

Cinematic artwork as a singularity:

entrevistas com Noel Carroll¹

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Resumo

Entrevista com Noel Carroll, palestrante convidado no XX Encontro Socine, em torno das questões da obra de arte cinematográfica como singularidade.

Palavras-chave: teoria do cinema, arte cinematográfica, especificidade do meio, convergência

Abstract

Interview with Noel Carroll, keynote speaker at the XX Socine Annual Meeting, on the cinematic artwork as a singularity.

Keywords: film theory, cinematic artwork, medium specificity, convergence.

Entrevista de Fernão Ramos (FR) com Noel Carroll (NC), 25 de julho de 2017

FR: Could you make a brief commentary, or historical overview, about the notion of medium specificity in film theory?

NC: The meaning of “medium specificity” can be captured by the slogan “Be true to the medium”, i.e., do what your artistic medium does best in terms of the materials that constitute it, the stuff it’s made of, and its basic devices for shaping that stuff. In cinema, this included the photographic strip and the camera. A corollary of the basic slogan is “Don’t attempt to use the medium to do something that some other medium does better.” With regard to cinema, that other medium was usually theater. The doctrine of medium specificity was a means to enfranchise cinema as a distinct art form. The argument was that if there is some artistic effect that cinema achieves better than any other, it deserves its own place among the muses. Moreover, if there was something that in virtue of its medium, cinema did better than, say, theater, cinema was not merely “theater in a can,” but an artistic medium in its own right with its own potential. For example, in virtue of editing, cinema could discharge many effects that would be generally impracticable in theater. Consequently, the medium specificity theorist urged movie makers to pursue those effects which were often designated as “cinematic.” Indeed, the notion of the cinematic frequently turned into an evaluative standard: films that were cinematic were good; films that were not were defective as films. However, the approach has a number of problems including the disagreement among various theorists about the nature of the medium and, because of that, the failure of proponents of certain conceptions of the medium to be able to account for cinematic masterpieces not in accord with their theories of the medium, as in the case of Siegfried Kracauer’s dismissal of the achievements of an Alfred Hitchcock.

FR: Can you explain what you mean with the concept of evaluative heuristic

and the critical standpoint you propose to work with approaches to medium specificity?

NC: In place of the notion of medium specificity, I recommend the idea of the “evaluative heuristic” as a means of assessing the value of a work of cinema. Every cinematic artwork has a purpose (or set of purposes) and it mobilizes its various forms and devices to realize those purposes. Battleship Potemkin had the aim to arouse the pro- revolutionary fervor of its audiences and it employed montage, including notably fast cutting, to do so. Given that every motion picture 1) has purposes and 2) deploys stylistic choices to achieve them, the obvious question to ask is whether those stylistic choices are appropriate to the purposes - do they support the purpose, do they advance and articulate it or to they fail to do so, or even impede it? That is the crux of the evaluative heuristic. One of its virtues is that it treats each cinematic artwork as a singularity, whereas the medium specificity view treats a putative cinematic artwork as an instance of the species of pure film.

FR: How can purpose and artistry, in a motion picture, combine to compose evaluative heuristics? What about the role of emotions? How can you justify evaluation as a key concept, or a structural device, in film theory?

NC: The “evaluative heuristic” is grounded in a fundamental way in which we assess the value of things, namely, in terms of its function - i.e. in terms of how its means serve its ends. Although this sounds ultimately a cognitive affair, it retains an important role for the emotions, since in many, if not most, motion pictures engaging out emotions is a principle aim, as in our example of Potemkin. Thus, our emotions are pertinent in identifying the purpose of the work and their arousal (or not) is material to determining whether the purpose has been secured. In answer to the last part of your question, I think that evaluation is germane to motion picture theory since what most people want to know about the movies they see is “Is it good?” Thus, I think it is incumbent upon us to supply them with a way to answer their questions.

Entrevista de Denize Araujo (DA) com Noel Carroll (NC), 25 de julho de 2017

DA: What do you understand by “convergences of | in Cinema”?

NC: Ours is a post-medium moment in the art world at large. Aspiring young artists no longer think of themselves as just painters or videographers - that is as masters of just one particular craft or technology. They think of themselves as Artists, ready to avail themselves of whatever arts and techniques and combinations (convergences) thereof that it takes to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and visions - that is, whatever it takes to get the job done. To repurpose Marx’s adage, they will be videographers in the morning and performance artists in the afternoon. Installation art is possibly the most exemplary art of our post medium times, since it so readily incorporates the possibilities of multi- media convergences, combining text, audio, and images - moving and still, handmade and machine-made, photographic, videographic, and cinematic, filmic, animated, and digital. But cinema too participates in this post-medium moment. So many movies today mix media as a very condition of their existence. A motion picture like Disney’s live-action *Beauty and the beast* is an indissoluble meld of photographic film and CGI. It is hybrid rather than pure cinema and all the better for it.

Cinema is not a specific medium but a convergence of many technological processes and tools, deployed to achieve the artist’s purposes. Moreover, it can be adapted for a range of divergent platforms - broadcast TV, DVD, flat projection, 3D, 4K, IMAX and systems not yet imagined - to constitute a converging moving-image world that extends from our smart phones to our multiplexes to our living room entertainment centers where action films, documentaries, and sitcoms coexist in a melee of media. The medium specificity approach emphasized the ways in which various artistic media diverge from each other. Thus, it ill-suits a period like our own in which media are converging - in which digital and photographic film are combined and

movies interface with television and video. Especially in this context, my notion of the evaluative heuristic better serves our “post medium” moving-image-world, insofar as it regards each convergence of media as a discrete artwork - as a singularity.