Reflections on What Movies Do Well

Recently, I watched an acclaimed Columbian film, *Embrace of the Serpent* [*El abrazo de la serpiente*] (Ciro Guerra, 2015), which tells the story of an Amazonian shaman who leads two Western explorers, thirty years apart, on extended river journeys to find a rare, sacred plant. Much of the film is concerned with contrasting an indigenous point of view represented by this shaman, Karamakate (played as a young man by Niblio Torres, and an old man by Antonio Bolivar), and those of his Western companions, who consistently fail to see or understand the Amazon and the changes colonization has brought to it as Karamakate does. Some of this contrast is, of course, conveyed by plot and dialogue, but much of it is provided by the film's striking cinematography and soundtrack. Black-and-white visuals and naturalistic sounds, combined with carefully selected music, subtly present a perspective that many critics have praised as broadly sympathetic toward those who have lived and died under the thumb of Western oppression.[1] Viewers in industrialized nations are offered a sustained sense of perceiving events in a way that is not often made available to them through movies, one that provides a perspective in sharp and critical contrast with how they typically conceive, perceive, and experience their world and the people in it. Like many others, I appreciated *Embrace of the Serpent* because its different perspective created a thoughtful mood in me regarding materialism,

imperialism, colonialization, and the destruction of native cultures.

For Western viewers, this movie falls into the category of the art film: its exotic setting and detached presentation of characters, for example, mark it as a work that caters to a rarefied audience of cineastes who desire novel, out-of-the-ordinary movie experiences. Appreciating these novel experiences require them to do considerable intellectual and emotional work in order to grasp and appreciate the narrative offered. Such a work differs strikingly from, say, *Zootopia* (Byron Howard and Rich Moore, 2016), a popular Disney movie that sold over a billion dollars worth of tickets worldwide, or *The Fate of the Furious* (F. Gary Gray, 2017), the latest sequel in *The Fast and Furious* series—which made even more money than *Zootopia*. Neither one of these works requires substantial emotional or intellectual effort in order to be understood or enjoyed; rather they can be grasped quite readily and easily.

Embrace of the Serpent also seems vastly different from *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-Wai, 2000), another well-known art film, as well as *Tangerine* (Sean Baker, 2015), a micro-budget, American independent film about being transgender in Los Angeles that was shot on iPhones. For that matter, this Columbian film contrasts sharply with some of my personal, take-to-a-desert-island favorites, such as *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1992), *City Lights* (Charlie Chaplin, 1931), and *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949). The striking differences between these movies naturally lead one to ask what they could possibly have in common. Do all narrative fiction films share crucially important aesthetic traits? Does it make sense to talk of unique features of the cinematic medium that can or should be exploited to achieve the best kind of cinematic art? What is it that film (in the broadest sense) does better than the other arts? What does it do best?

I am pretty sure that I cannot offer satisfactory answers to most of these questions. For one thing, by predisposition I am an anti-essentialist and, even though I admit that sometimes essences can be found, many other times (if not most of the time) they cannot. More to the point, I am deeply skeptical that there is a relevant "essence" or unique virtue to cinema that

might be usefully compared to the essences of other arts. Indeed, I think that the term 'art' itself, as well as most of its relevant subdivisions, are fundamentally diverse and protean concepts, which makes posing such comparative and superlative questions problematic, in the sense that most rankings that might be achieved would be temporary at best.

Moreover, how one answers such questions seems to depend on the standards and categories one uses in order to make such comparisons, rather than on some particular, widely accepted aesthetic criterion for judging art in general, and I am dubious that such universal standards and categories can ever be found or agreed upon. Finally, as someone who is oriented toward the empirical and generally skeptical of *a priori* arguments in art, it seems to me that declarations of what film does uniquely, or best, would simply invite artists to come up with artworks that were counterexamples to those declarations—invitations that would no doubt be embraced in short order. The prospects for satisfactorily answering these comparative and superlative questions thus appear, to me at least, to be pretty dim, and perhaps even misguided.

However, I do feel that I can usefully discuss two more modest questions: what I like best about movies, and what I think film does well. Leaving it to others to explore the deeper comparative and superlative inquiries, in this essay I aim to outline why I think pursuing medium specificity is a bad idea, what might be better avenues to pursue, and what those better avenues might mean for questions like what movies do well and what they do best. Perhaps this essay will amount to gathering materials that might contribute to our more thoughtful consideration of these deeper questions I reject, but it will take someone cleverer than me to figure that out.

Older Arguments Regarding Medium Specificity

The idea that film does something better than any other form of art and hence ought to pursue that ideal has a long and venerable history, stretching back to the beginnings of philosophy of film itself. Hugo Münsterberg advanced medium specificity arguments more than a century ago; Sergei Eisenstein and the Russian formalists offered related claims regarding montage as the singular aesthetic trait of film in the mid-1920s; Rudolf

Arnheim argued for silent film's essential aesthetic purity by the early 1930s; and others, including Andre Bazín, Sigfried Kracauer, Victor Perkins, and Stanley Cavell, have similarly sought to characterize the uniqueness or "essence" of cinema in ways that aimed to describe its unique virtues as an art form.[2] Most (though perhaps not *all*) of these arguments either implicitly or explicitly rely on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's Enlightenment thesis about the arts: the nature or unique properties of a medium fundamentally determine what it does best as an art.

Unfortunately, these arguments all seem to be misguided. In a series of books and articles stretching back to the 1980s, Noël Carroll has offered numerous counterexamples, thought experiments, comparisons to other arts, and arguments by analogy that have shown the flaws in these older medium specificity arguments, almost as if he had seen it as one of his chief missions in life to refute each and every one of these arguments.[3] His efforts, in my view, have been successful. Who, after all, wants to defend the idea that the Mack Sennett comedy *Lizzies of the Field* (Del Lord, 1924) is a better film than Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925), or that *Tarzan the Ape Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1932) is a better movie than *My Dinner with Andre* (Louis Malle, 1981) because they are allegedly more "cinematic" by virtue of using traits like montage or movement to a greater degree? Yet both rankings would seem to be required by different medium specificity arguments.[4]

Some philosophers continue to advance arguments for film's unique properties and/or what film does best, often edging into territory that at least implies film can do certain things better than other artistic media. Gregory Currie, Berys Gaut, and Trevor Ponech are among those who have done so.[5] However, rather than follow in Carroll's footsteps and critically address each and every argument favoring medium specificity, I would like to turn in a different direction.

Carroll himself has argued that moving pictures "glue" us to the screen through the diverse ways in which they pleasurably mold our affective and cognitive responses. He is surely right to claim that movies, as mass-art popular fictions, exert an impressive hold on us, because they take

advantage of certain natural propensities that we manifest as reasoning and affect-prone creatures.[6] Moreover, their sustained global popularity makes it evident that films have, in general, a more powerful allure for most people than, say, theater, written fiction, poetry, or painting.

Unlike earlier philosophers of film who relied on Lessing and advanced films arguments in a resolutely *a priori* fashion, Carroll's account of what glues us to the screen is based on empirical findings from cognitive science, psychology, evolutionary biology, and related fields. This difference, I think, gives us a clue regarding how we should proceed. As Gaut puts it, rather than approaching film in a purely conceptual way, we ought to make "detailed examination[s] of individual artworks to see how their narration operates in respect of emotion and cognition," while also paying heed to the many relevant discoveries in these related fields.[7]

As Carroll has frequently noted, this sort of approach is dialectical, pluralistic, and pragmatic, proceeding "in a piecemeal fashion". It permits us to revise and alter our theorizing as new details and insights arise.[8] Two recent theorists of film who adopt this approach are Amy Coplan and Margrethe Bruun Vaage. Their perspectives on what is interesting about film focus on careful analyses of particular films, offering new details and insights based on cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and adjacent disciplines. thus, their writings would seem to be good places to start looking for what film does well.

Coplan on Mood and Thought

In a recent essay, Amy Coplan has argued that the experience elicited in viewers by the world depicted in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) "exemplifies what film can do better than any other art form," i.e., create a complex and multi-layered atmosphere that induces a mood from which viewers then perceive and understand the story that is told.[9] By influencing "how we experience and interpret … meanings," film can affect viewer perception, engagement, and understanding of a narrative.[10] The best sorts of films are structured so that "we adopt an active stance in relation to the story" such that we enthusiastically try to discern what is true within it, doing so in a way that has been profoundly shaped by the film itself.[11]

This capacity of film to get us to perceive a story in a particular way fuses cinematic form and content. Hence, film can firmly capture our attention, while telling its story so effectively that "[o]ur thoughts are shaped by our feelings at least as much as our feelings are shaped by our thoughts."[12] Coplan describes this capacity of film at its best as putting us "in the mood for thought."

While focusing primarily in this essay on the affective mood that can be induced by film, Coplan 's other work demonstrates that she means her claims about what film does best to apply more broadly, especially to the medium's capacity to influence viewers emotionally and affectively. In an essay co-written with Derek Matravers, for example, she asserts that the intensity of viewer affective response to certain scenes in *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, 1975) is due to "the use of techniques unique to the cinematic medium."[13] She also notes that, in terms of eliciting affective responses, films "are often more powerful and effective than literature" because they "are able to directly influence viewers' affective states."[14] Thus, "filmmakers are able to increase our levels of affective arousal without cognitive engagement" by tapping into our experience directly, rather than through the mediation of symbols on a page, as literature must do.[15]

This capacity makes the formal qualities of film far more important to our overall aesthetic experience than they are in literature. Shot composition, lighting, editing style, set design, and so on have a powerful impact on how we experience a film aesthetically, partly because these elements affect us in direct, unmediated ways, both nonconsciously and unconsciously.[16] These modes of engagement are in addition to the ways in which the story might affect us consciously through plot, dialogue, or character. Film, then, has at its disposal a greater array of sensory and cognitive means to affect our experience than literature does.

For example, Coplan goes on to note that film's capacity to affect us has been greatly enhanced by improvements to sound systems in movie theaters and home entertainment centers over the last forty years or so.[17] Sound, which can move us in ways that directly influence our heartbeat, galvanic skin conduction, muscular configurations, or overall mood, and

thereby bypass higher-level cognitive functions (e.g., conscious thought), generally offers film access to our experience in ways of which we need not be aware. The push since the late 1970s to improve and enhance sound systems has thus greatly augmented film's practical capacity to affectively shape our aesthetic experience.

Coplan's more general point is that film's formal elements have a profound impact on us, particularly with regard to affects that are automatic, over which we have little or no control. These affects circumvent the imagination because they do not involve higher-level mental processing. For example, when a movie startles us, we respond automatically, involuntarily, and without having to do anything more than bodily register what startles us. We respond directly to whatever it is we have perceived on the screen or heard on the soundtrack by flinching, jumping in our seats, or having some other autonomic response. Literature cannot have these sorts of impacts on us, Coplan argues, because it does not have this sort of direct sensory access (such as through engagement with visual or aural information like loud noises, bright lights, camera movement, and so on.)[18] Movies can thus elicit as well as intensify emotions and affects in ways unavailable to other art forms like literature or painting, even as it uses the aesthetic means available to other arts as well.

As Coplan summarizes her own argument, in reacting to film we can feel without thinking, while in literature we must engage in thinking first, because we must cognitively interpret the symbols on the page before feeling what they elicit.[19] Literature, then, is a fundamentally mediated artform in a way that movies are not. For Coplan, film's capacity to elicit emotion and affect viewers directly is something that it can do better (i.e., more effectively) than many other artforms because of its unmediated access to our senses and therefore to our experience of the artwork, even as it uses aesthetic means available to other art forms as well.

Of course, Coplan's argument slightly exaggerates the differences between film and literature. As Derek Matravers points out in the second half of the same article, literature can elicit affective responses, too, such as startling and shocking us, so the difference is more a matter of degree than

of kind.[20] Exactly *how* literature can startle or shock us, in spite of being mediated through symbols, is a complicated issue that need not detain us here.[21] Instead, I wish to underscore that Coplan's point regarding how film has a certain edge over literature due to its greater degree of direct sensory access is a good one because it indicates how film has an enhanced capacity to elicit certain kinds of responses when compared to literature.

As I have argued elsewhere, this "increased somatic access" allows film "more immediate access to how we think and feel," in addition to the aesthetic means that it shares with literature and theater.[22] I do not think Coplan is wrong to argue that film has a certain advantage over literature with regard to forms of sensory and affective access to our aesthetic experience. I simply think that, by using superlatives to express those advantages, she overstates her case.

Moreover, Coplan's argument does not address certain other arts that have similar forms of direct sensory access, as well as forms of access shared by other arts, such as video games.[23] As an artform that builds upon the aesthetics of film and other arts (in the sense that it has borrowed liberally from the lessons learned over the history of film as well as art in general), video games have many of the same aesthetic traits and therefore as much potential to affect us in the ways that film does as film itself.[24] This newer artform can, furthermore, call upon interactivity to enhance our responses, making video games potentially even more powerful than film because they can elicit additional direct sensory as well as cognitive responses. This potential, if wielded properly, could enrich our aesthetic experience in ways that might surpass film.[25] Coplan's claims regarding what film does uniquely or best, however, do not take these possibilities into consideration.

In addition, the far older art of music offers us ways to feel without thinking that are directly analogous to those outlined by Coplan for film. As far as direct response to visual stimulation goes, painting, sculpture, and other visual media may elicit certain unmediated responses that film has taken on and uses to enhance its own effects. Stanley Cavell, for example, has noted ways in which film has borrowed from the tricks of direct stimulation developed by painting, based on his reading of art critic

Michael Fried and others; and Carroll (as well as Jenefer Robinson) have articulated how music has effects on our moods.[26] So contrary to Coplan's claims that she has identified aesthetic properties unique to film (and hence what film does best), the traits that she singles out are shared by a number of other arts.

Despite these objections, I think Coplan has identified something important here regarding what film does well. She has detected certain ways in which films affect us through 'embodied cognition'. By this term, I mean that our interaction with the world is often a matter of autonomic, bodily responses that do not require higher-level cognition, but rather depend on direct bodily reactions involving far more than merely the brain, take place automatically, and occur independently of whatever thoughts or ideas we may have about the matter.

Many of these forms of cognition are "reflex-like" and subject to what psychologists call an "affect program," meaning that they are triggered automatically, do not involve consciousness, and are typically brief in duration, such as disgust or the startle response.[27] They may also be habituated or otherwise encoded into us by culture and socialization, as well as having more brutely biological or genetic components. Other forms of embodied cognition beyond the reflex-like affect program types may be far longer in duration, but equally (if not even more) influential. One such form is mood, an affective state that 1) involves physiological arousal; 2) generally lasts much longer than emotions like anger or fear; 3) need not take an object; and 4) makes us more susceptible to certain related emotions, affects, or thoughts. In these ways, mood fundamentally influences our perception of and thinking about the world.[28]

In general, embodied cognition, insofar as it includes affects from mood to startle, means that cognition is shaped by the *entire* body and that the cognitive processing of information depends on the agent's specific sensorimotor capacities playing a fundamentally constitutive role in how it responds to the world. Cognition thus depends on the experience of "having a body" of a particular sort (as Francisco Varela and his co-authors put it in *The Embodied Mind*), and how that body's capacities have developed in "a

more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context."[29] More recently, this idea regarding context and its influence on our cognition has been incorporated into and bolstered by gene-culture coevolution theory. Regarding our cognitive capacities especially, the development of humans through the ages has been a process of not only genetics but also culture.[30] Underlying Coplan's analyses of *Blade Runner*, *Jaws*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Alien Resurrection*, and other films, then, are these crucial presumptions about embodied cognition.[31]

Vaage on Embodied Empathy

Margrethe Bruun Vaage also valorizes forms of embodied cognition, which she argues are crucial to a better understanding of our responses to movies. She makes a case for film spectators being capable of empathizing through reflexively and automatically mirroring what characters feel as well as through imagining these feelings. She even specifically calls this first form of empathy "embodied" and argues that in addition to cognitively imagining how a character feels, we may also directly mimic various aspects of a character's facial expression, posture, or situation in empathetic response.[32] Like Coplan, Vaage argues that certain stylistic techniques directly elicit embodied responses. However, unlike Coplan Vaage refers to these responses as empathy. Coplan rejects using 'empathy' as an umbrella term, in order to preserve its use for consciously generated, imaginative empathy only.[33] Like Vaage, I find this restriction to be too much at variance with our everyday usage, even if there are theoretical reasons for wanting to distinguish certain phenomena; Thus I agree that empathy can indeed be embodied. Point-of-view structure, sustained close-ups, and subjective narration all aim to get us to mirror the feelings of the characters, something that Sergei Eisenstein recognized as an important aspect of film art back in the 1920s.[34] Moreover, these mirrored feelings are "automatic" and "directly give[s] the spectator the bodily and affective feeling of the character, without depending on higher forms of cognition or the imagination," even when that state is understood as the feelings of another.[35]

Vaage's argument regarding embodied empathy is well-supported by empirical findings in cognitive science and neuropsychology, as she

and others have pointed out.[36] This line of reasoning thus offers her the opportunity to provide "an integrative account of empathy," as she calls it, one that avoids the pitfalls of incongruence that Carroll laid for older accounts of empathy.[37] As she notes, "the spectator's observer position does not rule out empathic reactions" because "difference in knowledge about a situation need not mean that the spectator does not empathize with the character."[38]

Vaage's other work shows that her broader aim is to formulate a "dual-process" theory of how viewers respond to film, one in which our "slower," more rationalistic cognitive processes are integrated with our "faster," affective ones.[39] In addition, as her analysis of "dedramatized film" (i.e., art film) demonstrates, she by no means thinks that embodied reactions do all the work for us when we are watching movies.[40] Rather, film uses an array of cognitive as well as affective (what we used to call "non-cognitive") techniques to engage us bodily, intellectually, imaginatively, and reflectively. It thereby draws us into cinematic narratives through complex mental as well as affective means, thus giving film enormous powers of aesthetic attraction.[41] Although she does not address the issue in her writings, one implication of Vaage's scholarship as a whole is that film has at its disposal a powerful and complex array of ways to comprehensively engage viewers that, in certain respects, give it at least some advantages over the other arts.

Neo-Jamesianism

If many of the claims I have articulated here regarding embodied cognition sound neo-Jamesian, I suppose that is because they are. For a long time, the physiological dimensions of cognition were largely overlooked by philosophy of film, but now they are gaining greater attention, due to the work of Coplan, Vaage, Dan Shaw, and others. Even Carroll has changed his tune regarding the legitimacy of neo-Jamesian claims, after years of advancing arguments against them.[42] More generally, Jenefer Robinson, Jesse Prinz, and Shaun Nichols have argued persuasively that taking our embodied reactions more fully into account is fundamental to a better understanding of cognition, art, and ethics. Without accommodating such matters, these thinkers argue, we have little prospect for comprehensively

understanding many aspects of epistemology, aesthetics, or ethics.[43]

In addition, Shannon Sullivan has recently brought to our attention how embodied affective elements are crucial for understanding sexist and racist oppression, which I have argued elsewhere possess serious downstream effects on our film viewing.[44] In a perhaps surprising way, philosophy of film is helping us to better grasp how the body is crucially involved in cognition, as well as in what we value, including what we think others are like, and why we find that knowledge of value.

What I Think Film Does Well

Film allows viewers to enter into worlds vastly different from their own and see the characters who people them in completely different ways. Entering into these unique worlds gives us the opportunity to expand our moral imaginations by helping us to build new cognitive and affective frameworks from which we can then perceive a given world and the creatures in it. Film can also make the familiar unfamiliar, allowing us to see a world we thought we knew from a radically different perspective. Movies can offer us new ways to see, a possibility that others, such as Cavell, Mulhall, and Nathan Andersen, have previously noted and described.[45] It can even show us new insights about philosophy itself, which I take as being one of Cavell's greatest insights (something that Mulhall underscores quite nicely in *On Film*), and a point that has been re-affirmed again and again as the film-as-philosophy debate has developed in the last two decades.[46] One way film does these things is by getting us to question our default presumptions and forge new ones, including, for example, those propensities we may have to see people of color in certain stereotypical ways that psychologists and philosophers describe as caused by implicit racial biases.[47]

Such opportunities allow viewers to develop what philosophers George Yancy and Charles Johnson have described as "double narrative intelligence," a capacity to vividly imagine not only fictional worlds inhabited predominantly by racially white characters, but to richly and deeply imagine those populated mainly by nonwhites as well.[48] This capacity is one commonly developed by people of color in America simply as a matter of getting by (and/or hoping to flourish) in a social world that has been

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profoundly shaped by white supremacy. It is a capacity that whites typically do not have because they neither have sufficient opportunities to cultivate it nor the need for such a skill. Instead, they enjoy one of the perks of white privilege, which is to live in the protective bubble that W. E. B. Du Bois over a century ago dubbed "the white world."[49] In that world, their lived experience is overwhelmingly confined to spaces and encounters in which race (for them) is invisible, or where they can safely presume either that race no longer exists or that it is not sufficiently problematic to deserve their attention. Moreover, they are given powerful cognitive as well as affective means by which they may deny the importance of race.[50] Thus, they are able to think that, even though racism existed a long time ago, we now live in a "post-racial" world, and anyone who thinks differently is either blinded by anger, crazy, or obsessed with a past that would better be forgotten. In this sense, lacking double narrative intelligence is a kind of imaginative disability, one that impairs the capacity of white people to vividly imagine the social world in which they actually live. They are unable to imagine in deep and nuanced ways what it is to be nonwhite, which is an essential aspect of their actual world.

I understand double narrative intelligence to be an aspect of what Linda Martín Alcoff has described as "white double consciousness."[51] Du Bois famously described American blacks as having "two souls, two thoughts" in a single body—a "double self" that is exceedingly difficult to unify.[52] Alcoff explains that the manifestation of double consciousness in whites involves having a sense of "how they are viewed by nonwhite others", as well as a sense of how they see themselves from the standard perspective of whiteness. According to Alcoff, these two perspectives are incompatible, even incoherent when taken together, but recognition of their incoherence, and our efforts to overcome it, may serve as "a potential source for a new and more accurate understanding of social conditions" and thereby a sense of whiteness that is "morally defensible."[53]

I would argue that the insights needed for developing white double consciousness may be readily conveyed by film, because such insights can be depicted using both direct sensation and mediated means to influence

our aesthetic experience. Moreover, these means are both voluntary and involuntary, in the sense that when we enter into a fictional world, we typically allow ourselves to willingly imagine what is presented to us and to respond autonomically to sights and sounds in it. The powerful sensory and cognitive array that film brings to bear on our experience can thus influence us to counteract racialized imaginative deficits. If we open ourselves to self-criticism (racially speaking), are willing to learn, have a sense of moral humility when it comes to race, and seek out challenges to our white racialized senses of self, we can overcome these deficits. Filling in these imaginative deficits can also spill over into everyday life because frequently the presumptions used there are the same ones that we use when watching movies.[54]

One such film that exemplifies how movies can open white audiences to the vexing difficulties of race is *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989). As I have argued elsewhere, this movie allows white viewers to see whiteness "from the outside", and to understand blackness "from the inside," thereby enhancing their senses of double white consciousness.[55] In particular, the depiction of the character of Sal (Danny Aiello) offers white viewers the chance to see whiteness critically, and many of the other characters offer insights into their full-fledged, nonwhite humanity, thereby making possible an enhanced double narrative intelligence.[56] Many of these effects depend on stylistic elements, in addition to those involving content, just as Coplan and Vaage would predict.[57] And, of course, the very possibility of being so affected will depend on the traits of openness, willingness, and humility just articulated.[58]

But again, this outline of what I think film does well is not a unique trait. Much of it is a dimension of the anti-egoist strategy that fiction can adopt, and that philosophers have noted for decades.[59] In addition, although the philosophers just referenced focus primarily on written fiction, it is a capacity shared by other arts: film itself, video games, multi-media installations in museums, etc.[60] But what movies do is bring an especially powerful set of elicitors into play to mold our responses and therefore guide our imagining and feeling; and these elicitors appeal to both mental and

embodied mechanisms, which respond accordingly when we willingly imagine the stories that are presented to us. When these elicitors are properly and fully coordinated, they can offer powerful motivation for more deeply understanding the lives of others in affectively vivid and intellectually rich ways, especially with respect to those who we might otherwise think are not like us.

As I have previously noted, some of the other arts can bring these same elicitors into play as well, but what film does in ways that I like best is offer the possibility of a laser-like focus on just these elicitors, without distracting us by using bells and whistles that might take us in other directions. This potential for focus, perhaps, is one of the advantages of sitting in the dark in a movie theater, attention directed at a movie screen, listening to the soundtrack all around one, and—as long as other audience members are cooperative and turn off their cell phones, munch their popcorn quietly, and don't indulge in extraneous conversations—not being distracted by other elements of our overall experience. Of course, these conditions can be duplicated using other arts and often are, such as in theater or when playing video games, but film allows for a special absorption and focus of attention that is easy to do, requires no special training, is easily habitualized, and has become virtually automatic for those of us who have long practice in moviegoing.

Moreover, film, insofar as it appeals to us in both embodied and high-level cognitive ways, has advantages over some other arts. It can affect our moods, affect programs, emotions, and imagined cognitions in collective, coordinated, and simultaneous ways, making it an art that possesses great potential to align as well as modulate our affects and our thinking in ways that can even make us think differently in philosophical ways. It can move us to get "in the mood for thought," to use Coplan's phrase, and direct us to insights, philosophical reminders, unquestioned presuppositions, or the expansion of concepts that would not have otherwise occurred to us. It can create an atmosphere or sensibility (such as in, say, *film noir*) that pervades our perception as well as thinking and feeling, such that we see familiar as well as unfamiliar worlds differently. It can even influence us to expand

our sense of 'philosophy' itself, as Cavell and Mulhall has argued. These characteristics make film a very powerful medium, even if it is not quite an artform that is unique in these regards.

Conclusion

For decades, many philosophers of film have been impressed (as well as perhaps haunted) by Hitchcock's striking claim that in *Psycho* (1960) he was "playing [viewers] like an organ."[61] In a way, the complexity of film's many effects on cinemagoers, as articulated in work by Coplan, Vaage, and others, both alludes to and substantiates Hitchcock's slightly creepy remark. As viewers, we allow ourselves to have our imaginings guided and molded by artists who, if they are masters at the top of their game, can influence us to think thoughts and feel feelings in combinations that we had never thought or felt before. Sometimes, films can even cause us to think *new* thoughts, feel *new* feelings, or recalibrate our perception of the world. They can impact us to such an extent that we are compelled to reconceptualize certain social relations, or perhaps even rethink 'philosophy' itself. Through both direct sensory and mediated means, films guide us to think and feel in ways that can involve the entire body, making it a very powerful art form that can potentially change our ways of thinking and perceiving for the better. Some other arts may do these things as well, but film requires little to no special skill set, previous training, or exclusive knowledge in order to do so, making it far more accessible than many other arts. It coordinates its efforts in powerful ways that can influence us to the point of changing our perceptions about the world and the people in it. That gives cinema a special, if not quite unique, quality that deserves our close attention and further study, as well, perhaps, as a sense of what film does best.

Dan Flory

Notes
[1]See, for example, Jessica Kiang, "Cannes Review: 'Embrace Of The Serpent' Is A Soulful, Strange And Stunning Discovery," *Indiewire*, May 17, 2015 <http://www.indiewire.com/2015/05/cannes-review-embrace-of-the-serpent-is-a-soulful-strange-and-stunning-discovery-263927/>, accessed 4 June 2017; and Justin Chang, Film Review: *Embrace of the Serpent*, *Variety*, June 2, 2015 <http://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/film-review-the-embrace-of-the-serpent-1201510916/>, accessed 4 June 2017.

<superscript>2</superscript>Hugo Münsterberg, "Why We Go to the Movies," *The Cosmopolitan* 60, no. 1 (December 15, 1915), 22-32, reprinted in *Hugo Münsterberg on Film*, ed. Allan Langdale (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 171-190; Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions" [1924], tr. Richard Taylor, reprinted in *Defining Cinema*, ed. Peter Lehmann (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 17-36; V. I. Pudovkin, "The Film Scenario and Its Theory" [1926], reprinted in *Film Technique and Film Acting*, tr. and ed. Ivor Montagu (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 29-78; Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* [1933] (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957); Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema" [1945] and "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" [1950-55], in *What is Cinema?* Volume I, ed. and tr. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 17-22, 23-40; Sigfried Kracauer *Theory of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); Victor Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* [1972] (reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1993); and Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Enlarged Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), esp. 16-41, 184-200.

<superscript>3</superscript>For a sampling of this work, see Noël Carroll, "Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts" [1984-5], and "The Specificity of Media in the Arts" [1985], reprinted in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3-24, 25-36; *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); "Kracauer's *Theory of Film*," in *Defining Cinema*, 111-131; "Forget the Medium!" [2000], reprinted in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-9; "Engaging Critics," *Film Studies* Issue 8 (Summer 2006), 161-170; and "Medium Specificity" (Chapter 2), *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 35-52.

<superscript>4</superscript>Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, 43-50.

<superscript>5</superscript>Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-16; Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 282-307; and Trevor Ponech, "The Substance of Cinema," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 185-98, and "Cinema: Display, Medium, Work," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 69:3-4 (2013), 543-564.

<superscript>6</superscript>Carroll uses the term "glue" in "Film, Emotion, and Genre," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 21-47, at 21. However, he has made related comments in many other essays over the years; see, for example, "The Power of Movies" [1985], reprinted in *Theorizing the Movie Image*, 78-93; and *Minerva's Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), Chapters 1 and 3.

<superscript>7</superscript>Berys Gaut, "Telling Stories: Narration, Emotion, and Insight in *Memento*," in *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, ed. Noël Carroll and John Gibson (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011), 23-44, at 42.

<superscript>8</superscript>E.g., Carroll, *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*, 5; and "Prospects for Film Theory: A Personal Assessment," *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 37-68, esp. 40, 56-64.

<superscript>9</superscript>Amy Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought: Mood and Meaning in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*," *Blade Runner*, ed. Amy Coplan and David Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 118-134, at 118.

<superscript>10</superscript>Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought," 119.

<superscript>11</superscript>Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought," 126.

<superscript>12</superscript>Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought," 132.

[13]Amy Coplan and Derek Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17-134, at 124.

[14]Coplan and Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," 121.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Regarding the distinction between that which is nonconscious and that which is unconscious, see Shannon Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 43-45.

[17]Coplan and Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," 123.

[18]Coplan and Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," 125, 126. This is excepting, of course, books on tape that employ background music to enhance their effect (and assuming that these still count as literature). I understand books on tape, however, to be a hybrid art form that applies the lessons of film to enhance how listeners respond to literature as it is read. (I owe this example to one of my students, Jennifer Devine.)

[19]Coplan and Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," 126.

[20]Coplan and Matravers, "Film, Literature, and Non-Cognitive Affect," 130.

[21]My conjecture is that such direct affects in literature are due to how we acquire habits of interpreting words on a page, but exactly how that explanation would work I am unsure. For more on this topic, see Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*, esp. 10-21; and Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

[22]Dan Flory, "Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron's *Avatar*," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 7:2 (2013), 41-63, at 47. Carl Plantinga has argued for the importance of direct affect for film as well; see his *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), esp. 117-20.

[23]Regarding video games as art, see Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and "Video Games as Mass Art," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 9 (2011), 1-17; and Dominic McIver Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), esp. 21-34.

[24]For more on the similarities between film and video games, see Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, e.g., 112-3; and Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art,* esp. 224-43. (Gaut in fact argues that video games should be included as a subclass of "cinematic art" rather than as an independent art itself because video games have borrowed so profoundly from film.)

[25]For more on interactivity and its potential for video games as art, see Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames*, 22-4; and Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 35-52. A similar argument regarding the parasitic use of film aesthetics and interactivity could be formulated regarding certain multi-media art installations in museums, but I will not develop that claim here.

[26]Regarding the relations between music and mood, see Noël Carroll, "Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures," *The Monist* 86 (2003), 521-55, esp. 545-552; and Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), esp. 393-411. Concerning visual stimulation and film's borrowing from painting, see Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 13-15, 20-3, 41-6, 106-126, and elsewhere.

[27]Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 15.

[28]Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought," 119-121. See also Carroll, "Art and Mood," 526-533; and Carl Plantinga, "Art Moods and Human Moods in Narrative Cinema," *New Literary History* 43 (2012), 455-75, at 459-460.

[29]Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive*

Science and Human Experience (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 173.

[30]See, for example, Kelly, *Yuck!* 6, 106-111. (In a way, this recent research and philosophizing about embodied cognition was foreshadowed in writings by phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty fifty and more years earlier; see, for example, Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, xv-xvi, 3-4, and elsewhere. Recent analytic and experimental philosophical thinkers can thus be seen as continuing to explore certain Continental insights even as they have extended and gone beyond them, which has further reunified these too-long-opposed philosophical camps.)

[31]See also Coplan, "Form and Feeling in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*," in *The Thin Red Line*, ed. David Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 65-86; and "Catching Characters' Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Fiction Film," *Film Studies*, Issue 8 (Summer, 2006), 26-38.

[32]Margrethe Bruun Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34 (2010), 158-79, esp. 163-72. See also her "The Empathetic Spectator in Analytic Philosophy and Naturalized Phenomenology," *Film and Philosophy* 10 (2006), 21-38.

[33]For Coplan's rejection of 'empathy' as an umbrella term, see her "Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up? A Case for a Narrow Conceptualization," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49 (s.1) (2011), 40-65.

[34]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 159-161; and Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," esp. 17-20, 26-31.

[35]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 163.

[36]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 164-5; see also Alvin Goldman, "Two Routes to Empathy: Insights from Cognitive Neuroscience," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31-44, esp. 33-6; and Dan Shaw, "Mirror Neurons and Simulation Theory: A Neurophysiological Foundation for Cinematic Empathy," in *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Film*, ed. Katherine Thomson-Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 148-62.

[37]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 159.

[38]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 168, 166.

[39]See Margrethe Bruun Vaage, *The Anti-Hero in American Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); and Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).

[40]Vaage, "Film Fiction and the Varieties of Empathic Engagement," 172-6.

[41]Regarding the importance of reflection for Vaage, see also her "Self-reflection: Beyond Conventional Fiction Film Engagement," *Nordicom Review* 30 (2009), 159-178.

[42]Compare, for example, Carroll's rejection of Jamesian claims in "Film, Emotion, and Genre," 24-7, with his more conciliatory remarks toward neo-Jamesians in *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65-8.

[43]Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*; Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[44]Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*; and Flory, "Imaginative Resistance, Racialized Disgust, and *12 Years a Slave*," *Film and Philosophy* 19 (2015), 75-95; "Racialized Disgust and Embodied Cognition in Film," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 10 (2016), 1-24.

[45]Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*; and "The Thought of Movies" [1983], reprinted

in *Themes Out of School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-26, esp. 8-9; Mulhall, *On Film*, Third Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 3-8, 85-103; and Nathan Andersen, "Is Film the Alien Other to Philosophy? Philosophy *as* Film in Mulhall's *On Film*," *Film-Philosophy* vol. 7, no. 3 (2003) <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/744/656>.

[46]Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), xii, 3, 32, and elsewhere; Mulhall, *On Film*, 3-8, 85-103; Noël Carroll, "*Memento* and the Phenomenology of Comprehending Motion Picture Narration," in *Memento*, ed. Andrew Kania (London: Routledge, 2009) 127-46; and "Philosophical Insight, Emotion, and Popular Fiction: the Case of *Sunset Boulevard*," in *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, 45-68.

[47]See many of the essays in *Implicit Bias and Philosophy*, two volumes, ed. Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Sullivan, *The Physiology of Sexist and Racist Oppression*.

[48]Noted in "Dan Flory" (interview), in George Yancy, *On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 117-130, at 124.

[49]W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], (reprinted New York: Signet, 1969), xi.

[50]These problems have been frequently diagnosed by critical race theorists. Two excellent analyses are Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

[51]See Alcoff, "What Should White People Do?" *Hypatia* 13 (1998), 6-26, at 25-6; and *The Future of Whiteness*, 136-77, esp. 163-77.

[52]Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

[53]Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness*, 170, 171.

[54]I have developed these claims at greater length elsewhere, see, for example, Flory, "Spike Lee and the Sympathetic Racist," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 67-79; *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008); "Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron's *Avatar*"; "Racialized Disgust and Embodied Cognition in Film;" and "Dan Flory" (interview).

[55]Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 41-4.

[56]Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 45-99.

[57]Regarding the importance of stylistic elements in *Do the Right Thing*, see my "Cinematic Presupposition, Race, and Epistemological Twist Films," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010), 379-387.

[58]Nor is *Do the Right Thing* an isolated example. Long-time readers of the journal will remember that I have advanced similar arguments for *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992) in "Race, Empathy, and *Noir* in *Deep Cover*," *Film and Philosophy* 11 (2007), 67-85, as well as for other films like *One False Move*, *Clockers* (Spike Lee, 1995), and *City of God* (Fernando Meirelles and Katia Lund, 2003) in *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, 100-152, 296-303, and elsewhere.

[59]See, for example, Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34; Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* [1970] (reprinted London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), 64-67; Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 77-79.

[60]Regarding the extension of this anti-egoist strategy to film, see Alex Neill, "Empathy and (Film) Fiction," in *Post-Theory*, 179-180; and Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 235-236.

[61]François Truffaut, *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, Revised Edition (New York: Touchstone Books, 1985), 269.