the object under normal viewing conditions. The second thing to note is that according to TRD the dependence relation obtains if any subject *judges* it to be so. This seems a little bit too strong. Looking back at the empirical evidence gathered in the previous chapter, the types of responses presented did not look like judgements. Responses like attentional patterns or narrative transportation, as discussed, rely on unconscious processes and manifest themselves

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[184] De Clercq, 'Two Conceptions of Response-Dependence', 160. See also Johnston, 'Objectivity Refigured' and Wright, *Truth and Objectivity.*

[185] Wright, *Truth and Objectivity,* 112.

[186] De Clercq, 'Two Conceptions', 161.

physiologically, e.g. through eye movements. If we claim that a judgment is necessary for the dependence relation to obtain, then these types of responses are irrelevant. So, for the case of film, I think it is fair to amend TRD slightly in order to accommodate the responses we have observed. Instead of 'if conditions C obtain, then S judges that X is a film', let's say 'if conditions C obtain, then S has responses that indicate that x is a film'. Let's call this slightly modified version TRD*.

So, looking back to the previous chapter, is there any type of response that audience members have towards films that could warrant this formulation of response-dependence? Keep in mind, this would have to be a very basic type of response. By 'basic', I mean something common to all, competent,[187] film viewers, because if any film viewer failed to have this type of response, then whatever they were watching could not be a film. In other words, the stakes are high.

Brunick, Cutting and DeLong have identified and studied the responses to what they call the low-level features of film.[188] These low-level features 'include any physical, quantitative aspect that occurs regardless of the narrative and can include shot structure, shot scale, color, contrast and movement'.[189] The previous chapter discussed some of the responses to these low-level features. For instance, the flicker fusion threshold, or the $1/f$ attentional pattern. Recall that the flicker fusion threshold is the rate required for a flickering light stimulus to be perceived as steady instead of flickering for human viewers to perceive the stimulus as steady instead of flickering.

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[187] By this, I mean something very basic, along the lines of visual and cognitive competency. A blind audience member's failure to respond would not count in this case.

[188] See Brunick, Cutting and DeLong, 'Low-level Features of Film'.

[189] *Ibid.*, 133.

This is a neurological response determined by motion-selective neurones. For films, this rate must be at least 16 frames per second, although this is not entirely sufficient to get rid of the flicker.[190] Beings that do not have this specific threshold for perceiving flicker, as is the case for birds, will not experience the illusion of motion essential to film. Pigeons do not see films, they just see a sequence of frames repeatedly interrupted. In the case of the $1/f$ attentional pattern, as briefly discussed in the context of shot duration analysis, Cutting and his colleagues were concerned with proving that films are made to fit the fundamental structure of human attention, i.e. this $1/f$ pattern.[191] Because every viewer's attentional capacities are determined by this pattern, anyone is capable of recognizing the practices that trigger these capacities as film practices.

Other similar low-level practices discussed by DeLong, Brunick and Cutting include something they refer to as *visual activity.* Visual activity is the on-screen combination of two types of movement: the first one is *motion,* i.e. anything that moves in front of the camera, such as the actors, certain objects, etc., and the second is *camera movement,* i.e. the movements operated by the camera to shift our perspective on a scene, such as pans, tilts or zooms. The reason why visual activity is considered a low-level practice is because viewers do not consciously distinguish between the two types of movement and instead process them together. Again, this is a kind of response that every viewer should have given that the capacity to process motion as well as one's

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[190] Silent films could be shown at a rate of 16 frames per second, up to 24 frames per second. Nowadays, it is not unusual for 72 images to be shown per second, with each frame repeated 3 times, which offers a much smoother experience of motion.

[191] Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer, 'Attention and the Evolution of Hollywood Film'.

individual movement at the same time is part of the human visual system.[192] It is something we already do when we look at the world: we see people and objects moving and we shift our viewpoint by moving our eyes, our head or our bodies. So the fact that films depend on these human responses – we might call them 'biologically-determined responses' – in various ways warrants TRD*.

However, this only gives us partial response-dependence. In fact, we can easily imagine a case where TRD* fails us. Let's say that at a viewing of Ozu's *Tokyo Story* one audience member, who possesses the same biological capacities of perception as any other viewer, fails to judge that *Tokyo Story* is a film. Perhaps the subject in question, while a competent viewer of colour films, has never encountered a black-and-white film. Or perhaps the subject has never encountered Japanese film practices, such as the low camera positions, and fails to recognize them as film practices. Then following TRD*, *Tokyo Story* would not be a film in that scenario. This conclusion simply does not match our intuitions about *Tokyo Story* and does not account for the role it has played in shaping the medium itself. If the film status of *Tokyo Story* is so precarious, how can it be so foundational for the entire medium?

The idea this scenario is meant to highlight is this: there is just more to films than the practices that depend on biologically determined responses. Culturally specific practices are one example. So, while it is true that TRD* works for certain film practices, it is not sufficient to cover all types of film practices, hence insufficient to cover the medium itself. To complete this picture, we must first understand the nature

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[192] See Brunick, Cutting and DeLong, 'Low-level Features of Film', as well as DeLong, Brunick, and Cutting, 'Shot Structure and Visual Activity', and Cutting et al., 'Quicker, Faster, Darker'.

of these other types of responses, i.e. the ones that are not biologically determined, and then craft another type of response-dependence that will work for them.

4.2.2   Socially determined responses

We have established that biologically determined responses are the kind of responses that involve any film viewer and thus the kind of responses that work with TRD*. The reason for this is that these responses occur outside of film viewing, in everyday conditions, and thus are triggered by film practices that recreate these everyday conditions. After all, film is in many regards like real life: there is motion, colours, temporal continuity, etc. The cognitive processes we all deploy to interpret these things in real life, we also deploy to interpret films. However, in many other regards, films are unlike real life. And as such, we might not all have the same cognitive capacities to interpret these films practices, in which case, TRD* will not be an appropriate formulation of response-dependence. Let's recall some of the practices and the types of responses they elicit.

In principle, any editing practice, precisely because it creates perceptual discontinuities by cutting and coordinating shots, requires perceptual capacities not typically solicited in real life. Previously, I discussed at length the practices of the Hollywood style of filmmaking and continuity editing. However, the point of continuity editing is only to create the *illusion* of continuity, to support the narrative flow for instance. In fact, continuity editing is discontinuous and as such requires capacities unnecessary in everyday perception. But this does not yet mean that our responses to perceptual discontinuities, such as the ones created by editing practices, are not also biologically determined. It might just be that they are not solicited as often. On the other hand, if there was evidence that at least some film viewers do not exhibit

the adequate perceptual responses when faced with editing practices, then it could indicate that these responses are not biologically determined. This evidence was provided by Schwann and Ildirar, who found adult subjects who had never experienced films or television and compared their reaction to samples of edited footage, depicting everyday situations such as making tea or walking into a house, with the reaction of minimally experienced and experienced viewers.[193] The edited clips contained switches in points of view, ellipses, i.e. when a time segment is omitted between shots, crosscutting, i.e. when simultaneous events occurring in different places are shown alternatively, as well as other typical editing techniques. The viewers' reactions were tested with a series of questions designed to assess their understanding and interpretation of the edited scenes. While all viewers understood that the clips were representational and depicted a real-world situation, the inexperienced viewers and low-experienced viewers showed a much greater lack of understanding of the clips than the experienced viewers. For instance, the participants were given a clip in which a woman is sitting in her house. A typical editing practice for this kind of scene is to provide first an establishing shot of the house and then to cut to the actress sitting inside the house. While the experienced viewers interpreted the scene correctly as a woman sitting in the house that was just shown, the inexperienced viewers did not make a connection between the house shown in the establishing shot and where the woman was sitting. The experimenters took their results to indicate that experience with cinematographic practices, such as editing, is necessary to have the appropriate responses to films, including narrative comprehension. At the very least, we must accept that these responses are not biologically determined. Instead they seem to be

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[193] Schwan and Ildirar, 'Watching Film for the First Time'.

determined by social behaviours, such as regularly watching films and television. Thus, we can perhaps refer to this type of response as 'socially determined' responses. Presumably this term will also cover responses which are not determined by repeated exposure to relevant practices, such as responses acquired through other psychological mechanisms. Moreover, cultural differences in response to film practices, as illustrated in the last chapter by the case of framing in Japanese and American comics, will also count as socially determined responses. I will not expand too much on this, as these were discussed at length previously, but also because it seems fairly obvious that responses determined by one's culture, or more precisely by one's exposure to certain cultural practices (such as the Japanese practice of sitting closer to the ground, thereby explaining the lower camera angles in Japanese cinema), are not biologically determined but socially determined.[194] Yet, just like responses to editing practices, cultural responses are a crucial part of experiencing films and must have a role to play in establishing the dependence relations between films and our responses. They are an equally important piece of the puzzle.

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[194] Moreover, if we accept the arguments from chapter 2 regarding the idea that certain media practices are shared across media, and as such cannot be fully understood and appreciated without some kind of reference to the medium in which they originate, then the cultural responses elicited by one medium could be transferred to another if these two media share practices. For instance, one might be somewhat familiar with Japanese cinema and in virtue of that, have the right kind of socially determined responses. However, if one is also not familiar with Japanese theatre and its practices, which are embedded in Japanese cinema since its early days, then one's overall cultural responses to Japanese films could fail. For an overview of the relation between Japanese theatre and Japanese early cinema, see McDonald, 'An Embarrassment of Riches'.

To sum up, we have on the one hand biologically determined responses, which include responses to low-level features of films, i.e. responses that any human being will experience when watching a film, and on the other socially determined responses, which include (but is not limited to) responses acquired through exposure, either to film practices directly or to other culturally embedded practices and which only certain relevant groups of film viewers will experience. This distinction is not sufficiently nuanced to cover all types of responses to media practices. In fact, the difference between mere exposure responses and cultural responses might be more significant than I have let on. However, for my purposes this distinction will have to do, as I simply want to show that socially determined responses do not have the same dependence relation to film practices as biologically determined responses. Hence, on the basis of this distinction, I can justifiably formulate another version of response dependence, distinct from TRD*, to accommodate socially determined responses.

4.2.3   *Interlude: naturalism and social science*

Before moving on to social response-dependence, I wish to clarify a few things regarding the naturalistic commitments of this project and the appeal to social objects, such as socially determined responses, as I have called them. As I have claimed on several occasions, this project is an empirically-led one. That is, the empirical information received from the various sources I have thus far selected determine the theoretical direction I am taking to discuss the medium and medium specificity. A new source I am now turning to (especially in the next section) is social science, or at least the philosophy of social science. However, it is sometimes argued that the social sciences do not meet the scientific criteria upon which philosophical naturalism is formulated. If this is the case, then turning to social science to build a theory of the

medium, even partially, would be going against my own methodological commitments, which I have discussed at length in the introduction to this thesis. Against anti-naturalist arguments in the social sciences, some have argued that the social world is just part of the natural world and as such, there are no fundamental differences in the methods we should employ to study the natural world and the social world. The debate between naturalism and antinaturalism in the social sciences is a lengthy and complex one and so, while my interests lie on the side of the naturalists, I cannot offer an adequate defence of it here.[195] What I can do is reiterate that this project endorses an inclusive and flexible version of naturalism, which allows for a variety of methods to count as scientific, for a variety of phenomena to be worthy of such investigations, and for a variety of scientific goals to be pursued.

4.2.4   *Social response-dependence*

So what will a social response-dependence (henceforth SRD) relation look like and what should we expect from it? First of all, it must accommodate the fact that not every individual's response will count towards establishing the film status of a given object. Instead, as was already mentioned, it is the responses of relevant audiences that will count. Such audiences can vary: for instance, experienced film viewers are one relevant group, Japanese audiences another, twenty-first century audiences could be another one. The dependence relation between films and their practices on the one hand and the responses of each of these groups will vary, but sometimes overlap as

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[195] For an overview of the topic, see Guala, 'Philosophy of the Social Sciences'.

well.[196] Second, SRD should include a way of selecting the relevant audiences and their relevant responses in a given case. After all, we are working with certain intuitions about films, for instance the intuition that *Tokyo Story* is a film, and a particularly influential one, and the responses of say, the inexperienced film viewers in Schwan and Ildirar's studies, contradict those intuitions. This is clearly not a case of peer disagreement, as inexperienced viewers would change their mind if they were to become experienced. Nonetheless, they are part of a group whose responses we would not deem relevant. Similarly, it does not seem that twelve-year-old boys with red hair and green eyes would be a relevant audience with relevant responses, because it is an arbitrary one. So another desiderata of SRD is that it should stipulate a criterion for selecting relevant audiences and relevant responses.

To formulate SRD, I will follow a recent model from the social ontology literature that establishes the different factors that make a social fact what it is. But before I can present this model and apply it to the case of film, I must justify the appeal to social ontology and social facts. So far, I have been using *Tokyo Story* as an intuitive example of a film. *Tokyo Story is a film* is a true proposition representing a fact about the world. But what kind of fact is it? Better yet, in virtue of what is it a fact? For if we can identify the features of the world that make it a fact that *Tokyo Story* is a film, then we will know what *kind* of fact it is. And this is important because depending on the kind of fact, different dependence stories can be told and ontological pictures drawn.

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[196] As we have seen with the studies on cross-cultural differences between Japanese comics and American comics, there was still some overlap in the types of practices used and the types of responses elicited in each audience. Moreover, we can expect experienced audiences to be familiar with practices that do not originate from their own culture. The boundaries of each relevant group need not be strict.

Following the view developed so far, the fact that *Tokyo Story* is a film obtains partly in virtue of certain biological features of human responses. But what I am attempting to show is that it is also the case that social features determine the fact that *Tokyo Story* is a film. In that sense, this fact is partly some kind of natural fact, partly a social fact. To put it simply, a *natural* fact is a fact which concerns a *natural* entity or kind and a *social* fact is one which concerns a *social* entity or kind. At this point, it will help to offer a comparison to other natural and social facts, to see how both aspects constrain one another in the hybrid case of film. *There are seven major tectonic plates making up the Earth's crust* is an example of a natural fact. It is a natural fact because it is true in virtue of certain features of the natural world that we have observed. A social fact, on the other hand would be something like *Black Americans are less likely to receive pain management from healthcare professionals than White Americans with the same symptoms.*[197] This is a social fact because it is true in virtue of certain social realities pertaining to race, history, social interactions and so on.[198] Unfortunately, this is an oversimplification of the overall picture. Some facts cannot be reduced to either natural or social facts. These categories are helpful guides but do not cover all possible facts. Even saying that *Tokyo Story is a film* is a hybrid fact, part natural part social, is an approximation, and there is not really a way of measuring the approximation error. However, I can and will say more later on the relation between the social and the natural in establishing medium related facts.

Let's now return to the task of formulating SRD. The recent model in social ontology mentioned earlier was developed by Brian Epstein, and it explains the picture

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[197] See Hoffman *et al.*, 'Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations'.

[198] Social facts are a very interesting and vast topic, to which I cannot do justice here. Instead, I would point to Gilbert's work, in particular *On Social Facts,* for some much more illuminating discussions.

just drawn fairly clearly.[199]   To set up his model, Epstein introduces a distinction between two kinds of ontological projects regarding social facts, namely *grounding* and *anchoring.* For him, this distinction is based on another distinction between two types of ontological questions one can ask regarding social facts: '*What* are the grounds for that fact? and separately, *Why* is that fact grounded the way it is? What, in other words, are the anchors for that fact's grounding conditions?'[200] – two different questions, therefore two different projects. Epstein gives the following example to clarify this point. *Assad is a war criminal* is a social fact. The grounds for it, i.e. what makes Assad a war criminal[201], are other facts like *Assad ordered the torture and execution of hundreds of Syrian citizens during the Syrian civil war*, or *Assad ordered the use of sarin gas against civilians during the Syrian civil war.* These facts are adequate grounds for Assad being a war criminal simply because these are acts that will make someone a war criminal. But that leaves one question unanswered: why is it that these acts will make someone a war criminal? This is precisely the other type of ontological question Epstein distinguishes, namely the anchoring question. As he points out, the answer to the anchoring question is explanatory in nature. It explains why certain social entities, e.g. the status of war criminal, are set up the way they are. And while, as Epstein notes, an anchoring question can be answered by appealing to individuals, it certainly does not have to be. For instance, Assad's actions grant him the status of war criminal because certain

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[199] Epstein, *The Ant Trap.*

[200] Epstein, 'A Framework for Social Ontology', 148. Epstein introduced the grounding/anchoring distinction in *The Ant Trap* but I am using this later paper to discuss it here as I find its presentation of the distinction more streamlined.

[201] Not to be confused with the *causes* of Assad being a war criminal.

international organizations have established that these actions will make someone a war criminal.
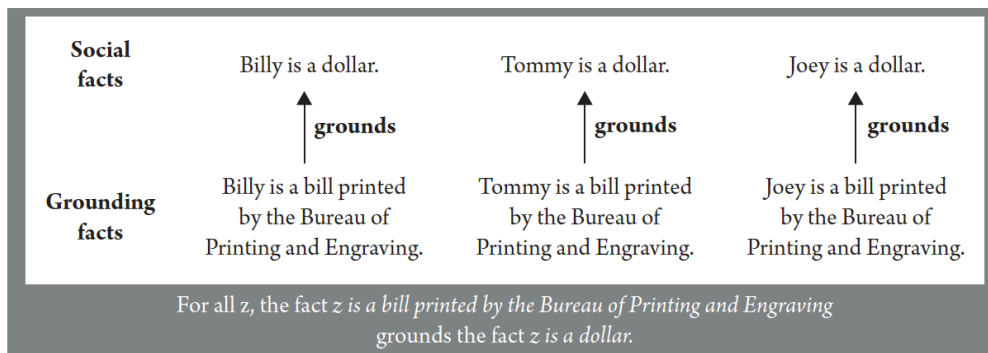
Figure 4-1 *The grounding/anchoring relation as presented by Epstein in The Ant Trap*

As Katherine Hawley notes in her comments on Epstein's work, there are ambiguities and complexities in his distinction, which she believes we could do without.[202] In particular, she claims that anchors could in fact be another type of grounds, as they seem to operate identically. Her reasons for this claim deserve a more subtle presentation than what I am offering here. However, the same should be said for Epstein's distinction. I have deliberately taken a few shortcuts precisely to avoid the more fine-grained issues that Hawley identifies. However, I am not trying to misrepresent Epstein's framework. Rather, the point is that even if Epstein's distinction is slightly artificial or unnecessarily complex, it remains explanatorily helpful for my purposes.[203] The reason for presenting Epstein's distinction in the first place is

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[202] Hawley, 'Comments on Brian Epstein's *The Ant Trap*'.

[203] This would be a more uncharitable reading of Epstein than Hawley's. In fact, such a reading might not even possible from Epstein's formulation of the distinction in 'A Framework for Social Ontology'. There, he seems to be less committed to the strong notion of anchoring as he was in *The Ant Trap*,

that it highlights the fact that there are two 'levels' of grounds, so to speak. And this is useful to establish the links between each of the elements of our theory of media and medium specificity, i.e. the medium, its practices and our responses, precisely because in order to get to the medium, we must go through two levels: our responses and the practices. I find that giving a different name to each of these levels, i.e. grounding and anchoring, helps to clarify the idea. But I remain agnostic as to whether there are different metaphysical mechanisms operating at each level.

All I will attempt to show is that practices can be construed as the grounds of media and our responses, as well as certain conventions surrounding these responses, as the anchors of these practices (or following Hawley, the grounds of the practices). To give an example, *Tokyo Story is a film* is in part a social fact grounded by certain film practices used in *Tokyo Story,* and the reason why these practices are adequate grounds for *Tokyo Story is a film* is that they elicit specific socially determined responses and that these responses, as well as the specific audiences who exhibit them, are conventionally accepted as relevant to ground the film status of *Tokyo Story*. But before we can get to this conclusion, there are a few details to iron out.

➢ *Practices as Grounds*

The first link to establish is between media and their practices. Recall the definitions developed in chapter 2: media are sets of practices, and practices are the basic constituents of media available to practitioners to express themselves through the medium, to highlight certain functions of the medium and generally to bear meaning

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which predates that paper. As he notes, there could be several theories of anchoring and he is simply gesturing at one of them.

for audiences. This has already been discussed at length. However, I have not yet explained what it means for media to *be* sets of practices. In other words, what is the metaphysical relation tying media to practices? There are many options offered by traditional metaphysics we could explore.[204] However, I think that Epstein's framework is a good fit and that we should understand media as being *grounded* by their practices.

Recall the role of grounding in Epstein's model: for him, 'grounding is most straightforwardly understood as a relation between facts'.[205] On the one hand we've got a social fact, such as *Billy is a dollar* or *Tokyo Story is a film* and on the other a grounding fact such as *Billy is a bill printed by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving* or *Tokyo Story is made using the practices of the film medium.* The former social fact is a fact, i.e. is true in the actual world, because the latter grounding fact is also a fact and true in the actual world. So far, as Epstein notes, this is only a description of the actual world. Knowing the fact that *Tokyo Story* is a film because it is made using the practices of the film medium does not tell me why *Citizen Kane* is a film. So, Epstein adds that we need a principle capable of generalizing the conditions that make *Tokyo Story* a film to all similar social facts. He calls this a 'frame principle'. A frame principle in this picture is a grounding principle which operates like the grounding relation in the actual world but for the set of all possible worlds where the grounding conditions in question obtain. So in our case, we would end up with a frame principle like 'for all z, the fact *z is a bill printed by the Bureau of Printing and Engraving* grounds the fact *z is a dollar*', or, 'for all x, the fact *x is made using a combination of film practices* grounds the fact *x is a film*'. The

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[204] Again, I would refer the reader to an overview of dependence relations in metaphysics, such as Hoeltje, Schnieder and Steinberg's *Varieties of Dependence.*

[205] Epstein, *The Ant Trap,* 76.

frame principle then offers us more than a mere description of the actual world. It gives us a way of explaining currently known social facts and of predicting future social facts. It can also be a way of finding hidden social facts. By this I mean that sometimes the film status of an object is not transparent, but with careful examination we can conclude that it does meet the social conditions for being a film. In that sense, the frame principle can be an investigation tool.

Note as well that *Tokyo Story is made using a combination of film practices* does not correspond to one single fact. It could be replaced by *Tokyo Story is made using a combination of cinematographic, editing, acting practices*. It could even be replaced by a more specific fact that details the types of practices used in *Tokyo Story*. The idea here is that, as Epstein warns us on several occasions, social facts are flexible and can be grounded by several distinct facts. One might think that this could jeopardise the strength of the frame principle as an investigative tool. However, the idea behind the flexibility of this frame principle (and of the set-of-practices definition of media) is to be able to reflect the complexity of the medium of film itself and not to simplify the overall picture for the sake of easy identification. As we have seen before, this would only lead the exclusion of important cases and to the impossibility of accommodating changes overtime.

➢ *Responses as Anchors*

We have established that media are grounded by practices through our frame principle: for all x, x is a film because it is made with certain practices, specifically, the right practices to make a film. But here is the second question Epstein would ask: why are these practices the *right ones* to make a film? In other words, why is it that these practices are adequate grounds for *Tokyo Story* to be a film? This is the anchoring question, i.e.

the question necessary to highlight the fact that there are actually two levels of grounds, and that both need to be determined to provide a full explanation of why *Tokyo Story* is a film and not, let's say, a painting, or even more specifically, why it is a feature-length, narrative fiction film and not a short subject documentary.

I will answer the anchoring question in two parts. In short, the first part of the answer is that certain film audiences consistently have specific responses to the sets of practices that ground media. The second part of the answer is that there a further constraints on which audiences we must look at to find the relevant responses to ground film. Regarding the first part of the answer, the frame principle just stated adequately grounds film-related social facts because our responses to film practices are shared and indicate a collective understanding of x as a film. In other words, our collective responses (recall that I have distinguished biological and social responses) to film practices determine, or anchor, the frame principle. Further, the reason why responses can anchor the frame principle is because conceptual, critical and otherwise practical variables have overtime selected the collective responses of certain film audiences (aside from outliers, like first-time viewers) as relevant to identify the practices that make films what they are.

So, let's return to the first part of the answer, i.e. the idea that our collective responses to film practices anchors the fact that if x is made using film practices then x is a film. Recall that, for Epstein, the anchoring relation is essentially an explanatory relation. Our collective responses to film practices tell us *why* the specific practices used in films ground films. First of all, the responses of the social kind discussed in the previous chapter, especially the attentional responses, were indeed collective ones, not in the sense that biologically-determined responses were, but in the sense that high

degrees of synchronicity were measured.[206] As hypothesised earlier, this is probably due to cultural and social exposure to films that employ those very same socially determined responses. As new audiences come to be exposed to practices anchored by the responses of previous audiences, we get a forward-moving feedback loop – forward-moving because new practices get introduced and new audiences get exposed to the old as well as the new practices, thereby reshaping the medium.

However, the fact that relevant audiences collectively respond in specific ways to film practices it is not entirely sufficient to anchor the fact that film practices ground films. We must also explain who the relevant audiences are and why it is their responses that count as anchors. As I have mentioned before, first-time viewers who do not have the appropriate responses to film practices should not be allowed to count as a relevant audience. The criterion here seems to be something like exposure *simpliciter*. Given that responses and practices are involved in a feedback loop, a first-time viewer would not respond in a way that could represent the entirety of the loop. Moreover, film audiences can have various degrees of expertise, some audiences might have been more exposed to certain film practices than to others, and so on. Perhaps, for certain experimental film practices to ground a film, we need the responses of more experienced audiences, rather than those of an average film viewer. In fact, there might be plenty of borderline cases, whose entry into the medium depends not on the collective responses of the average film viewers, but on those of a select few. Who these select few should be might be determined by socio-economic or cultural constraints, by critical standards, etc. In other words, the many variables of the film world, which in important ways is a social world, calibrate the anchoring of film

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[206] Here I refer the reader to Tim J. Smith's work presented in chapter 3.

practices to the relevant audience in any given case. But, if the story is right, the borderline cases can overtime make their way to the heart of the medium and then be recognized as films by the average film viewer.

The idea here is that the social reality of watching and responding to films is quite a complex one. The model I have offered to map this social reality is not capable of capturing this complexity for several reasons. For one, the nature of the relation between certain audiences and certain films is often best studied on a case by case basis and probably on a local level by local specialists. Second, my model is coarse-grained for a reason. It is designed to accommodate change, cultural diversity, psychodiversity, and so on. So there is in fact a very good reason to keep the model coarse-grained, even if further investigation is needed to get better explanations for specific cases.

4.2.5 Social Response-Dependence, Formulated

Finally, it is time to take stock of the picture developed with the help of Epstein's model and to offer a formulation of SRD. The hope was that SRD could help us put some of our pieces together, i.e. the medium, the *socially determined* practices and our responses to those practices. Epstein's model gave us an explanation of the relationship between media and socially determined practices, namely that the latter *ground* the former, as well as an explanation of the relationship between the socially determined practices of the medium and our responses to them, namely that the latter *anchor* the former. This model also fulfils our desiderata for SRD stated at the beginning of section, 1.4. That is, it accommodates the idea that not just any audience is fit to determine which practices are film practices. In most cases, the relevant audience is quite large and indiscriminate, but the model also allows for select audiences and their select responses to have the anchoring power in borderline cases.

With this in mind, here is my formulation of social response-dependence: x is socially response-dependent if and only if x generates socially determined responses in the relevant subjects. Applied to film, this gives us: x is a film if and only if the practices that make up x generate socially determined responses in the relevant audiences, which in most cases are simply the average film viewers, and in borderline cases are non-average viewers selected on a case by case basis.

Recall that, when discussing TRD*, the need for a further formulation of response-dependence was expressed by a case where a film viewer exhibiting all the usual biologically determined responses to film, could still fail to recognize that *Tokyo Story* is a film. The hypothesis then was that perhaps the film viewer was not familiar with black-and-white films or with low camera angle practices customary in Japanese cinema. With SRD, we can now say that in this case, the film viewer does not meet the exposure criterion to be a relevant audience. Or perhaps, Japanese black-and-white films require a more experienced audience to be grounded. I am inclined to think the former is more plausible, but regardless, I believe this case, which was a puzzle for TRD*, can be explained away by SRD.

4.2.6 Taking stock

It is now time to bring together the two conceptions of response-dependence presented so far and to discuss how they both fit together. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, some of our responses to film are biologically determined. This means two things: first, that those responses are generated for anyone who watches a film, and second, that something cannot be a film if it does not generate those responses. However, as I have shown, this is not the case for all the responses that films generate in their audiences. Some responses are generated only in certain groups of people, for

instance, experienced film audiences, or audiences with different cultural backgrounds. This led me to suggest that some of the responses that films generate are not biologically determined but socially determined. However, given the ubiquity and importance of these responses for film (e.g. attentional responses to editing techniques), I did not want to suggest that they did not have the capacity to ground films as much as biologically determined responses. Instead, I argued that, for the relevant social groups, if an object does not generate those socially determined responses, it cannot be a film. The outcome of all this is that some objects are films because they generate a mixture of biologically and socially determined responses.

Now, I wish to say a little bit more about the mixture itself, so to speak. An important question to ask is whether one of these types of responses is more important than the other in determining what kinds of things count as films. It is quite plausible that biologically determined responses should weigh more because they are more fundamental in a sense. On the other hand, it seems that the majority of film practices generate socially determined responses, so perhaps these are more important in the long run. The main question behind these considerations is this: is film more of a social object or more of a natural, physically determined, object? Which side has more say in determining the consequences? Unfortunately, I do not think that I can offer a precise answer to this question on the basis of the evidence collected thus far. Instead, I wish to add some nuance to the distinction between biologically determined and socially determined responses, which led me to this hybrid picture in the first place. While I still believe there is an important difference between the two, which the hybrid model of response-dependence developed in this chapter captures, there is also empirical evidence that so-called socially determined responses can in fact change our low-level (which I have called biological) neural responses. This evidence does not come from

the empirical literature on film, but from the literature on video games. However, given the proximity of the two media, I think this evidence is still relevant for the case of film. In a systematic review of studies exploring the neural effects of video games, Marc Palaus and his colleagues conclude that exposure to video games, which arguably is a social practice, can cause structural and functional changes in the player's brain.[207] To put it very briefly, structural neural data is information about the anatomical shape and makeup of the neural system, whereas functional neural data is information about the role of that neural system (the idea being that the structure of the system determines its role). Interestingly, the bulk of the evidence of structural and functional change concerns the attentional networks of video game players. In expert video game players, the authors report studies showing long-term plastic changes to the areas of the brain responsible for attentional and sensorimotor skills. The explanation they offer is that the repeated activity of using a video game controller, coordinated with visual stimuli, can physically change the neural capacities of a player.

What I conclude from these studies is that if a social practice like playing video games can cause structural change in the neural systems of the players, then the distinction between biologically determined responses and socially determined responses, in the case of video game playing, merely depends on exposure, and not on some fundamental difference between the social and the natural. And again, given the similarities between the media of video games and film, which presumably entails that similar neural systems are engaged in both video game playing and film watching, I am inclined to apply this conclusion to the case of film responses. With this in mind, I do not think we could place biologically and socially determined responses in a

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[207] Palaus et al., 'Neural Basis of Video Gaming'.

hierarchical relation when it comes to grounding films, because it is likely that, in some cases, what were once socially determined responses became biologically determined responses. To illustrate, recall the statistical evidence, presented in chapter 3, on average shot length of Hollywood films over the last seventy years.[208] The authors showed that in that period of time the average shot length of Hollywood films decreased quite drastically, from around 9 seconds to around 3 seconds, nearing what is now measured as the $1/f$ pattern of human attention. Unfortunately, we do not know what the attentional patterns of film viewers seventy years ago were like, but it is quite plausible that our attentional patterns can change and evolve as the visual stimuli we are exposed to change and evolve. In that sense, the social practice of watching films could alter our biological responses.

One last point on the 'mixture' of responses: it is possible that two different, but related, media could elicit the same biologically determined responses, but different socially determined responses. Given that biologically determined responses are fairly basic and first occur in our experiences of the real world, two different media relying on the same experiences of the real world, would rely on the same biologically determined responses. Take for instance theatre and dance. It is likely that our low-level processing of movement and sound are similar in both cases, yet our socially determined responses differ, because having been exposed to works of each medium, we have learned to interpret the meaning of certain movements differently, even if

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[208] Cutting, DeLong and Nothelfer, 'Attention and the Evolution of Hollywood Film'.

biologically we process them similarly.[209] What I think this shows is the proximity of media, in virtue of their differential practices. And while media can be close and their practices related, this does not contradict medium specificity arguments.

4.3 Grounding Medium Specificity

And now, let's turn to the last piece of the puzzle: medium specificity. The aim of this project was to reconstruct a theory of medium specificity, but in order to do that, I had to reconstruct a theory of the medium. In fact, the problems Carroll brought up with the original formulations of medium specificity were not about medium specificity itself, but about the conception of the medium behind these original formulations. And so, to fix those problems, we had to fix the medium. Now, the path is cleared to reformulate medium specificity. In this section, I will offer a reformulation of medium specificity, based on the definitional work of chapter 2, the empirical evidence of chapter 3 and the metaphysical model of this chapter. To achieve this, I will first recollect the claims I have made about the new version of medium specificity in previous chapters. I will then put the pieces together and make the metaphysical claims about medium specificity necessary to keep the whole picture coherent with the claims about the medium made in this chapter. Finally, I will assess the new formulation against the old one and show that the aims of the latter can still be satisfied, in an updated way, by the former.

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[209] I am willing to speculate that, on the other hand, someone could not have the relevant biological responses to an object, e.g. a blind person could process a work of sculpture by touching it rather than seeing it, yet would have similar social responses as others because they belong to an audience who have been socialized to respond to sculptural practices in the same ways.

4.3.1 Medium specificity so far

First of all, let's recall that, for Carroll, the original formulations of medium specificity relied on two main components: uniqueness and excellence. For medium specificity to be upheld, media practices must be both unique, so as to differentiate the medium from other media, and they also must be the best practices the medium can exhibit, i.e. what that particular medium, given its physical constraints, does best. We saw many issues with this formulation, which we imputed to the conception of medium behind this original formulation.

Another key notion to medium specific arguments, brought up by Gaut, was that of differential properties. Gaut argued that for many formulations of medium specificity the main criterion is not uniqueness, but differentiality. The idea is that, for medium specificity to be upheld, media practices do not need to be unique to any medium, but rather must 'distinguish one group of media from another group'.[210] For instance, a practice like narration is differential because it differentiates between groups of media that rely on it and those that do not. In chapter 2 I showed that Carroll's conception of media and their basic constituents (as physical features) led to a misunderstanding of the significance of differential properties. Carroll seems to understand that a differential property, like narration, cannot truly ground medium specificity because, narration being bound by certain physical constraints, is not specific to any one medium. However, I showed that if we understand the basic constituents of media as practices within a set, i.e. how one makes use of the material,

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[210] Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art,* 291.

rather than as the material itself, then a differential property like narration can be specific to the medium it is being used in. The reason for this is that how one uses narration in film is different from how one uses narration in literature. Further, this difference in usage is owed to the fact that differential properties, now understood as medium practices, exist within the set of practices that constitutes the medium. Given how I described these sets in chapter 2, i.e. not simply as an arbitrary way of juxtaposing certain practices, but as a meaningful grouping of practices that evolved and changed alongside one another, a differential property like narration will have a different profile in different sets. As I put it in chapter 2, narration in literature belongs and refers to the set of literary practices, whereas narration in film belongs and refers to the set of cinematographic practices. As such, narration, as a differential property, can be understood to be unique to the medium it is applied to. Back in chapter 2, I also claimed that differential properties were one example of how practices combined within a medium. Medium specificity can be found in those combinations of practices, under both of its forms, i.e. differentiation and excellence. I claimed that media are differentiated by the specific combinations of their practices, not by any singular practice. Further, media do not excel at certain specific practices but at combining practices in specific ways, which, as we saw and will further explore in the next chapter, is something critics are sensitive to.

4.3.2   *Medium specificity, reformulated*

So, given the new hybrid model of media as response-dependent, what does it mean to say that medium specificity can be found in the specific combinations of media practices? I argued that media are response-dependent, that is they are grounded by our responses, both biologically and socially determined, to their practices. But if what

individuates media, i.e. what makes a medium distinct from other media, is not any single practice on its own, but specific combinations of practices, then we must look at our responses to the combinations of practices rather than to the practices on their own. In other words, film is a specific medium if and only if the *combinations* of its practices generate specific responses of the type described before, in the relevant audiences. In chapter 3, I explored this idea by bringing up studies investigating the effects of combined practices, such as soundtrack and narration, on the attention of viewers. For instance, we saw that narrative transportation does not just rely on the usual narrative practices such as script, pace and so on, but also on fitting soundtracks.[211] We also saw that soundtrack was essential to the success of edit blindness[212] and that, generally, filmmakers are aware that the cinematographic effects they seek can only be attained by combining the appropriate practices because the audience does not respond to individual practices but rather to combinations of practices. An interesting example of that was Smith testing Eisenstein's claim of having created audio-visual correspondences in the scene of the 'Battle on Ice' from *Alexander Nevsky*.[213] While Eisenstein's predictions were not entirely successful, Smith's study pointed to a lot of important cross-modal, i.e. combinatorial, effects in film that require further investigation. But the fact is, audiences respond to combinations of practices, not simply to practices on their own. This is sufficient to claim that medium specificity,

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[211] Costabile and Terman, 'Effects of Film Music on Psychological Transportation and Narrative Persuasion'.

[212] Smith and Martin-Portugues Santacreu, 'Match-Action'.

[213] Smith, 'Audiovisual Correspondences'.

in virtue of being determined by combinations of practices, is grounded by the responses to these combinations.

4.3.3 Medium specificity, revaluated

Before concluding this chapter, I wish to compare the new formulation of medium specificity to the old one. More precisely, I want to know if what the old formulation achieved could still be done by the new one, and if the new one can achieve things that the old one could not. As described in chapter 1, medium specificity arguments were used in many different ways and for many different ends. Some of these ends were explanatory. Medium specificity claims can explain why certain objects are films while others are paintings and so on. They can point to the specific features of these objects that make them what they are, and explain why these specific features are the individuating features.

Some of the ends of medium specificity arguments were evaluative. They can tell us what is aesthetically valuable about a certain medium, and consequently, what is aesthetically valuable about an object in virtue of its belonging to a given medium. Another important use for medium specificity argument was a sociocultural one. Recall that some of the early film theorists' claims about the medium specificity of film were aimed at establishing the status of film as art, and later on, as a topic worthy of academic study in the proper institutional setting, which would require specialised scholars, departments, journals and so on. Among other things, these are important contributions that medium specificity arguments made to the practice of film.

But now that we have reformulated medium specificity, are these contributions lost? More importantly, does the reformulation bring new benefits to the practice of film? Regarding the explanatory and evaluative contributions of the old formulation, I

have already shown, in chapter 2 especially, that my account could do better. In addition, in the next chapter I will show that the practice of criticism must rely on medium specific claims to be successful, which should answer any further questions about the evaluative contributions of medium specificity. Regarding the sociocultural contribution of medium specificity, I am not sure the new formulation can do anything the old one has not already done. As Carroll stated when he urged us to forget the medium, the legitimizing function of medium specificity arguments has been fulfilled.[214] Film is now respected as an art form, film scholars are part of the academic institutions and so on. So is there any sociocultural role left to play for the new formulation? I believe so. One fact that has been underlined many times in this thesis is that media change overtime. Simply because early film theorists have made their point and shown that film, as they understood it, was worthy of academic attention, does not mean that we must not continue to show that the medium of film, in its new instantiations, needs to be further explored and studied. In fact, the idea of medium specificity as the specific combinations of practices, especially differential ones, creates space for a discussion of new and hybrid media, which are difficult to categorize and analyse precisely due to the fact that they appeal to new or unfamiliar practices. This is an important discussion not only for art practitioners and scholars, but also for philosophers. In a short paper from 1984, Levinson was already asking 'what exactly are hybrid art forms, i.e., when do we count an art form as hybrid?'.[215] The short answer he gives to the question is this: *hybrid art forms are art forms arising from the actual combination*

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[214] Carroll, 'Forget the Medium!'.

[215] Levinson, 'Hybrid Art Forms', 5.

or interpretation of earlier art forms'.[216] Levinson sees hybrid art forms as composites to be

analysed in the light of their pre-existing parts. He gives an example: 'it would generally

be more apt and revealing critically to note photographic or theatrical effects in a silent

film than to be on the lookout for calligraphic ones, given the actual genesis of the

film medium'.[217] Here he is clearly appealing to the idea of differential properties.

According to Levinson, film is a hybrid medium precisely because it relies on other

media and their practices (yet is not reducible to them). Interestingly, Levinson has a

conception of the medium very close to the one presented in this thesis:

> … medium in the present context is not equivalent to
> material or physical dimension. Rather, by a medium I
> mean a developed way of using given materials or
> dimensions, with certain entrenched properties, practices,
> and possibilities. 'Medium' in this sense is closer to 'art
> form' than to 'kind of stuff'. Hybrid art forms, which
> merge different media, may not involve different materials
> or dimensions (e.g. prose-poems, "fusion" jazz), and art
> forms which do clearly involve different materials or
> dimensions, may not be ones we normally recognize as
> hybrid (e.g. ceramics, folk song).[218]

Levinson's understanding of medium might have needed some clarifying, for instance

regarding the relation between media and art forms, as well as regarding the 'properties,

practices, and possibilities' that constitute the medium, but in spirit it very much

foreshadowed Gaut and Lopes' work on the notion. Moreover, Levinson shows that

hybridity, which characterizes film but not only, can only be understood under this

new definition of the medium. Hybridity is simply not a concept that is taken seriously,

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[216] *Ibid.,* 6. Emphasis in original.

[217] *Ibid.,* 7.

[218] *Ibid.*, 7. Emphasis in original.

in media studies and let alone in philosophy, and Levinson's investigations, as well as his definition of the medium, have fallen on deaf ears. Until recently, the physical medium was the consensus, and hybridity regarding media cannot be understood under that conception. Therefore, film, an old hybrid medium by today's standard, could not be studied *as a hybrid medium.* We can only imagine how lacking our understanding of newer hybrid media might be. The lack of institutional legitimacy criticised by film theorists, which led them to turn to medium specificity arguments, is now experienced by those who might wish to build systematic studies of hybrid media. But taking the idea of combinatorial specificity seriously enables us to think about hybrid media on their own terms, which would have been impossible with the earlier formulations of medium specificity.

4.4   Conclusion

The goal of this chapter, stated in the introduction, was to 'put all the pieces together', the pieces being the medium, the practices that constitute media and our responses to media practices. The idea was that once these pieces were put together, i.e. metaphysically bound to each other, a new formulation of medium specificity could simply fall into place, given what had been set up previously. To that effect, I began by categorising the types of responses seen in the previous chapter and highlighted two main categories: biologically determined and socially determined responses. Given the nature of each type, different metaphysical relations between responses and practices had to be established. I argued that this metaphysical relation was best understood as response-dependence and that two types could be formulated to accommodate both types of responses: traditional response-dependence (TRD*) for biologically determined responses and social response-dependence (SRD) for socially

determined responses. Additionally, I appealed to a model from the social ontology literature, i.e. Epstein's grounding and anchoring model, to explain the relation between media, practices and socially determined responses. All of this together gave us a picture structured enough to be explanatorily helpful but flexible enough to accommodate future empirical investigations. Finally, the last piece of the puzzle was reformulating medium specificity. As I have previously highlighted, the problems with the old version of medium specificity were due to the faulty accounts of media on which the medium specificity arguments were built. Therefore, with an appropriate account of media, formulating medium specificity is not all that difficult. Ultimately, media can be individuated by the specific combinations of practices they create. Audiences respond to these combinations, critics can find aesthetic value in them and scholars can rely on them to establish the institutional legitimacy of their domain of expertise.

Chapter 5   Outcomes for Aesthetic Theories

5.1   Introduction

My aim for the previous chapter was, as I put it then, to finally put all the pieces together. I developed a hybrid model of media practices as response-dependent, which states that media are grounded by their practices, which are themselves grounded (or anchored) by our responses to them. Consequently, I reformulated medium specificity as the specific combinations of practices media create, and which elicit specific responses *as* combinations. But now it is time to look beyond this model and assess the contributions it can make to the field of aesthetics overall.

This project started with a rather narrow issue, i.e. the use of the notion of medium specificity by film theorists and critics to justify the art status of film as well as certain aesthetic ends for the medium. However, as I have tried to show, this issue has had broader ramifications than was initially realized. Through this old and perhaps obscure notion, I have had the opportunity to investigate among other things the nature of media in general, their natural and social features, and what influence these features have on our experience of artworks. Forgetting the medium and medium specificity altogether, as Carroll has called for, would rob us of a rich assortment of questions, and as a result, of a deeper understanding of the objects we make for various purposes, including aesthetic ones. I also believe that among these questions, there are some that would be of particular interest to contemporary aestheticians because they pertain to certain theories, views and arguments currently under development. As such, this chapter will explore the outcomes that the picture I have laid out in this thesis may

have for these various projects and show that the medium and medium specificity are in fact indispensable for aesthetics. In section 5.2, I will be looking at a recent definition of art, namely Lopes' buck-passing theory and show how my view can bolster his account. Then, in section 5.3, I will discuss an interesting, yet slightly neglected topic: the distinction between art and craft. Section 5.4 is dedicated to debates surrounding artistic intentions, and in section 5.5 I return to Carroll with his account of criticism. Finally, I end the chapter with discussions of creativity, in section 5.6, and of style, in section 5.7.

5.2   The Definition of Art

 One of the biggest challenge of aesthetics today is to find a theory of art that can resist the many counterexamples, e.g. emerging art practices, cultural differences, psychodiversity, etc., that have invalidated past proposals. Recently, Lopes attempted to provide a theory flexible enough to accommodate these difficulties.[219] His view has many benefits, one of which is to vindicate my account of the medium. However, as I will show, Lopes' theory is not without its own difficulties and I argue that his proposal can be strengthened by my account of the medium. His proposal is to 'pass the buck'. Instead of providing a list of conditions that some x must meet in order for x to be an artwork, Lopes states that 'x is a work of art $=$ x is a work of K, where K is an art'. At first glance, this might seem almost too simple. After all, we know what arts are, i.e. things like painting, sculpture, music, architecture, film, and so on. However, as Lopes rightly notes, if these are the kinds of things that count as arts, we still need to know

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[219] Lopes, *Beyond Art*. I am also following Davies' thorough review of Lopes' book.

what makes *these* kinds *art* kinds.[220] In other words, we will need either a theory of the

form '*K* is an art = *K* is …' or individual theories of the form 'x is a work of art kind y

=…' and 'x is a work of art kind z =…', and so on, to complete the picture. Essentially,

Lopes argues we must pass the buck from a theory of art to either a theory of the arts

(i.e. a theory of art kinds), or to theories of the individual arts. This difference is crucial

to understand Lopes' proposal. A theory of art merely states the condition under which

an object is art. A theory of art kinds will provide us with a general guide to identify

which kinds of things are art kinds. And finally theories of individual arts will tell us

for a given art kind, which conditions an object must meet to be part of that art kind.

These are not embedded in each other but are rather three distinct projects. A theory

of art does not tell us why ceramic art is an art kind. Only a theory of art kinds can do

that. And a theory of art kinds does not tell us why a specific piece of ceramic is a work

of ceramic art while another is not because that is up to a theory of ceramics to inform

us on that matter.

For Lopes, there are several reasons to pass the buck. For one, it makes it a lot

easier to deal with the 'hard cases' of art, and, as he argues, dealing with the hard cases

is precisely what makes a theory of art systematically informative.[221] Moreover, he

argues that a theory of art should 'provide a foundation for empirical art studies'[222].

And his buck passing theory can do this, James O. Young explains, because it can 'pick

out the works of music for musicologists, identify the works of painting for historians

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220 Lopes, Beyond Art, 14-15.

221 *Beyond Art,* chapter 2.

222 *Ibid.*, 64.

of painting, and so on'.[223] Given these desiderata, I believe that Lopes' buck passing theory not only vindicates the theory of media and medium specificity developed in this thesis, but it also needs it to fend off the critics who claim that his theory of art is actually non-informative.

So, first off, let's examine the overall compatibility of Lopes' theory and my account of media and medium specificity. As I have mentioned, passing the buck from art to art *kinds* requires a theory of such kinds. Moreover, if this theory of art kinds is to complete a theory of art, it needs to explain why a particular object belongs to a particular art kind, and therefore is art. Indeed, for the buck passing theory to be viable, Lopes argues, it must resist what he calls the coffee mug objection: one could assume that if ceramics is an art kind, then any coffee mug made of ceramic material is an artwork, according to the buck passing theory. If we give in to this assumption, many mundane objects, such as coffee mugs, will be artworks simply because they belong to ceramics, painting, architecture and so on, and Lopes' theory will have an overgeneration problem. To resist the objection, Lopes appeals to the medium. He distinguishes art kind from medium and claims that belonging to a medium is not sufficient to belong to an art kind. This fits well with the picture of media drawn in this thesis: a set of practices, some artistic and some not. Lopes' art kind covers the subset of artistic practices within the medium. This can explain why the coffee mug does not belong to the art kind while still belonging to the medium. Also, I believe that Lopes' conception of the arts or art kinds is quite in line with my understanding of artistic practices in the medium. Lopes states that 'the buck passing theory refers not to art forms but rather to the arts. This is deliberate, for two reasons. First, the arts

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[223] Young, 'The Buck Passing Theory of Art', 423.

need not occupy the top level of taxonomy. The *K*s are up for grabs and the determination of what occupies the top level of a taxonomy is likely to answer to empirical matters that are not yet worked out.'[224]. This first reason Lopes gives for talking about art kinds and not art forms is once again about flexibility in the face of empirical findings. This is the same reason why I have defined media as sets of practices, some of which are artistic. Whatever will count as an artistic practice entirely depends on future usage and combinations, which cannot be predicted but rather must be investigated on a case by case basis. Just like the account of media and medium specificity developed here, Lopes presents a theory that puts the phenomenon of art first. As Young puts it, 'the buck passing theory grows out of theories of the individual arts and these theories grow out empirical studies of the individual arts'.[225] To complete this picture, I would say that the buck passing theory could also grow out of my account of media and medium specificity, which itself grows out of empirical studies of media and medium specificity.

With this in mind, I think that Lopes' buck passing theory and my account fit together quite naturally. They seem to be completing each other and to hold similar commitments. But I also think that relying on my account could help Lopes' theory fend off a couple of objections, although it might require changing Lopes' roadmap slightly. As I mentioned before, an important desideratum for Lopes is systematic informativeness. Passing the buck is only worth it if it can be more systematically informative than stopping the buck. However, given that the buck passing theory does

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[224] Lopes, *Beyond Art,* 133.

[225] Young, "The Buck Passing Theory of Art', 423.

not in and of itself provide a theory of art kinds (something Lopes thinks is not on the horizon) or theories of the individual arts, it cannot be systematically informative. As it stands, it is incomplete. Lopes responds to this worry by arguing that buck stopping theories are not systematically informative either, and by providing a framework or a 'recipe' to develop theories of the individual arts in the future. As such, the challenge for each type of theory, buck stopping or buck passing, is to complete its own picture in order to become systematically informative. Whichever can do this first wins, so to speak. However, Young objects that Lopes is wrong when he claims that buck stopping theories are not systematically informative. If this is the case, buck stopping theories could make it to the finish line before the buck passing theory. I wish to add my own worries to this: according to Lopes theories of the individual arts are preferable to a theory of the arts because just like theories of art, theories of the arts face too many counterexamples and are too hard to pin down. But in order to show that his buck passing theory can be completed with theories of the individual arts, he provides us with a 'framework within which theories of the [individual] arts are to be developed'.[226] This framework relies on identifying what Lopes calls 'appreciative kinds'[227]. Lopes shows that art kinds are appreciative kinds. Appreciative kinds are individuated by certain appreciative practices, the norms of which are determined by what he calls a 'medium profile'. He also gives a definition of media as 'technical

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[226] *Beyond Art,* 125.

[227] *Ibid.,* 132. Lopes uses Thomson's account of goodness-fixing kind in *Normativity* to characterise his appreciative kinds. I do not replicate the discussion here as it is fairly sophisticated and not directly relevant to my point.

resources that are relevant to the appreciation of works as belonging to the arts'.[228] I think that Lopes' strategy to get us to a framework for theories of the individual arts is unnecessarily complex. It is also quite vague and relies on a definition of media that remains undefended in Lopes' account. Given that the buck passing theory is under a fair amount of pressure to be more cost-effective than any other buck stopping theory, this is less than satisfactory.

At this point, I think Lopes is at an impasse. He has argued that in order to successfully pass the buck and get a systematically informative theory we need either a theory of the arts or theories of the individual arts. He is pessimistic about the former and I find his strategy to get the second not cost-effective. Moreover, Young is pressuring Lopes by showing that buck stopping theories are in fact not as uninformative as he thinks. So how do we salvage Lopes' proposal and make sure it can get to the finish line before the buck stopping theories? My suggestion is the following: if we can find an account to complete Lopes' theory that can tell us both why certain kinds are art kinds and why a given object belongs to a given art kind, essentially fulfilling the job of both a theory of art kinds and of theories of the individual arts, then Lopes can win the race. I think that my account of media and medium specificity is well placed to fulfil that role. If this works, Lopes still stands a chance against buck stopping theories while still maintaining his desiderata for a theory of art, i.e. dealing with the hard cases and being empirically grounded.

As I have mentioned, the job of a theory of art kinds is to explain why certain kinds are art kinds, for instance, why ceramic art is an art kind. My account of media can provide a straightforward explanation: ceramic art is an art kind because it

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[228] *Ibid.*, 144.

corresponds to a subset of practices contained in the medium of ceramic, which are used and combined artistically by ceramic practitioners.[229] In more general terms, K is an art = K is a subset of media practices used and combined artistically. On the other hand, the job of theories of the individual arts, e.g. a theory of ceramic art, is to explain why a Japanese Raku tea bowl, for instance, is a work of ceramic art and not merely a piece of ceramic. My account can also answer this: the Raku tea bowl is a work of ceramic art because it is made by using and combining the relevant artistic practices of the medium of ceramic. So x is a work of art kind y = x is made by using and combining the artistic practices contained in the medium of y. To bring all of this back to Lopes' project, the buck passing theory can be systematically informative, on top of being an interesting alternative to traditional theories of art, if instead of passing the buck to either a theory of art kinds or to theories of the individual arts, we pass it to a theory of media practices.

The buck passing theory is only one of many proposals in one of the most central projects in aesthetics. Defending it properly is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, seeing how pertinent a theory of media and medium specificity can be to one of these contemporary proposals can contribute to the point of this chapter, namely to show that the questions which sparked this project are far-reaching in contemporary aesthetics.

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[229] And which are responded to adequately by the appropriate audiences. See chapter 4 for the whole picture.

5.3 The Distinction Between Art and Craft

Another interesting project in aesthetics, which I believe will be impacted by my account of media and medium specificity, is the distinction between art and craft. I will admit that the distinction between art and craft is not currently as popular as the definition of art. In fact, the distinction was mostly discussed in the last century.[230] However, I believe we are bound to see renewed interest in the topic, given the recent development and rise in popularity of 'everyday' or 'social' aesthetics.[231] One of the commitments of everyday aesthetics is to find what aspects of everyday experiences, actions and interactions can be truly *aesthetic* in nature, regardless of how mundane they might be. For that reason, everyday aesthetics usually overlooks any sharp boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art, or fine art and craft. A mundane ceramic coffee mug could, under the right circumstances, be the object of a valuable aesthetic experience, according to the proponents of everyday aesthetics.

Keeping this in mind, what kind of outcome could my account of media and medium specificity have for current discussions on the distinction between art and craft? Larry Shiner notes that these discussions have moved on from a hierarchical understanding of art as more valuable than *mere* craft to talks of 'blurred boundaries' and hybrids.[232] He is referring to a shift in theoretical and practical discussions of art, whereby practices which used to be described as 'decorative' or 'applied', e.g. textile work, as a way to demarcate them from the 'finer' arts, are now being incorporated

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[230] See Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*. See Shiner 'Blurred Boundaries' for an historical overview.

[231] See Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics,* Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense,* Irvin, 'Scratching an Itch' and 'Aesthetics of the Everyday.

[232] Shiner, 'Blurred Boundaries'.

into 'hybrid' works (an example Shiner gives is Tracey Emin's use of embroidery). These hybrid works are not diminished by their use of craft, but rather praised for it. This shift requires interpretation and explanation according to Shiner, and I believe that my account can do that, as well as justify further this talk of blurred boundaries.

First, let me explain what Shiner means by craft. He makes an important distinction between crafts as 'a category of disciplines' and craft as 'a process and practice'.[233] The former includes disciplines like ceramics, woodworking, metalworking and so on, which I think can be understood as media as I have defined them. The medium of metalworking is a set of practices, which include all sorts of cutting, filing, and turning techniques. The reason why the medium of metalworking might be considered a 'mere' craft, is perhaps the fact that most of the practices of metalworking are not essentially artistic. In some instances they might be used in an art making process, but in general they do not on their own elicit the right kind of responses to grant a given object membership to an artistic medium. According to Shiner, this understanding of crafts as a set of disciplines (or media with mostly non-artistic practices), is what has led to the subordination of crafts in the first place. Instead, he argues that understanding craft as a process and practice is preferable and, in fact, more in line with current talks of blurred lines and consistent with the existence of hybrid works (which do make artistic use of those 'mere' crafts like metalwork). By practices and processes, Shiner means something like 'a set of shared assumptions that inform a way of doing'.[234] Here he is combining Glenn Adamson's conception of craft as 'a general way of making', which Shiner thinks is in fact too general, with Wittgenstein's

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[233] *Ibid.*, 232.

[234] *Ibid.*, 233.

notion of practice.[235] I think Shiner's idea is not too far off from the understanding of media practices developed in chapter 2. Take for instance the practice of continuity editing, which I have previously discussed at length. Filmmakers have been using continuity editing practices on the basis of certain assumptions about how audiences pay attention to images, how they associate images to create meaning, and so on. These assumptions have informed their way of editing films, in particular when they seek continuity.

So to sum up Shiner's view in my own terms, he argues that we are better off understanding craft as a type of practice, as I have characterised them, than as a type of medium. Craft is not itself a limited set of practices but rather a type of practice that can be found potentially in any medium. Formulating his view in those terms can help us better understand what is meant by hybrid works and blurred boundaries. As Shiner puts it, '... we should think of craft, design and (high) art as three overlapping rather than exclusive practices. Some practitioners move comfortably among all three; the weaver Ann Sutton has said: "I work … sometimes as an artist, sometimes as a designer, sometimes as a craftsperson"'.[236] Again, this is very much in line with my account of media and practices. I understand the sets of practices constituting media as a gradable plane with different modalities a given practice could manifest, for instance, a practice could be more or less in accordance or in contrast with the set, as I have explained in chapter 2, or it could be consistently, rarely or never used artistically. These modalities create a wide spectrum of practices for practitioners to

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[235] *Ibid.*, 233. See also Adamson, *The Craft Reader* and Lamarque, 'Wittgenstein, Literature, and the Idea of a Practice'.

[236] *Ibid.*, 241. Shiner is quoting Sheehan and Tebby, *Ann Sutton,* 8.

choose from, and if they choose liberally from every end of the spectrum, they might feel like Ann Sutton, sometimes artist, sometimes designer, sometimes craftsperson. Interestingly, Shiner claims that the overlaps between art, craft and design are not that blurred or vague, as current discussions would have us believe. He argues that they can be investigated and analysed philosophically, which is something I have attempted to do with my account of the film medium. Sure, the finished picture will be complex and messy and will require regular updating as media profiles evolve, but it will have the potential to me much more informative than mere talk of blurred boundaries.

5.4   Artistic Intentions

Embedded in my account of media practices is a certain conception of intentions. I have on several occasions said that a practitioner can choose what type of practice they want to make use of for their purposes. Moreover, when explaining how the set of practices that constitutes a medium works, and how practices relate to each other, I implied that a practice can *refer meaningfully* to the set or a subset with the medium. For instance, consider the use of the shaky cam, i.e. a shooting technique where the image is not stabilized, produced either with a hand-held camera or equipment imitating the effects of a hand-held camera. Used in moderation[237], the shaky cam can evoke certain types of intimate documentaries, such as those of the *cinema vérité* tradition*,* low-budget mumblecore films, and so on. For a filmmaker to select the shaky cam practice is not

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[237] This is important to note as excessive shaky cam are often used in action film sequences, such as fights, car chases, etc. This is an example of a specific film practice that can change meaning depending on how much it is used. I take this as another reminder that practitioners do not simply select practices to use, but combine them in very specific and proportionate ways.

neutral (especially given that more technologically advanced equipment is available). Rather, selecting such practice is a way of directing us back to the place in the medium where the practices of *cinema vérité* and mumblecore are located. A practitioner might choose to do so for all sorts of reasons and her choice can have all sorts of effects on audiences. It would be natural to understand this picture as implying some kind of intentionality about art, which is why I need to address whether my account of medium and medium specificity endorses such a view, and if so to what degree. Further, the notion of artistic intentionality is also central to the aesthetic themes and theories I discuss in the next sections of this chapter and so it fully merits the attention.

The idea behind artistic intentionality is that the artist's intentions are somehow present *in the work* and thus are relevant for aesthetic understanding, interpretation, evaluation, and so on. This view comes in different strengths. Paisley Livingston describes extreme intentionalism as claiming that 'the work's meaning is logically equivalent to the artist's intended meanings, semantic willings, or 'final intention'' and extreme anti-intentionalism as 'the claim that the meanings of a work of art are all and only those of the text, performance, artefact, or other artistic item taken by itself'.[238] As Livingston notes, while these two extreme views are still defended, most philosophers engaged in the debate stand somewhere in the middle. While this is not a comprehensive overview of the debate, it is sufficient for my purposes as I simply want to bring up an important distinction Jerrold Levinson makes between *semantic* intentionalism and *categorical* intentionalism. The former type of intentionalism concerns the intentions of the practitioner regarding the meaning of her work, while the latter concerns her intentions 'that govern not what a work is to mean but how it

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[238] Livingston, 'Intentions in Art', 282.

is to be conceived, approached, classified on a fundamental level'.[239] According to categorical intentionalism, what the artists intends to do with her medium is essential to understanding her artwork. While I cannot say much here about semantic intentionalism, I believe that categorical intentionalism is perfectly plausible and should not prevent anti-intentionalists from addressing their objections to semantic intentionalism.

In the next section I discuss criticism and the importance of the medium for this activity. Criticism is concerned with artistic appreciation as a whole, which includes semantic considerations, and if one holds a view that referring to the medium is also an essential part of criticism, then some kind of artistic intentionalism might have to be defended. That is, if one takes appreciation of the medium to be a part of aesthetic appreciation overall, and understanding the medium (or category) is essential to understanding the meaning of a work, then a version of intentionalism broader than categorical intentionalism might have to be defended. These questions unfortunately exceed the scope of this chapter and of this thesis. But if these limitations can show us anything, it is that a lot more still remains to be said about the medium and our relation to it.

5.5   Criticism

As Carroll explains in the introduction of his book *On Criticism,* the philosophy of criticism, or meta-criticism, was once a flourishing area of aesthetics.[240] However, since the 1970's it has fallen out of favour as aestheticians increasingly focused on definitions

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[239] Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation', 222.

[240] Carroll, *On Criticism,* 1.

of art. But given the current importance of criticism in contemporary art discourse, as well as the amount of artistic works offered for public consumption, Carroll believes that the philosophy of criticism should be brought back to the forefront. To that effect he intends to 'develop a framework in which the practices of criticism can be rendered intelligible and ordered'.[241] It is clear that Carroll wants to talk about criticism in the ways it is actually practised; but while maintaining this commitment, he also claims that he will be presenting 'certain standards about what should count as criticism'.[242] The main standard Carroll argues for is reasoned evaluation, i.e. critics are not simply in the business of describing, classifying and contextualising art works, but they should also show us what value they have and give good reasons for their evaluations.

The reason I am introducing Carroll's theory of criticism here is because I believe that talk of media and medium specificity are in fact crucial to criticism, and if we are to revive interest in the philosophical investigation of criticism, we must include a relevant account of media in the discussion. Unfortunately, I do not believe that Carroll takes this into account when presenting his views on criticism. In fact, if we recall his general views on medium specificity and the concept of medium, we can speculate that he might not even wish to do so. At the heart of the early uses of medium specificity arguments, the very same that Carroll objected to, lies the idea that a work should be evaluated on its capacity to showcase what its medium does best. For a film to be 'cinematic' is praiseworthy because 'cinematicity' is what film does best among the things it can do. It is also what sets film apart from other media (this is what Carroll

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[241] *Ibid.*, 3.

[242] *Ibid.*, 4.

calls the internal and external components of medium specificity arguments).[243] But Carroll has already shown vigorously that these arguments are limiting both for the practitioners and the critics of art. And so, it is natural for him to stay away from these notions when rethinking the practice of criticism.

However, the point of this thesis has been to show that there is a more interesting understanding of medium and medium specificity that does not set any limitations on the practitioners. To complete this claim, I also wish to show that these reformulated notions do not set any limitations on the critics. In fact, paying attention to the medium can be a way for critics 'to discover what is valuable or worthy of attention in artworks and to explain why this is so', as Carroll insists is the nature of criticism.[244] As such, I do not intend to object to his characterisation of criticism overall. Rather, I think that not including medium specificity arguments in the discussion would actually impoverish his project.

If we recall chapter 2, this is something I briefly touched on then, when discussing the role of differential properties and their specific combinations. I pointed out that critics often refer to the specific combinations of differential properties which make up the medium, for instance how the cinematography interacts with the narration and so on. Bringing our attention to these features of films satisfies Carroll's criteria for criticism: it is a way of describing and interpreting the work, it can be a way of highlighting the underlying intentions of the filmmakers, but more crucially, it also involves providing a reasoned evaluation of the work. To give a couple of examples, here is Roger Ebert on *Barry Lyndon:*

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[243] Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image,* 8.

[244] Carroll, *On Criticism,* 45.

> The images proceed in elegant stages through the events, often accompanied by the inexorable funereal progression of Handel's "Sarabande." For such an eventful life, there is no attempt to speed the events along. Kubrick told the critic Michel Ciment he used the narrator because the novel had too much incident even for a three-hour film, but there isn't the slightest sense he's condensing.[245]

Here Ebert makes an elaborate comment about the pace of Kubrick's film, showing how the director used narrative practices (such as a voice-over narrator) and a repeated musical theme, which itself sets a very recognizable pace, to give a certain epic yet quiet dimension to Barry Lyndon's life. By bringing our attention to these features of the medium (e.g. time, narration, score) and how they interact in service of an overall effect, Ebert is providing us with reasons to follow him in his positive evaluation of the film. Note as well that Ebert mentions Kubrick deliberately explaining his own intentions in using a narrator.

To offer some contrast, here is an excerpt from a review, more journalistic in style, of a recent film, *Eighth Grade*, directed by Bo Burnham, and praised for its candid and nuanced illustration of the awkwardness of female preadolescence in America:

> Kayla's entrance into a cool girl's pool party is shot as if she's attempting a terrifying mission into enemy territory. Sharply attuned to Kayla's acute self-consciousness, you suffer alongside her as she sidles awkwardly between preening classmates, Anna Meredith's thudding EDM score underlining her panic.[246]

Here, the journalist, Kate Stables, does not name specific cinematographic practices but rather refers us to a familiar scenario we might have encountered before in films of a very different genre, namely war films. For those who might have seen *Eight Grade*

[245] Ebert, 'Barry Lyndon'.

[246] Stables, 'Eighth Grade'.

and recall the scene in question, the comparison becomes undeniable. The practices combined in both scenarios, a terrifying middle school pool party and a war zone, are the same: the use of slow-motion, a close-up on the character that slowly transitions to a long shot so as to provide an overview of what she is up against, and so on. Compare this to the scene in *Wonder Woman*, set during WWI, where Diana decides to cross No Man's Land. Her heroic action is filmed partly in slow motion with alternated close-ups of Diana's determined facial expression and long shots of the desolated No Man's Land, bullets flying by the character. Moreover, in both cases, the score is instrumental to the scene and, combined with the cinematography, participates in giving us a heightened experience of the character's emotions, which are radically different in both cases.

Image 5-1 Eighth Grade (2018)

Image 5-2 Wonder Woman (2017)

To return to Stables' review, while she does not explicitly point to film practices used by the filmmakers, she directs the reader to a familiar set of film practices relevant

to appreciate the scene she is describing. She is offering an interpretation of the narrative arc of the character, of her emotions, by exploiting our experience and understanding of the medium and its specific (combinations of) practices.

Another important feature of Carroll's account of criticism is its intentionalism. Carroll argues that the critic, in evaluating the work of an artist, is evaluating her actions, and through evaluating her actions inevitably evaluates her intentions. As Alan H. Goldman notes in his review of Carroll's book, anti-intentionalists about art will have responses to his arguments and this aspect of Carroll's theory could become an important point of contention.[247] I do not wish to take a side on this issue, but rather point out something interesting in Carroll's version of intentionalism. He notes that

> … to appraise a mystery novel by Agatha Christie, I must recognize that it is a classic detective story and not an in-depth, psychological character study. Knowing what the artist intends to do – knowing the playing field he/she means to be on – supplies the critic with a set of expectations that aids the critic and her audience in understanding and following the work.[248]

Carroll's mention of the 'playing field' of the artist sounds a lot like a metaphor for the medium. In other words, to ground his intentionalism, Carroll cannot do away with the medium. As I have mentioned before in section 3, the artist's intentions are inextricably connected to the medium she is operating in. To understand the medium and medium specificity it is important to consider the categorical intentions of the artist and vice versa. As such, I take Carrol to be endorsing some kind of categorical intentionalism (at least in this passage), which can be construed as intentionalism about the medium.

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[247] Goldman, 'On Criticism'.

[248] Carroll, *On Criticism,* 66.

5.6   Creativity

An essential part of this thesis is about art practitioners and their relation to their medium, and a crucial feature of this relation is creativity. Creativity is one of the more recent topics to have captured the attention of aestheticians, with important volumes remedying previous lack of philosophical discussion on the subject.[249] I include it here because, first of all, it is an interesting contemporary topic in aesthetics and I wish to show that theories of the medium and medium specificity are relevant to contemporary aesthetics. Second, creativity is something critics evaluate and as such is discussed in accounts of criticism. It is also something we attribute to the actions of artists, which makes it relevant to accounts of artistic intentions. As I have shown, these topics rely on discussions of the medium and medium specificity. And so, my further point is that this thesis is not only relevant for individual theories in contemporary aesthetics, but in fact presents a crucial underlying theme that connects all these individual accounts – the medium is at the heart of aesthetics.

So to get back to creativity, I do not aim to arbitrate in this section between different accounts of creativity. Rather, I just wish to show that my account of the medium and medium specificity could easily slot in into some of the most popular theories of creativity, which would result in an enriched discussion on both ends. To begin, I will consider one of the most influential accounts in the literature, namely Margaret Boden's.[250] Boden famously argues that 'creativity is the ability to come up

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[249] See Gaut and Kieran, *Creativity and Philosophy,* Paul and Kaufman, *The Philosophy of Creativity,* Gaut and Livingston, *The Creation of Art.*

[250] Boden, *The Creative Mind.*

with ideas or artefacts that are *new, surprising and valuable'*.[251] The part of her argument I am particularly interested in here is her characterisation of surprise. She distinguishes between three types of surprising activities: 'the first involves making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas'[252], while the other two 'involve the *exploration,* and in the most surprising cases the *transformation,* of conceptual spaces in people's minds'.[253] What is specifically relevant here for my account of the medium and medium specificity is her mention of unfamiliar combinations and that of conceptual spaces. Boden claims that the first case of surprising action, i.e. making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas, can be consciously or unconsciously made. This seems to apply quite well to the idea that practitioners make use of the standard and familiar practices of the medium, for instance continuity editing, scoring, and combine them in new and specific ways. In that sense, making use of the specificity of the medium, as I have construed it, is one particular way in which a practitioner can be creative, assuming her artistic outputs can also satisfy Boden's other criteria, i.e. being new and valuable. Beyond this interesting link between medium specificity and creativity, there is Boden's notion of conceptual spaces, which she defines as 'structured styles of thought'.[254] Here, what she has in mind is something shared, for instance 'ways of writing prose or poetry; styles of sculpture, painting or music; theories in chemistry or biology', basically 'any disciplined way of thinking that is familiar to (and valued by) a

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[251] *Ibid.*, 1. Her emphasis.

[252] *Ibid.*, 3.

[253] *Ibid.*, 4.

[254] *Ibid.*, 4.

certain social group'.[255] To me, it sounds like conceptual spaces, as Boden understands them, can overlap in some significant way with media. At this point, I am not certain whether media *are* conceptual spaces, or if there are conceptual spaces corresponding to each media, but for the purposes of understanding creativity in relation to media, it seems fair to say that a practitioner can explore and/or transform a conceptual space by exploring and/or transforming their medium, and more specifically, the practices that constitute their medium. A standard film practice I have discussed before is the Dutch tilt, a deliberate tilt of the camera first used in German expressionist films and favoured by *film noir* directors for creating an atmosphere of mystery and unease. However, the Dutch tilt found a new popularity in the 1990's for a different reason. Filmmakers like Terry Gilliam made use of the Dutch tilt, most extensively in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* to express unease but in a humoristic, almost 'wacky' sort of way. This is a case of creative transformation of the medium, which gave a new connotation to an old film practice, thereby expanding the possibilities of the medium itself.

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[255] *Ibid.,* 4.

Image 5-3 Terry Giliam's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1998)

There is another popular account of creativity that I believe is worth mentioning here, as it might give us some insight into how media develop and evolve. The account in question is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of creativity. In his words,

> …creativity can be observed only in the interrelations of a system made up of three main parts. The first of these is the *domain*, which consists of a set of symbolic rules and procedures. […] The second component of creativity is the *field*, which includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers to the domain. […] Finally, the third component of the creative system is the individual *person*. Creativity occurs when a person, using the symbols of a given domain such as music, engineering, business, or mathematics, has a new idea or sees a new pattern, and when this novelty is selected by the appropriate field for inclusion into the relevant domain. [256]

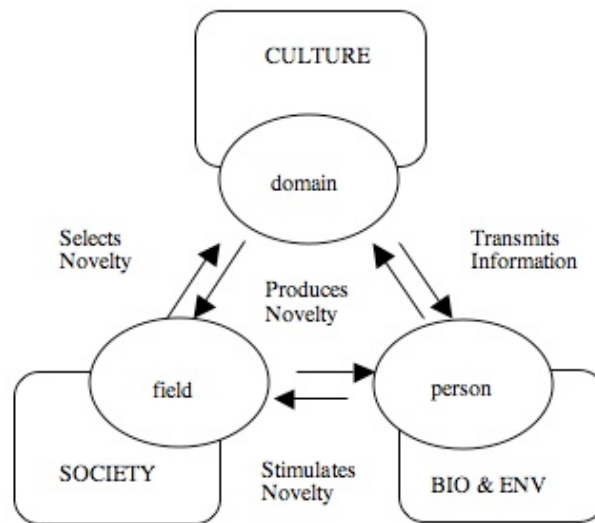[256] Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity,* 27-28. His italics.

Image 5-4 Csikszentmihalyi's Systems Model of Creativity

This model of creativity is rich and complex, and there is much more to say about it than I have space for here. What I do have space for is developing the connections between this picture and mine. First of all, I think that on Csikszentmihalyi's model, media can be thought straightforwardly as domains. However, perfectly matching media practices to the 'symbolic rules and procedures' of the model would require a better understanding of what he means by these rules and procedures. But we could easily imagine that, if the match is not perfect, there might still be rules or procedures *attached* to media practices. There are certain rules and procedures to be followed when it comes to editing, especially specific usage of editing such as continuity editing. The field, or gatekeepers, of a medium is hard to pin down, but then again, Csikszentmihalyi admits that this particular piece of his model hard to pin down as it is. The community of filmmakers themselves can give their seal of approval to new practices simply by using them. The community of film audiences, who develop adequate responses to certain practices overtime, also play a part in admitting a new practice into a medium. And finally, the role of the individual in the creation and

evolution of the medium confirms once again the importance of artistic agency, which I have already discussed. To illustrate this entire picture, I am going to focus on one example. Another type of film practice I discussed in chapter 2, when explaining how practices can be in accordance or in contrast with the overall set, was the 'external footage' practice.[257] Then, I showed that in Ridley Scott's *The Martian,* the inclusion of the character's GoPro daily logs made us aware of the recording equipment and thereby broke cinematic transparency. While external footage is now used more regularly, it certainly was not always part of the artistic domain of film. A precursor of the external footage practice is the found footage practice.[258] Interestingly, we have quite a bit of information about its introduction in the domain and the role the field played in accepting it as such. Critics and scholars often note that *The Blair Witch Project* was instrumental in initiating the use of the found footage practice for the horror genre.[259] In fact, prior to the film, experienced and novice audiences were so unfamiliar

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[257] More precisely, we should understand the external footage practice as an umbrella practice under which we can find a variety of more specific practices, the idea being that, just like media, practices are embedded.

[258] For interesting overviews of the found footage practice, see Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films* or Blake and Aldana Reyes, *Digital Horror.*

[259] While *The Blair Witch Project* is considered the main contributor to the inclusion of the found footage practice in the domain of horror, film historians credit the Italian horror film *Cannibal Holocaust* for the first use of the practice in film in 1980, ten years prior to *The Blair Witch Project.* This illustrates how Csikszentmihalyi's model does not run smoothly, but rather is highly dependent on sociocultural contingencies. Under different circumstances, *Cannibal Holocaust* could have been the film that made the found footage practice part of the domain, and thus could have been recognized for the same creative achievement.

with the practice that the release of the film was genuinely confusing – a feeling which was assisted by a clever marketing campaign that never explicitly stated whether the events depicted were real or not.[260] In the case of *The Blair Witch Project,* we have individuals, two film students, who made a genuinely creative contribution to the domain of horror by reconfiguring its rules and symbols. The field, namely audiences, critics and the wider film community, accepted their contribution into the domain, which was thereafter changed. Found footage is now a standard part of the medium and can itself be referenced as one of the rules and symbols of the domain, against which new creative practices can be measured, such as the external footage practice.

And so, to get back to Csikszentmihalyi, his model gives us a story of how media come to be the way they are. This is a very important part of the overall picture I have drawn in this thesis, as one of the main puzzles of the original medium specificity arguments was precisely the question of medium evolution and change. How could the film medium have changed so drastically since its birth and yet remain the same medium? With a circular model like the Systems Model of Creativity, we have part of an answer.

5.7   Style

Style is an interesting notion in aesthetics.[261] Just like creativity, style is intimately related to artistic agency and criticism. Style can be attributed to an individual, for

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[260] For details, see Turner, *The Blair Witch Project.*

[261] I am talking here about the descriptive notion of style rather than its evaluative counterpart ('she's got style!'). As Bordwell and Thompson note 'all films have style, because all films make *some* use of

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instance to the artist, or more generally to a movement, a time period, a genre, and so on.[262] In both cases, the practitioner's intentions in exhibiting a particular style are essential. Style is also something critics care about. Again, whether it is an individual or a general style, pointing to the style of an artwork can provide some context, help interpretation and ultimately take part in the evaluation of the work. Further, style is also connected to creativity. Exploring a new style or transforming an existing style are usually considered to be creative endeavours. So once again, we are dealing with a notion truly embedded in the field of aesthetics.

I have already mentioned style in a few different places in this thesis, especially in chapter 2. When highlighting the merits of the set-of-practices construal of the medium compared to the physical construal, I argued that the former gave the artist more agency over her medium and that her use of media practices could become a style (if used repeatedly in a certain way, for instance). On a different occasion, I also noted that with the set-of-practices construal, styles are not limited to the physical material of the medium but rather by socio-cultural contexts, as well as by the artist's own agency and creativity. This covers both sides of the main distinction aestheticians of style have been investigating, i.e. individual style and general styles. Therefore, I will follow suit and develop further the consequences of my account of media and medium specificity for a theory of individual style and a theory of general styles.

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techniques of the medium, and those techniques will necessarily be organized in some way', *Film Art*, 412.

[262] Here I am following Meskin's 'Style', a helpful overview of the subject in Gaut and Lopes *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. Regarding general style, Bordwell and Thompson also refer to it as 'group style', *Film Art*, 390.

To begin, let's look at individual styles in the context of art. I am not looking at how my account interacts with the notion of personal style such as one's taste in fashion or music. The topic here is rather the individual style, let's call it artistic style, certain artists develop in their works, which can make them unique, recognizable and sometimes even predictable. A few notable examples of filmmakers with recognizable individual styles are Wes Anderson, Tim Burton, Jane Campion, Sofia Coppola, Wong Kar-wai, whom I have already mentioned, Zack Snyder, Quentin Tarantino, and so on. [263] So what links style, something these filmmakers all have, and the medium? First of all, it seems that the notion of individual artistic style is necessarily bound to the works of the artist. We cannot talk about an artist's style without pointing to her works. Moreover, to talk about the artist's style, we point at specific features of her works. To phrase this in the language of medium theory, we point to specific practices featured in the work. It is important to clarify here that, as Aaron Meskin notes, it might tempting to associate style with the *formal* features of a work rather than its content.[264] To resist this temptation he refers to views that argue against a strict distinction between form and content. I will follow suit and take thematic features, for instance, to participate in certain styles, either individual or general. To support Meskin's point, I would add that when film critics and scholars talk about the 'stylistic trademarks' of a filmmaker, they do not restrict themselves to formal features, but also note recurring

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[263] Wes Anderson' style is also one of the most analysed styles in popular discussions about film today. See for instance the many articles on the Wes Anderson style featured on the filmmaking blog No Film School: '17 Trademarks of Wes Anderson's Idiosyncratic Visual Style', 'What We Can Learn from Wes Anderson's Distinct Style', or '" Bottle Rocket" to "Budapest": The Evolution of Wes Anderson's Style'.

[264] Meskin 'Style', 447.

themes, cast, and so on. Further, to talk about the style of an artist we usually point to the practices that consistently appear *together* in their works. For an artist to exhibit an individual style, it does not suffice that she consistently uses certain practices. After all, many filmmakers use the same practices consistently. Think about the studio system during the Golden Age of Hollywood. Directors hired by the studios all employed similar practices in their films, for instance continuity editing, studio lighting, and so on, and yet the style of these movies is not attributed individually to the filmmakers. If anything, it is considered a general style to be attributed to the era (but more on this later). Rather, to identify the individual style of an artist, we must look at the specific combinations of differential practices, i.e. how the artist consistently combines certain practices for certain effects. It is those combinatorial effects that make the individual style. In other words, individual style is dependent on medium specificity.

Let's consider some examples. Among the filmmakers famous for their styles mentioned above, I want to take a closer look at Sofia Coppola and the practices she uses and combines to create her artistic style. Coppola's style is usually identified by her persistent use of certain themes (female characters, sometimes female ensembles, at emotional crossroads), certain narrative practices (emphasis on theme rather than plot), cinematographic features (back and forth between balanced and unbalanced composition, use of natural light), etc.[265] Individually, these practices are accessible to any contemporary filmmaker. What makes Coppola's style is not merely her use of these practices (that 'merely' makes her a filmmaker), but the specific combinations of these practices she creates in her films. For instance, her debut film *The Virgin Suicides,*

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[265] See ScreenPrism's video essay 'You know It's a Sofia Coppola Movie IF...'

deals with a group of sisters in the aftermath of one of their own's suicide. In a central scene, one of the sisters, Lux, finds herself waking up in an empty football field at dawn, after having been left there by her date to the homecoming dance. In this particular shot, the practices mentioned before combine for an overall emergent effect. The natural light creates a very low contrast image with soft colours, which combined with the unbalanced composition – we see Lux from afar in an aerial shot, small in the bottom right corner of the frame – expresses visually the main theme of the film: the vulnerability and loneliness of the sisters.

Image 5-5 Sofia Coppola's The Virgin Suicides (1999)

I do not believe that the use of natural light without this specific type of framing could have achieved the same effect, and neither could the use of unbalanced composition if the image had been high, instead of low, contrast. Now, this is only one instance of such combinations, but critics who examine Coppola's style throughout her films highlight the recurrence of these combinations. In other words, they highlight her own individual reliance on the specificity the medium – the unique way in which she capitalizes on the potential specific to the medium of film.

Now let's look at general styles, i.e. styles that are not attributed to individual practitioners but rather to a time, place, movement, etc. Once again, it seems that the

medium is essential to understand how general styles work. Let's consider the neo-noir style. Neo-noir is particularly interesting as a general style because it refers to an earlier style, *film noir*, and as such takes on some of its characteristics, while featuring some updated trademarks. As such, it gives us a good example of how subsets of practices regenerate within a medium. It is also a good example to distinguish genre from style. I have said before that a general style can be attributed, among other things, to a place, a time, or a genre. And so, while classical Hollywood *film noir* is often described as a genre, perhaps because it is clearly delineated in time and space (Hollywood, between the 1920's and 1950's), the style we attribute to this genre can exceed these limits and should not be strictly identified with it. Indeed, we find stylistic inspirations from *film noir* in Japan with Kurosawa, in France with Clouzot, and so on. Neo-noir on the other hand is more fluid than original noir, and as such is not so strictly identified with a specific genre, although it is often found in the thriller genre. Here are a few examples that can illustrate the neo-noir style and show us the relationship between general style and the medium. Polanski's *Chinatown,* Scott's *Bladerunner,* the Cohen Brothers' *Fargo,* Rodriguez' *Sin City,* and Campion's *Top of the Lake* have all been described as neo-noir works. On the one hand, it is fair to say that these do not have much more in common than that. For instance, *Bladerunner* belongs to the science-fiction genre, while *Fargo* is more of a black-comedy thriller. *Sin City,* like Rodriguez' other work, sits quite closely to classic American exploitation films, while *Top of the Lake* bears some resemblance to social realist cinema. On the other hand, what these works do have in common are updated references to the original *film noir* style, in terms of themes (antiheros involved in criminal investigations), cinematography (*Sin City* reprises the high contrast black and white visuals for instance), and so on. Interestingly, all of these films use the neo-noir style for different purposes. In *Fargo,* the style adds to the comedic aspect of the

film. In *Sin City* the style is exploited (as in the exploitation genre) beyond its limits. In *Blade Runner,* it is blended with science-fiction to create something new (sometimes referred to as the tech-noir style). Without the neo-noir style, these films would sit quite far apart from each other within the medium because of their differences. But with a general style like neo-noir, these films are connected beyond their differences in genre, themes, artistic purposes and so on. General style is another way in which practitioners and audiences get to navigate the wide spectrum of media practices and not remain confined to one corner or another.

Before moving on, I would like to note an interesting correspondence between individual and general style on the one hand, and the previous section on creativity on the other. Boden's model of creativity is aimed at identifying individual creativity, i.e. how the products of individual creators can be deemed creative, whereas Csikszentmihalyi's account is about historical creativity, how entire domains change overtime through creative actions. As such, if we wished to evaluate an individual artistic style, Boden's model would be a better fit. However, to understand the significance of general styles for their relevant domains, looking at Csikszentmihalyi makes more sense.

Finally, I would like to discuss something that does not appear in the literature on style very much, and that is the interplay between individual artistic style and general artistic style. There seems to be some obvious connections between the two that should be spelled out. On the one hand, Tarantino's individual style cannot be fully understood and appreciated outside of the context of the American exploitation style.[266] On the other hand, there are general styles that depend on the individual styles

[266] See Waddell, *The Style of Sleaze*

of certain filmmakers. Think for instance of the French New Wave. The general *nouvelle vague* style, which casts a long shadow in contemporary cinema, is inseparable from the individual styles of filmmakers like François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard or Agnès Varda.[267] So what does this interplay between general and individual style mean for the medium? Once again, I think it indicates a deep connection between practitioner and medium. The space the medium offers the practitioner determines in some important and interesting ways her artistic outputs and, on the other hand, her practice determines in some important and interesting ways the evolution of the medium. For audiences, I think this offers richer opportunities for interpretation and evaluation.

5.8   Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have considered only a few of the possible applications of my theory of media and medium specificity in contemporary aesthetics. I have looked at a recent definition of art, Lopes' buck-passing theory, and shown that the benefits of his view could be defended and enhanced with the support of my own account of media. I have also discussed the distinction between art and craft, a topic which I believe will regain popularity with the advancements made in everyday aesthetics, and artistic intentions, an important debate which needed to be addressed given certain claims I had previously made. I then discussed criticism – a topic central to Carroll's aesthetics and as such in need of updating following my response to his claims against medium specificity – creativity and style. These last two issues have in the past been more neglected than some of the other topics I discuss, but now have their own

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[267] See Morrey, *The Legacy of the New Wave in French Cinema.*

supporters and it should not be too long until they are considered part of the canon. What I have hoped to show is that, *philosophically,* the medium and medium specificity should also be part of that canon because they are not only relevant to this varied selection of views and theories, but also because they connect these views and theories together. The medium is in fact a foundational component of the philosophical canon, as well as a foundational component of art, and as such is equally relevant to philosophers, practitioners and appreciators.

Conclusion

In the outline of this thesis, I made the observation that the scope of the issues discussed here, while seemingly narrow at first, would broaden as my investigations developed. We are now at the broader end of this investigation. The medium and medium specificity are not some obscure notions that aesthetics can do without, but are in fact sewn into the fabric of the entire subject. Whether one is interested in the ontology of art, aesthetic appreciation or the creation of art, the medium will be a fundamental part of any aesthetic theory. If we do not pay attention to it, we will inevitably produce incomplete theories and will not fully understand the phenomena we seek to investigate.

Let me summarize how we got to here. After unpacking the original theory of the medium and medium specificity and exposing its many flaws with the help of Carroll, I sought to find a better alternative than his, which was to 'forget the medium' altogether. In chapter 2, I started the theory reconstruction project by redefining the core concepts of medium specificity, namely the medium itself and the 'basic constituents' of the medium, which I argued are better understood as sets of practices, and practices respectively. This proposal, while explanatorily powerful, lacked one important component: a naturalistic basis. The old version of medium specificity had one advantage: its straightforward naturalism. With the new construal of the medium and of its basic

constituents as sets of practices and practices respectively, we lost this naturalistic basis. This meant that the medium could not truly be specific under the new conceptualization. Chapter 3 was the beginning of a solution to this issue. I presented a wide variety of empirical research on human responses to film practices. We saw that these responses are scientifically observable, which satisfies our naturalistic criteria, and are specific to individual practices as well as to combinations of practices. I argued, in chapter 4 that this was sufficient to ground a new theory of the medium and medium specificity. I developed a hybrid form of response-dependence to match the two types of responses discovered in chapter 3, namely biologically determined and socially determined responses, by drawing on recent work in social metaphysics. In part, the response-dependence relation between our responses and the medium is quite classic. To accommodate biologically determined responses, I formulated TRD*: x is a film if and only if for any subject S: if conditions C obtain, then S has responses that indicate that x is a film. To accommodate socially determined responses I formulated SRD: x is a film if and only if the practices that make up x generate socially determined responses in the relevant audiences, which in most cases are simply the average film viewers, and in borderline cases are non-average viewers selected on a case by case basis. This was done to show that our responses to film practices, especially our responses to the combinations of practices, are specific enough to differentiate the film medium from other media. Artists create

unique combinations of practices, to which we respond in unique and complex ways. This is medium specificity.

One might think that this new theory, while dealing with the differentiation aspect of the old version of medium specificity, neglects the normative aspect, i.e. the idea that what is specific about a medium is also what it excels at. However, in chapter 5 I showed that amongst the many important implications that my theory would have for various aesthetic theories (e.g. definitions of art, craft, artistic intentions), it is particularly relevant to theories of aesthetic value. For instance, I argued that creativity, arguably a crucial aesthetic value, cannot be fully understood without appealing to medium specificity. Creative artists rely on the specificity of the medium and create unique combinations of practices that will in turn elicit unique and positive responses.

This theory reconstruction project results in a view that has not only more explanatory power and flexibility than the original, it is also supported by a large variety of empirical evidence, some more classically scientific and some more practical (I am thinking here of the knowledge shared amongst the film community). In philosophy, this new theory could easily be integrated in the theoretical field of aesthetics, as I have shown that it connects many different important debates. And while I am convinced that the topic of the medium and medium specificity should be further investigated by philosophers, I also want to note that this theory has the potential to exceed philosophy and break disciplinary boundaries. If philosophers truly want to move on from the medium, there are plenty

of theorists and practitioners who are currently investigating the many
fascinating forms that media are now taking and who might find insight
in this project.

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