Editor's Introduction

The history of aesthetic theorizing since Aristotle has been marked by many intriguing attempts to define artistic and literary genres, as well as the very nature of "Art" itself. While I have argued elsewhere against the notion that "real" definitions of such concepts can be given, I also believe that proposing such theories has led to some of the most profound thinking about these issues.

The early history of theorizing about film traced a similar path. Two opposing schools of thought quickly developed, one emphasizing the realism of photographic and moving images (as direct representations of the material world), the other focusing on the unique expressive possibilities of the medium (foregrounding editing and montage techniques). That bifurcation is best embodied in the writings of Andre Bazin and Sergei Eisenstein, who respectively championed the realism of long takes (and deep focus) as opposed to the expressive possibilities of montage.

When Stanley Cavell took up the conversation as one of the first philosophers to take film seriously (in *The World Viewed*), he sided with Bazin in privileging the uniquely realistic nature of the medium, which he took to explain why films can so convincingly assuage our skeptical doubts about what is meaningful in life. Cavell argued that this is what films do best (especially in the classical age of Hollywood), and urged filmmakers to continue to do so. Arthur Danto (in "Moving Image" and elsewhere), on the other hand, emphasized the artificiality of the medium, and the debate was on again.

It ground to a screeching halt in the face of the many convincing arguments in Noël Carroll's highly influential article "The Specificity of Media in the Arts", which appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* in the Winter of 1985. He effectively debunked what he called the "medium specificity thesis", the idea that "each art form, in virtue of its medium, has its own exclusive domain of development". As a result, serious attempts to answer the central question of the philosophy of film, "What is film?", have been relatively few and far between.

This Special Edition represents my attempt to rekindle the conversation about this topic, inviting essays from some of the most prominent contemporary film-philosophers about what the Movies do best (or at least particularly well). The result is a collection of which I am mighty proud, containing some very provocative answers to that question.

Dan Flory kicks off the volume by offering a helpful gloss on the history of the issue, and a detailed analysis of Carroll's case against medium specificity, which he still finds compelling. In "On What the Movies Do Well: Reflections on What I Like Most About Movies", Flory focuses on how films invite viewers to take perspectives they might otherwise be unable to occupy, He illustrates what he means by recounting his influential reading of *Do the Right Thing*, that highlights the ambivalent representation there of Sal, the sympathetic racist who owns the pizzeria that becomes the locus of violence at the end of the film.

Deborah Knight is considerably more comfortable with the specificity thesis, identifying the two foundational questions that film aesthetics must address as: "What is the nature of film?" and "In what sense is film an art?" To talk about film *as film*, Knight claims that the aesthetician should obviously focus on the specific treatment of cinematic space, time and sound in a particular film. Otherwise, you are not discussing the art of cinema.

David Sorfa shifts the focus from the formal aspects of the medium to its ability to arouse emotion and inspire belief (or rather, as he prefers to put it, quasi-emotions and beliefs). He chooses Franco Zefferelli's *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, as his exemplar, which recounts part of the life of St. Francis of Assisi in a fashion that some critics have dismissed as overly sentimental. Sorfa argues that one cannot appreciate the film without giving into its sentimentality, But that doesn't mean we lose sight of the fact that it is a fiction, and an implausible one at that. It does mean that, in doing so, we experience quasi-emotions. Far from decrying this fact, Sorfa concludes by suggesting that we learn how to experience real emotions by first feeling the quasi-emotions to which cinema gives rise.

In a dialogue between colleagues in the Holocaust Studies program at Keene State College, Lawrence Benaquist and Sander Lee next explore

the relevance of medium specificity to our reception of films about the "Final Solution". Upon showing a particularly graphic passage from one such film to an institute for high school teachers on how to teach the Holocaust, the authors were surprised to find that many in the audience were particularly upset by the clip. This led them to a series of reflections on whether it is the uniquely realistic nature of the cinematic medium that makes such representations more disturbing than, say, written accounts of the same events.

Thomas Wartenberg has spent a good deal of time analyzing the ways in which a film can philosophize, and has previously proposed three major ways in which it can do so: by illustrating a philosophical theory, by presenting a philosophical thought experiment, and by demonstrating a necessary condition for something being a film. He points to a fourth way here, claiming that films (or in this case, TV shows) can also dramatize philosophy, by setting philosophical distinctions in dramatic contexts that illuminate them. His archetypal example is a sketch from Monty Python called the Argument Clinic, which adumbrates the two senses of the term "argument", as both dispute and the posing of premises designed to demonstrate a particular conclusion, in a hilarious fashion.

Cynthia Freeland is also more comfortable with talking about what films do particularly well than what they do *best*. One of the things they do particularly well is to create mood, and impart it to the audience. To illustrate her point, she offers an insightful analysis of David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, Following Robert Sinnerbrink, she describes this creation of mood as opening up a cinematic world to audiences, and then points to specific elements of that film, "which presents a bold narrative that addresses significant themes using evocative imagery, music, sound design, editing, camerawork, acting, and more."

Next up is my own contribution to the volume, which embraces Cavell's claim that the movies are best at addressing our skepticism about our deepest held values, in ways that inspire a renewed belief in such values. I am seeking to extend this paradigm to genres that Cavell did not address, in this case to films about the law which depict desperate lawyers

who redeem themselves by triumphing in court for a noble cause and against all odds. My archetype is *The Verdict*, many of whose themes also recur in the recent streaming mini-series from Amazon Prime, *Goliath*.

Last but not least is a carry over from Volume 21, an essay by Kevin Stoehr on the films of Michael Haneke. He approaches several of Haneke's films with a particular question in mind: is Haneke an active or passive nihilist, in terms of the distinction Friedrich Nietzsche proposes (in *The Will to Power*) between these two types? Stoehr contends that Haneke is an active nihilist, who thinks of his withering critiques of the human condition as paving the way for further affirmations. I can connect this to our theme by affirming my belief that film is a particularly apt medium to explore the human implications of the threat of nihilism.

I believe that this collection demonstrates the fruitfulness of renewing the conversation about the essence of the cinematic medium. Whether it is a question of what the Movies do best, or just particularly well, it is a topic that deserves more exploration than it presently enjoys.

Daniel Shaw