

# Cinematic

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**ABSTRACT** Is cinematicity a virtue in film? Is lack of cinematicity a defect? Berys Gaut thinks so. He claims that cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue in film. I disagree. I argue that the term “cinematic” principally refers to some cluster of characteristics found in films featuring the following: expansive scenery, extreme depth of field, high camera positioning, and elaborate tracking shots. We often use the word as a term of praise. And we are likely right to do so. We are right if we mean that the film does well what movies often do well. We are wrong if we mean that the film is good for doing what is merely distinctive of film. This issue has important implications for understanding the role of the medium in artistic evaluation. I argue that we should reject Gaut’s claim because it entails an implausibly strong medium specificity thesis.

**KEYWORDS** Cinematic, medium specificity, philosophy of film, distinctiveness, artistic value, Berys Gaut, Noël Carroll.

## Introduction

Former editor of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, director of over two dozens films, and active into his late 80’s before his death in 2010, Eric Rohmer (born Jean-Marie Maurice Scherer) is best known for his breakthrough feature *My Night at Maud’s* (1969) and most loved for *The Green Ray* (*Le Rayon Vert*, 1986). His movies produced enamored fans and irritated detractors, but nothing in between. A common complaint is that Rohmer’s films are “uncinematic” – they are more like filmed stage plays than movies.<sup>1</sup> The action is confined to relatively few locations and occurs over a short period of time during which nothing much seems to happen. Much like filmed theater, the average shot length in Rohmer’s films is significantly longer than contemporary Hollywood. For example, the second shot of *The Green Ray* lasts for a whopping one minute and nine seconds.

Rohmer’s extended takes are not of the expansive, choreographed mode found in the works of Orson Welles. In Rohmer, we do not find anything like the magisterial three-minute, twenty one-second continuous tracking shot at the beginning of *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958) or the virtuoso party scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Welles, 1942) where the camera deftly navigates a crowded mansion. No, Rohmer tends to just plop the camera down in front of the action. One medium shot follows another. People talk. And then other people talk. Occasionally we get a glimpse of their surroundings. Hence, it is not very controversial to say that Rohmer’s films are “uncinematic.” What is less clear is whether this is a liability. Does the uncinematic nature of Rohmer’s films make

them less valuable as works of art? What about as works of film art?<sup>2</sup> More generally, we may ask: Is lack of cinematicity a defect in a film?<sup>3</sup>

I think not. I argue that a lack of cinematicity is not a defect in a film, not even a *pro tanto* defect – something that gives us reason to think that a work is flawed. Here I stand in stark disagreement with Berys Gaut. Gaut argues that for a movie to be cinematic is a *pro tanto* virtue and to be uncinematic is a *pro tanto* defect.<sup>4</sup> We can call this the *cinematicity thesis* (CT). I intend to show that the latter part of the cinematicity thesis, the negative claim, is certainly wrong: lack of cinematicity is not a *pro tanto* defect. In addition, I argue that the positive claim that cinematicity is a virtue rests on an ambiguity. I agree that cinematicity is sometimes good. It might even typically be good. But when it is good, it is not for the reasons Gaut supplies. Cinematicity is not a *pro tanto* virtue.

I think that this issue is philosophically interesting in its own right, apart from its implications for the larger medium specificity debate. One task of the philosophy of art is to subject to scrutiny the terms of critical practice, such as the philosophical favorites: “identification” and “expression.” As with “painterly,” “literary,” and “theatrical,” critics, professional and amateur, frequently use “cinematic.” Recently, the concept has been regularly invoked in discussions of videogames, where players complain about games that are too “cinematic.” Its critical showing makes the concept a suitable subject for the philosophy of art. As Beardsley argues, “On the third level, one can ask questions about criticism itself, about the terms it uses, its methods of investigation and argument, its underlying assumption. These questions obviously belong to philosophical aesthetics.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the philosophical significance does not stop here. The issue is also notable in the context of the larger debate about the importance of the medium for evaluating art. Most recently, Gaut argues that the truth of CT supports a moderate medium specificity thesis (MSV): “Some correct artistic evaluations of artworks refer to distinctive properties of the medium in which these artworks occur” (p. 286). If I am right that CT is false, then this undermines part of his support for MSV.<sup>6</sup> But I am not primarily interested in this attenuated thesis. I am interested in CT because it has more significant implications.

I argue that Gaut’s claims about cinematicity are far more ambitious than MSV. I think that CT entails a much stronger view, one that more closely tracks traditional claims about medium specificity.<sup>7</sup> On a plausible reading, CT entails a substantive medium specificity thesis.<sup>8</sup> A *substantive medium specificity thesis* (SMS) holds that cinematic films are distinctively filmic and, ipso facto, artistically or aesthetically good, or,

at least, have artistic or aesthetic good-making features. Roughly, MSV holds that some distinctive features are sometimes aesthetically good; in contrast, SMS holds that some distinctive features are aesthetically good by the fact that they are distinctive. I deny that this is the case. I show that problems with SMS undermine the cinematicity thesis, since in a purely descriptive sense of “cinematic,” CT entails SMS.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I distinguish between a few related senses of “cinematic.” I argue that the core descriptive sense is made perspicuous by the stylistic features of self-consciously cinematic epic productions. I then turn to assess whether descriptively cinematic films are good by virtue of their cinematicity. Here I reveal a point of equivocation. I argue that cinematicity is good when it is good because it is good, not because it is distinctive of film.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I respond to several objections.

### **The Meaning of “Cinematic”**

Our first question is this: Just what do we mean when we say a work of art is “cinematic”? As with many terms, there is some variability in its usage. The term is sometimes used with evaluative import. Much like “gaudy,” “tacky,” and “gauche,” when we use the term “cinematic” we often mean to evaluate a film. Like “graceful” and unlike “gaudy,” “cinematic” tends to carry praise. Similarly, by using the term we mean to do more than to simply imply that a particular film is good; we also mean to say that it is good in some particular way, some particularly cinematic way. Hence, the term has a descriptive sense as well.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the term has at least two descriptive senses. Sometimes we use “cinematic” to merely mean film or filmic. One might use “cinematic” to pick out the films in the corpus of an artist who works in multiple mediums. For example, I might say: “Sergei Eisenstein first developed the expressive movement style of acting in his early work in the theater. He continued to use this acting style in his later cinematic efforts.”<sup>11</sup> This is the sense captured in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “of, relating to, suggestive of, or suitable for motion pictures or the filming of motion pictures.” But this is not exactly the descriptive sense that I have in mind. It leaves too much unspecified. I am after the sense that the word has when we are classifying movies.<sup>12</sup> Some films, such as Rohmer’s, are not cinematic; others are. Similarly, some scenes are more cinematic than others. Clearly, we have something more in mind than the dictionary definition. If a reviewer calls a film, a particular scene, or a director’s oeuvre “cinematic,” we can safely form certain expectations about some of its features. This is the sense of the term that we need to isolate.

Those versed in the history of film theory might think that the best route to the descriptive content of “cinematic” will be through the debate between Bazinian realists and Soviet montage theorists.<sup>13</sup> Bazin celebrates the deep-focus long takes that we find in Welles and Renoir. He sees the essence of the medium as lying in photography.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, soviet montage theorists, such as Kuleshov and Eisenstein, think that the essence of the medium is to be found in editing, or montage.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, one might suggest, what we mean by “cinematic” is a hybrid inflected by the literature on the nature of film.

However, I doubt that the debates in classical film theory have much to do with current usage. The matter is much more mundane. The current meaning of “cinematic” is exactly that behind key trends in post-War Hollywood. Here we find a period in the history of the artform where people explicitly sought to produce highly cinematic films. To quickly tell a familiar story: After the introduction of television, theater attendance in the US took a nosedive: from 98 million a week in 1946 to just 47 million by 1957. In an attempt to rescue the movies, studios marketed epic productions, often shot in widescreen formats (such as Cinemascope and Cinerama), multichannel sound, and color (especially Technicolor).<sup>16</sup> The expansive, expensive wide-screen epic was “cinematic,” something you could not get at home. Puny black-and-white TV screens could not hope to match the grandeur of the silver screen. Much like contemporary blockbusters, the biblical epic *Samson and Delilah* was the top grossing film of 1949.

Here, the meaning of the term is most perspicuous. Of course, the notion that there is something particularly cinematic about epics was not unfamiliar before television. I am not making a claim about the origin of current usage. I do not think that the marketing department at Paramount Pictures invented the term. But the explicitly cinematic epic makes the meaning of the term clear. Panofsky, writing in 1947, gives a standard list of cinematic features:

full-scale battle scenes; all kinds of operations, not only in the surgical sense, but also in the sense of any actual construction, destruction, or experimentation [...]; a really grand party, moving through many rooms of a mansion or a palace. Features like these, even the mere shifting of a scene from one place to another by means of a car perilously negotiating heavy traffic or a motorboat steered through a nocturnal harbor, will not only always retain their primitive cinematic appeal but also remain enormously effective as a means of stirring the emotions and creating suspense.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, these features were then and are now commonly associated with film.

I concur with Murray Smith that the vulgar usage “identifies features in a film which, to the speaker, are in some way *characteristic* or *prototypical* of the medium.”<sup>18</sup> As the post-war epics demonstrate, the rich descriptive sense of the term “cinematic” principally refers to some cluster of characteristics found in films featuring the following: expansive scenery, extreme depth of field, high camera positioning, and elaborate tracking shots. At least this is a good summary of what we find in the recent critical discourse.

For instance, Roger Ebert typically uses “cinematic” to simply mean filmic, but he occasionally has more in mind. Here’s Ebert writing about *Fitzcarraldo*: “Werner Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo* is a movie in the great tradition of grandiose cinematic visions. Like Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* or Kubrick’s *2001*, it is a quest film in which the hero’s quest is scarcely more than the filmmaker’s.”<sup>19</sup> Speaking more generally about film, Ebert writes: “It is impossible to think of gangsters or cowboys without thinking of the movies, and perhaps epics also belong on the list of genres that are uniquely cinematic. No other medium, except literature, is so well suited to the epic form.”<sup>20</sup>

In his reviews, Ebert rarely uses the term in the more detailed descriptive sense, but other critics make heavy use: Writing about *Alice’s Restaurant*, Vincent Canby says, “There is an extraordinarily cinematic funeral during a quiet New England snowfall, while Joni Mitchell sings ‘Songs to Aging Children.’ It may be self-conscious but it’s also very beautiful.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Canby has in mind just those features that one typically associates with grand productions – expansive landscapes and elaborate tracking shots.<sup>22</sup>

So far, none of this should be too controversial. We should have a fairly good handle on what we mean when we call a movie, a scene, or a director’s oeuvre “cinematic.” The important question is whether cinematicity is a virtue.

### **Is Cinematicity a Virtue?**

As critics such as Canby demonstrate, people frequently use “cinematic” both to refer to some set of features found in filmic spectacles and to praise the films for having these good features. The term often has built in praise. So if a movie is cinematic in the honorific sense, then yes it is a virtue, or at least typically. But this is an uninteresting result.<sup>23</sup> In answer to the question “Is cinematicity a virtue?” We would have simply

answered, yes, it is a virtue when it is good. If this is all the cinematicity thesis is committed to, it is a vacuous tautology.

We know that cinematicity is good when it is good. We do not need an argument for that. What we want to know is whether it is a pro tanto virtue for a film to be cinematic in the rich descriptive sense. The features that make a film cinematic distinguish the prototype from that of TV and theater. If there are distinctive features of the medium, they are these. Assuming that “cinematic” captures features that are distinctive of film, we can ask: Is cinematicity a virtue because it is distinctive of film? Is it a virtue for a film to be film-like? Here, I think that the answer is no. Cinematicity can sometimes be a flaw.

There is a good case to be made for the claim that cinematicity is not always a virtue, as some suggest. For instance, Smith argues that “‘cinematic’ is invariably a term of praise.”<sup>24</sup> But this is not so. In fact some critics, such as Pauline Kael, seem to think that cinematicity, in the rich descriptive sense, is typically a defect. In *5001 Nights at the Movies*, Kael uses the word “cinematic” only six times in 960 pages.<sup>25</sup> Five of the six uses are in scare quotes. The scare quotes do not suggest that Kael denies the cinematicity of the particular scenes. Rather, she is mocking the idea that cinematicity is a virtue. She is thumbing her nose at the notion. In five of the six instances, she uses the term to denote a flaw. In one instance, she dismisses a worry that the lack of cinematic editing is a flaw. But, more important, Kael seems to think that being cinematic is typically a defect. Of *Alfie* she writes: “Caine brings out the gusto in Naughton’s dialogue and despite the obvious weaknesses in the film (the gratuitous “cinematic” barroom brawl, the clumsy witnessing of the christening, the symbolism of the dog), he keeps the viewer absorbed in Alfie.”<sup>26</sup> Here, Kael thinks that the cinematicity of the fight scene is a flaw of the same order as the obvious dog symbolism at the end of the film. She certainly does not think that cinematicity is always a virtue. In fact, she seems to think that it is typically a flaw.<sup>27</sup>

But this establishes fairly little. Yes, a film might be gratuitously cinematic. Fancy tracking shots and elaborate settings might detract from character engagement. They might be used in ways that subvert larger artistic goals. In such a case, cinematicity would be a defect. Most will agree. The conclusion that cinematicity is not always an all-things-considered virtue comes cheap. The more interesting question is whether cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue, and, conversely, whether lack of cinematicity is a pro tanto defect. Again, a pro tanto virtue is a factor in consideration of merit. If all you know about a film is that it is cinematic,

then if cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue, you would have some reason to think that the movie is good.

Here, a brief clarification of the difference between a pro tanto virtue and a prima facie virtue is in order. Gaut argues that cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue.<sup>28</sup> This is much stronger than merely saying that it is a prima facie virtue.<sup>29</sup> A prima facie virtue is merely an apparent virtue. Upon further inspection, it might not turn out to be a virtue after all. In contrast, pro tanto virtues and defects do not disappear upon further reflection. A pro tanto defect with a work of art would give you reason to think that it is flawed. This flaw might be compensated for in other ways, so that the work is good overall. But if it has a pro tanto defect, the work is good in spite of the flaw. Pro tanto reasons can be overridden but not eradicated. Hence, aspects of works that are pro tanto virtues and defects are not merely aspects that are typically virtues and vices. The frequency of compensation is not at issue.

Even stated this boldly, the claim that cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue may still seem right. But I think this, too, is mistaken. The cinematicity thesis only seems plausible because the rich descriptive sense is frequently used in contexts of praise. But, as we saw in the reviews of Kael and Ebert, the term need not be used as an honorific. When used descriptively, it merely picks out features that we have come to associate with film. If cinematicity were a pro tanto virtue, it could not occasionally be a defect in itself. If cinematicity were a pro tanto virtue, it could only be an indirect defect. In such a case, the cinematicity would be good, but not overall, because, say, it interferes with some other aesthetic goals. But this does not accurately describe the cases at hand.

Most plausibly, Kael's complaint is not that the cinematicity was good in itself, but overall bad in that it interfered with other aesthetic goals. No, her complaint appears to be that cinematicity is simply bad in itself in some cases. Her scornful remarks suggest as much. But regardless of Kael's actual intentions, she very well might have intended to use the term in this way. Given her examples, it seems right. At least, it's plausible. And for my argument, plausibility is all I need. This is a serious problem for the cinematicity thesis. It suggests that cinematicity is not a pro tanto virtue. In some cases, cinematicity seems to be bad.<sup>30</sup>

### **Problems for the Substantive Medium Specificity Thesis**

There are more significant worries for CT. If we assume that "cinematic" tracks distinctive features of the medium, then in the purely descriptive sense of "cinematic," Gaut's cinematicity thesis entails a substantive

medium specificity thesis. Again, a *substantive medium specificity thesis* (SMS) holds that cinematic films are good, at least in part, because they are distinctively filmic – that distinctiveness is *ipso facto* artistically or aesthetically good. If films are artistically or aesthetically good because they have distinctive features of the medium, as CT holds, then SMS must be the case. But SMS is false.

The chief problem with SMS is that the mere fact that a film has features that are distinctive of film gives us no reason to think that it is good. It seems that for the most part, people are clear about this. When we use the term “cinematic” in contexts of praise we do not mean to merely suggest that the film has distinctive, filmic features; instead, we mean to pick out good-making features that *happen* to be distinctive. If we think otherwise, I will argue that we are wrong to do so.<sup>31</sup> We are right to praise a film for having good features. But we would be wrong to praise a film for merely having features that are distinctive of film.<sup>32</sup> What makes cinematicity a virtue is not that it makes a film very film-like, but that the film excels in certain ways that happen to be distinctive of film. A film can be very film-like and be bad partly for this reason; imagine a melodrama with MTV editing patterns. It would be more filmic than theatrical, but, surely rapid editing would be a poor choice for eliciting pity, nostalgia, and regret. The fact that some films might be distinctively filmic would not make them good, just different from theater. The only reason we care about these particular features is that they are often the good aspects of films we like.

There is a subtle difference between thinking that a film is good because it is distinctively filmic and thinking that a film is good because it has good features that merely happen to be filmic. The distinction is crucial to getting clear about the matter. Unfortunately, it is too often ignored. For instance, in regards to terms such as “painterly” as applied to painting, “literary” as applied to literature, and “cinematic” as applied to film, Gaut argues that: “These terms are all evaluative, and they claim that the works in question are good in part because they exploit features that are distinctive to the medium.”<sup>33</sup> This is partly right, but it trades on an ambiguity. The ambiguity concerns “because.” It is right to say that the works “are good in part because they exploit features that are distinctive to the medium,” if we mean that the works are good because they employ some features in a good way. That would amount to saying that they are good because of the good features. Surely, that is right.

However, the claim is wrong if Gaut means that the works are good by virtue of the fact that they employ distinctive features (i.e., SMS). And this is what he must mean if his comment is to support CT. The



problem is that the works would be good if they deployed these same features, even if the features were not distinctive. Although the distinctive features of the medium may facilitate filmmakers in the pursuit of cinematic goals, the ends are not good because of the fact that they are distinctive of the medium. Merely employing distinctive features does not make a work or anything else good; it merely makes it distinct, or in this case, paradigmatic.

To see why, it might help to make two things clear about the value of distinct features: First, the characteristics that make something distinct are not necessarily its best characteristics. Take two Ferraris that are exactly the same in every way, except that one has a slightly nicer gearshift handle: The gearshift handle distinguishes one from the other, but it is not the best feature. Not by far. Or consider two professors: Both are excellent researchers. They are both fair teachers, but one is slightly better than the other at teaching. Teaching ability distinguishes one from the other, but it is not her best feature.

One might object that these examples do not capture the kind of distinct features that we should be talking about. Rather than incidental features, we should be talking about features that distinguish one kind of thing from another. We should be concerned with constitutive or essential features. Gearshift handles are not constitutive or essential. Neither is teaching ability.

In response, it appears that this worry is unfounded and irrelevant. Gear shift handles are indeed one of the features that distinguish cars from horses and stick shifts from automatics. And the ability to teach is one of the features that distinguish professors from bears, bus drivers, bankers, and bees. Although you do not need to be able to teach in order to be a philosopher, you must be able to teach to be a professor. The task is implied by the very name. Hence the objection is unfounded. And it is irrelevant. Although someone with no teaching ability could not be a professor, the same is not the case with cinematicity. A film can be a film even if it is not cinematic. Regardless, my point stands: the features that distinguish one thing from another, or one kind of thing from another, are not always its best features.

Second, and more important, what distinguishes one thing from another might be of no value. If one member of a pair of identical twins develops a hideous rash, the rash might distinguish the two, but it is not a good feature. The mere fact that a feature distinguishes something gives us no reason to think that it is a valuable feature. It may be valuable for purposes of distinguishing, but this is not a form of artistic or aesthetic value.

To return to the question at hand: Suppose that the term “cinematic” picks out some of what is distinctive of film, or at least what sets it apart from other media such as TV or theater. Would this make cinematicity a good-making feature? At this point, it should be clear that the answer is no. Merely being distinctive is not enough. To be good, the distinctive feature also has to be good. Merely being an exemplar does not make something good. A particularly cinematic film would be a good example of a film, but this would not mean that it is artistically or aesthetically valuable. Hence, we should reject the cinematicity thesis because it entails a falsehood – the substantive medium specificity thesis.

### Objections

#### OBJECTION FROM THE FUNCTION OF FILM

One might muster a slightly different defense of the value of distinctness. Rather than focus on distinct features, one might appeal to distinct functions. For instance, a good knife is one that cuts well. If it cuts well, it is good as a knife. The knife fulfills its function well. Similarly, one might argue that film has a cinematic function to fulfill. A better film will be one that is more cinematic. It will be better since it fulfills its function better.

Perhaps one way to make this argument more plausible is via a comparison. Some people criticize videogames that have too many cut scenes – animated, minimally interactive narrative sequences. Players complain that videogames with lots of cut scenes are too cinematic. Such games are not good as games, since they are no fun to play. There is just too much sitting around watching and not enough playing. On similar grounds, one might argue that *My Dinner with Andre*, a very theatrical movie, is flawed in a similar way. It fails to be good as a film, much like a knife that cannot cut fails to be good as a knife.

The central problem with this line of argument is that the basis for the assumption that films must have a cinematic function is utterly mysterious. Although there are clearly definable functions for tools such as knives, there are no such goals for film.<sup>34</sup> Where in the world would they come from? Most plausibly, for something to be a knife it must be produced with the function of cutting in mind or appropriated as a cutting device. In contrast, it is not the case that to be a film something must be produced with the function of cinematicity in mind, at least not in anything like the rich descriptive sense. Filmmakers can make films in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. There is no reason to think that what makes film distinct as an artform establishes a function

analogous to that of knives. To make this clear, assume for the sake of argument that what distinguishes film from theater is that film is not confined to continuous space.<sup>35</sup> This would establish no function for film. Why would it?<sup>36</sup>

#### OBJECTION FROM THE FULL USE OF THE MEDIUM

As another line of reply, one might object that it is a defect to fail to make full use of the medium. Rohmer fails to take advantage of the capacity to visually relay information, to create meaning through montage, to engage the viewer through camera movement, etc. This is why his films are not cinematic. And this is why his films are flawed. They do not take advantage of the capacity of the medium.

Surely there is something to this criticism. Conversely, we often praise artists for what they are able to accomplish given the limitations of the medium. Similarly, we celebrate inventive uses of media. But this shows very little. It is not a defect to fail to make full use of a medium. It is not even clear what this would involve. Should all movies shot on digital video feature extended long takes not possible when using celluloid? Should every movie be edited like *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929)? Of course not. The capacities of the medium do not set the purposes for the artist. Sure, the medium can impose limitations, but it does not dictate style. And it does not dictate artistic goals.

The videogame analogy does help illustrate what might be going on here. It is not the case that the flaw with cinematic videogames is that they are not ludic enough, but that they do not give players what they want. Many people want ludic games. Apart from this expectation, there is no reason to think that a videogame should not involve lots of cut scenes.<sup>37</sup> The same goes for noncinematic, theatrical movies. Some audiences expect certain things from movies. When they do not get what they want, they complain, or they simply avoid the arthouse and go to the multiplex.

This has no larger implications. It does not show that films have a cinematic function like knives do cutting. And it does not show that merely employing distinctive features of a medium is a pro tanto virtue. It simply shows that if you go to a movie expecting one thing and get another, you might be disappointed. This does not make audience expectations normative. It simply reveals that audiences have a too-limited idea of what movies can be.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the claim that lack of cinematicity is a pro tanto defect is not supported by any such considerations.

## THE OBJECTION FROM CINEMATOGRAPHY

One might raise a related objection to my claim that cinematicity is not a pro tanto virtue. Simply consider the various ways in which we revere the craftsmanship of filmmaking. Take cinematography: We praise excellence in cinematography. There is an Academy Award dedicated to the craft. An excellent cinematographer is one who makes excellent use of the medium of film. A good cinematographer frames shots well, chooses film stock and lenses well, has a keen eye for lighting, and is a master of shot composition. These are mostly distinctively filmic forms of excellence. The excellence of cinematography is such that it cannot be evaluated or even described without reference to distinctive properties of the medium. The same goes for other forms of film craftsmanship, such as editing. Indeed, this is likely the case. But it does nothing to support the cinematicity thesis.

The fact that excellence in filmmaking involves making use of distinctive features of the medium does not mean that cinematicity is a good-making feature. It simply shows that to make a film, you have to use some features of the medium that might be distinctive. It does not show that a good film is good because it is distinctive. This is clear in the case of cinematography; it is not the case that the best cinematography is the kind that is most filmic, whatever that might mean. And even if it were the case, it would not show that the most filmic cinematography was good because it was distinctive. I made this clear in the previous section. Film craftsmanship provides no clear support for the cinematicity thesis.

In defense of CT, one might object that there is more to the craftsmanship problem. Consider the opening scene of Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958): It features an elaborate 3 minute 21 second tracking shot that slips over and through a busy border town. We witness the planting of a bomb set to go off in 3 minutes, navigate through the town to the border crossing, and finally see the explosion. This scene is one of the greatest achievements in the history of cinema. It would still be pretty fancy on digital video or with CGI inserts. But it is particularly good because it was done on celluloid as a single shot without editing or CGI. The limitations of the technology in 1958 make it the achievement that it is. The scene is artistically and aesthetically as good as it is precisely because of the distinctive features of the medium.<sup>39</sup> *Touch of Evil* would not be as artistically valuable had Welles been able to use different media. Surely this supports the SMS.

I agree that this example highlights something important about achievement value. And I agree that artistic value is probably largely a

matter of achievement value, although aesthetic value is most likely not.<sup>40</sup> Either way, it does nothing to support CT or SMS. In *Touch of Evil* we find an excellent scene that is rightfully called cinematic. But the scene is not artistically or aesthetically valuable because it is distinct. It is good because Welles directed an excellent scene. He used the tools available to him remarkably well. Some of these tools were distinctive or essential features of the medium. The achievement value of his craftsmanship is a factor of the difficulty imposed by the limitations of the medium.

Sure. But this does not show that cinematicity is a pro tanto virtue. Nor does it show that distinctiveness is *ipso facto* good. Here's why: *Touch of Evil* would be just as artistically valuable if the features imposing the limitations were neither essential nor distinctive of film. Virtuoso acting and musical accompaniment are artistically valuable in film, though neither is distinctive of the medium. Both are found in theater. Why would cinematography be any different? As the comparison suggests, the cinematography is good because it is good, not because it is distinctive of the medium. The fact that the feature is distinctive is incidental. I see no reason to think otherwise.

At this point, the burden of proof is squarely on my opponent. Accordingly, we can safely assume that the distinctiveness of the features that impose limitations is irrelevant to the achievement value of the work. SMS gets this wrong.

### Conclusion

It is plausible that we do sometimes use "cinematic" as a term of praise, indicating a goodness characteristic of film. I offer a brief account of the descriptive content of the term. It is also plausible that the descriptive content picks out distinctive features of the medium, features most pronounced in grand, epic productions. Particularly cinematic films, such as *Touch of Evil*, are often excellent. But none of this supports the cinematicity thesis. Cinematicity is not a pro tanto virtue. Nor is lack of cinematicity a pro tanto defect.

What makes cinematic films good is that they have good-making features. They are not good because they are distinctively filmic. Being distinctively filmic is not *ipso facto* good. As we have seen, merely being distinctive does not make something good. What makes a good cinematic film good is that it is good in the cinematic way. This is a way that happens to be distinctive. It is not good *because* it is distinctive. Sure, the features picked out by the rich descriptive sense might be distinctive of film, but so what? This does not tell us much of significance.<sup>41</sup> This

mistake undermines the substantive medium specificity thesis and cinematicity thesis.

If when we call a film cinematic we intend to praise it for being filmic, we are wrong to do so. But it is unlikely that we have any such thing in mind. If by “cinematic” we mean that a movie is good because it uses distinctive features of its medium, then we could not make sense of how people use the term to praise some works of theater and even pop music. For instance, Julie Taymor, director of the stage production of *The Lion King*, says of her work: “My theater is highly cinematic, and conversely, my cinema is highly theatrical.”<sup>42</sup> Here, Taymor is deploying the rich descriptive sense of the term – the sense that we typically find in contexts of praise. Her theater is indeed cinematic in this way. But it certainly cannot be good because it is exploiting distinctive features of its medium; her play is a play, not a film. Cinematicity is good when it is good where it is good. That’s about all we can say. The cinematicity thesis is false.<sup>43</sup>

### Notes

1. This complaint is ubiquitous. It is widely expressed in conversation. As the program notes for the 2010 Harvard Film Archive series say: “The emphasis placed on spoken dialogue in Rohmer’s films has led some to claim his filmmaking is ‘uncinematic.’” And here’s part of Rohmer’s obituary in *Variety*: “The highly literate films were criticized by some as uncinematic for their simple, unobtrusive camera moves and editing plus their heavy emphasis on dialogue.”

2. This issue frames the debate between Carroll, “Forget the Medium!”; Smith, “My Dinner with Noël”; and Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, chap. 7.

3. Following common parlance, I use the word “film” for both digital and celluloid formats. It seems unnecessary to use a distracting neologism such as “the art of the moving image.” No one on the street would balk if I called the latest feature shot on DV a “film.” Nor would they complain if I called a Samsung copy machine a “Xerox machine,” or a Honda Scooter a “moped.” Accordingly, I will use “films,” “movies,” and “works of cinema” interchangeably.

4. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 295.

5. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present*, 14.

6. I address Gaut’s second argument, the argument from craftsmanship, in the last objection in the paper. Due to limitations of scope, I will not attempt to situate CT in the larger context of his book. I will assess it as an independent claim.

7. Due to limitations of scope, I cannot summarize the various debates that

fallen under the issue of medium specificity. Nor can I do much to explore the implications of SMS. Each would take at least another article.

8. See: Carroll, "Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts."

9. Here I use "distinctive" in the normal sense as "that which distinguishes." Characteristic and prototypical features are typically distinctive in this sense. A distinguishing feature of a medium, if there are any such things, need not be one that works in other mediums could not have. In fact, if this were the case, there would be no medium specificity debate. If films couldn't be theatrical, there would be no point saying that they shouldn't be theatrical. I will not attempt to untangle "distinctive" further. Nothing here rides on a more precise notion.

10. Smith, "My Dinner with Noël," 145–46, concurs. Gaut says very little about the descriptive content of the term.

11. For more on the technique, see Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein*, 117–19.

12. I do not think this usage is restricted to talk of film, or even parts of films.

13. Limitations of scope preclude a detailed rehearsal of this familiar debate.

14. See Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, for a theoretical discussion and Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, for more detailed discussions of films and filmmakers.

15. For instance, see Eisenstein, *Film Form*.

16. For an overview of the decline of Hollywood after the introduction of television and post-war suburbanization, see Thompson and Bordwell, *Film History*, chap. 15. For more on the development of Cinemascope, see Brag, "The Development of Cinemascope."

17. Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures." Panofsky composed this essay in 1931 and revised it in 1945. The idea that these features are particularly filmic is not new.

18. Smith, "My Dinner with Noël," 146.

19. Ebert, *Roger Ebert's Four-Star Reviews 1967–2007*, 259.

20. *Ibid.*, 837.

21. Canby loves the word "cinematic." He even thinks that *My Night at Maud's* is cinematic! Perhaps he is not the most careful writer.

22. It is important to note that although these features are paradigmatically cinematic, they are not essential. It would be a mistake to confuse largely contingent, historical stylistic features with the essence of the medium. Sontag, "Film and Theatre," 28, puts it nicely: "Whether derived from plays or not, films with complex or formal dialogue, films in which the camera is static or in which the action stays indoors, are not necessarily theatrical. *Per contra*, it is not more part of the putative 'essence' of movies that the camera must rove over a large physical area, than it is that movies ought to be silent." It is out of scope to engage in further debate about the essence of the cinema.

23. Likewise, on this reading, MSV appears to be trivially true.
24. Smith, "My Dinner with Noël," 146.
25. Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies*, 13, 47, 323, 379, 525, and 698.
26. Kael, *5001 Nights*, 13–14.
27. Not much rides on my interpretation of Kael's remarks. I think I'm right, but if Kael meant to deny that the fight scene was cinematic, my objection stands. It would be perfectly natural for a critic to complain about gratuitous cinematicity. Perhaps this isn't what Kael was up to, but she certainly could have been.
28. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 295.
29. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, uses "prima facie" to mean "pro tanto." He (p.20) acknowledges the infelicity. Contemporary usage is more accurate.
30. This is not a question begging assertion. It establishes the way things seem. If CT suggests otherwise, it appears to be wrong. Hence, this is a reductio. It shifts the burden onto the defender of CT. It would only beg the question if CT were more plausible than the claim that cinematicity is sometimes a flaw. If someone makes a claim that implies a falsehood, it does not beg the question to point out the flaw. More generally, any argument can be reconstructed into a reductio of one of its premises: "A and B ∴ not C" to "C and A ∴ not B". I've switched "CT ∴ always good" to "Sometimes bad ∴ not CT". Temporal priority of presentation does not make one claim more plausible than the other. Nor does it license charges of begging the question.
31. Smith, "My Dinner with Noël," 146, argues that ordinary usage likely differs from the more essentialist academic usage. He thinks that ordinary people do not think that cinematic features are good because they are distinctive, but that the distinctive features are good. And that a good film will exploit them. I wish that this was the case, but I suspect that people are not entirely sure about the basis for praising a film for its cinematicity.
32. It appears that Truffaut, in his interview with Hitchcock, thinks that merely being distinctive is good. Unfortunately, he is confused. See, Truffaut, *Hitchcock*.
33. Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, 295.
34. This has been Carroll's chief complaint against medium specificity. See: Carroll, "Medium Specificity Arguments," *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, and "Forget the Medium!"
35. Sontag, "Film and Theatre," 29, makes a similar suggestion.
36. Carroll, "Medium Specificity Arguments," considers a variety of bad reasons, chief among them a worry about redundancy.
37. The feature is not even "contra-standard," as Walton might put it, since cut scenes are extremely common. It is out of scope to pursue Walton's arguments further. My argument against CT is independent of Walton's thesis. See Walton, "Categories of Art."



38. There is not much sense to be made of “good as a film.” We can evaluate things based on comparative classes, but there is no relevant comparative class of film. It is too broad to ground any substantive evaluation.

39. In *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, Gaut pursues this line of argument. His focus is on achievement value, which depends on difficulty. Features of the medium establish the difficulty of tasks of artistic production. His principal example is that a delicately carved sculpture is more impressive than a similar cast.

40. I assume that aesthetic value is a species of artistic value. Nothing here requires a more precise theory of either.

41. Smith, “My Dinner with Noël,” argues for medium deflationism – the view that aspects of the medium are relevant for appreciating works of art. This view is nearly as weak as Gaut’s MSV. Neither entails CT. And neither is the primary subject of this paper.

42. Conterio, “Painting Theater and Cinema.” There is no different sense involved here. There is no equivocation in the sentence: “*Touch of Evil* and *The Lion King* are both very cinematic.” I mean the same thing whether I’m talking about film, theater, or video games.

43. I thank Heidi Bollich, Noël Carroll, Chris Grau, Christy Mag Uidhir, and Henry Pratt for feedback on an early version of this paper. I also thank the audience at the 2011 Eastern Division meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics and the audience at the 2010 SPSCVA session of the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

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