Reading Notes for Section II Introduction “Ontology/What is Film?”

**A. What is Ontology**

Ontology: the study of “being’, aka, “what **sort** of being” is anything is a **distinctive kind of thing**.

Important distinction: *individuals* vs. *categories of individuals.*

The attempt to investigate ‘the **ontology of film**’ is an investigation that **begins with individual films**, but is **looking for what all films have in common**: i.e., **what *makes them films*** rather than something that is **not a film**?

One way to uncover what **sort of thing a film is as such** would be to seek out its **nature** or **essence**. But this amounts to attempting to establish the **necessary and sufficient conditions** that anything that **is a film** will have.

The necessary conditions would tell us what features anything that **is a film MUST HAVE**.

The sufficient conditions would tell us what **MINIMUM SET OF PROPERTIES** are by themselves enough to make anything that has them a film.

Example: it is a **necessary condition** of being a human being that you are alive. But it is **not a sufficient condition** (even bacteria are alive).

If you specify both the necessary and sufficient conditions for being human, you would have isolated both what is essential to our kind of animal, and exclude all other living things that are not human beings from falling under the concept ‘human being’.

**The pursuit of this kind of definition of anything is very ambitious. Yet** there may be no set of features that all films have in common. An example of something like this would be all those things we call ‘games’. Since we have this word, and seem to know how to apply it, does that mean that we can give the necessary and sufficient conditions for anything that can *count as a ‘game’?* You might think all games involve some objective which counts as ‘winning the game’. But a foot race as ‘winning’ as an objective, yet a foot race is not a game. You might think that all games have *rules* that must be obeyed in order to play that game. But if that is all that is needed, then any *language* is a game since to speak in that language (which, on this proposal, would be to ‘play the game of English’) involves all sorts of rules: of syntax, grammar, pronunciation, orthographic representation, etc. But surely a language is **not** a game (although we certainly play all kinds of word games!)

I raise all this because it might be that in looking for what all films have in common, we may discover what Ludwig Wittgenstein thought he discovered about games, namely, that the concept of a game is *loose* and it is impossible to come up with necessary and sufficient conditions that would capture *everything that we regard as games.* Rather, he thought that those things that fall under the concept ‘game’ only have certain *family resemblances* [just as people in a family have certain similarities in their appearance, but these similarities differ from family to family].

So what if individual films just like individual games and only have family resemblances to each other, and where they *fail to resemble each other,* this does not disqualify them as games?

I raise all this only to get you thinking about what a *philosopher* has to consider in looking into the ontological question she asks when discovering something that seems to be a *new kind of thing in the world*.

**B. Why the Ontology of Cinema was Pursued Originally**

1. Film was a new kind of entity in the world and so people naturally tried to figure out what was *new* about it.

2. Film was widely criticized as ‘a slavish, mindless, mechanical product of technologies of reproduction’ like automobiles or sewing machines. This was thought by its critics to preclude it from being a *form of art* (each such artifact was *unique,* created *by a particular individual* or *unique set of individuals,* and was impossible to reproduce by *mechanical means*). Defenders of the artistic potential and value of film wanted to show that none of these features it was being criticized for were *essential to film*. And that meant coming up with *an alternative account of what* ***was essential*** *to a film*. To defend film as an artform meant coming up with an ontology of film.

First Attempt: **Editing** was a unique feature essential to any film, since there was no such thing in any of the nearby visual/dramatic mediums of artistic expression (stage dramas, operas, photography). In 1916 Munsterberg presented this view in his essay “The Photoplay”. Editing was essential to film and was what made it capable of being art. His reasoning was that editing required the application of the intervention of the filmmaker who decided how to cut up the raw footage, what to include, what to exclude, in what order to put things, and this amounts to an intervention by the human mind in the making of a film, and that made it a kind of representation of the *contents* of the human mind (i.e., of the filmmaker’s ideas and feelings).

This was a good beginning, but other thinkers immediately began to look for more. They didn’t want to merely *distinguish* film from things that shared something in common with it, but to identify what was *cinematic* about it: what made it capable of what they saw as *a new kind of art form* with new possibilities for artistic expression.

3. TWO CAMPS: Creationists vs. Realists

Creationists emphasized the way film didn’t merely *record what was before the camera*, but instead, manipulated what was eventually presented to an audience (e.g., the Soviet *montage* style) so that the result was a new reality, rather than a mechanical recording of what passed before the camera.

Realists embraced the feature of photography that the creationists thought made a film incapable of being art. They thought film was a major *advance* in the representation of reality, one that could *enliven and enhance* visual art and take it to a new level, a **more real** version of **‘realistic art’**.

The two positions each emphasize something of which film is capable: a film with long-take, depth-of-field shots emphasizes a film’s capacity for images that carry a powerful sense of realism. These kinds of scenes are often among the most moving kinds. But rapid cutting and montage techniques showed another possibility, one that takes what is before the camera and manipulates it so that another kind of powerful viewer experience becomes possible. (SHOW VIDEO ON MONTAGE [linked under PHIL2710 Bookmarks])

4. THE FAILURE OF THE TWO CAMPS

These early theorists simply excluded ways that films could be made from qualifying as *properly cinematic* but in doing so, they were simply imposing their own ideas about what the medium *should do* when the **medium itself** is capable of all kinds of styles, and dictates **none in particular**.

As the authors say “The error of early realist and creationist ontologists of film ‘was’ that they presupposed … the medium had a built-in purpose or function….[and in this they] fail[ed] to acknowledge the normative dimension actually involved in designating a style as cinematic.”[53]

JP: One explanation for this early focus on different *styles* of filmmaking (where those styles were taken to be ***determined***by the technical methods of filmmaking like **editing**) was probably due to the way film kept changing its *functional styles* as new technical innovations appeared in the mechanisms by which films were created. One such innovation that was covered in the Birth of the Cinema episode of The Story of Film involved the device in a sewing machine that racheted the cloth across the needle at fixed intervals in time. This was repurposed to advance frames of a celluloid film strip at specific timeintervals, which generated the *appearance of motion* (where, in fact, there was no motion, only the *illusion* of motion)!

**C. Contemporary Ontological Accounts of the Nature of Film**

Option 1. Film-as-More-Powerful-Photography. Film is distinguished entirely in virtue of being *photographic* in nature, and *that* is what ameks films seem to convey *reality* (as the original **realists** thought). Proponents: Stanley Cavell, following the lead from people like André Bazin. The key to this approach is that film borrows something essential to photography: *transparency*. What is that? It is the idea that a photograph re-presents something once seen and thereby “gives us transparent access to things past”, unlike painting. Unlike paintings (which are hand-made), photographs are produced by the camera (and thus the subjective intervention of the painter is missing with the person holding the camera [true? Hmmm.]), and unlike painting, which ***is*** *a* ***world*,** film is ***of*****the world**. [54] Cavell and other realists see painting as *a contrivance of the painter,* whereas photographs are *records of what was before the photographer*.

Option 2. Film-as-Dream. Film is not a *re-presentation of reality,* but rather, *distinctive in its* ***regular departures FROM reality!*** What is distinctive about a film is its *dream-like* character. Proponents: Susanne Langer, Francis Sparshott. Langer says “[film] objectifies (makes into an object) the patterns and rhythms of inner states of feeling…[projecting them] into the external world where they can be inspected.”[58]

Sparshott borrows from Langer the idea that film scenes are like ‘sequence[s] of apparitions in a dream’ as what is most important in the language of film and he thinks it helps to explain why we are so readily able to comprehend the many conventions of film: it is because they mimic the features of dreamlife. The strength of his view: that various techniques of editing [flashforwards, parallel editing, symbolical editing] seem to present something that one might expect would be experienced as *jumbled, bizarre, incomprehensible*, and yet young and old alike seem able to ‘roll with’ these devices and grasp what is going on. Sparshott’s appeal to dream-likeness and our nightly experiences with dreams the training ground that helps to explain this otherwise inexplicable fact.

Option 3: Film-as-Language. Films are able to “communicate pictorially through gesture…”, facial expressions, and editing contrivances to *tell a story* even when almost no *actual language* is used. That film *functions to communicate* ***like a language,*** has been a common way of thinking about the nature of film. It implies that it is, of course, a **different kind of language**, one that, like English among natural languages, is capable of communicating things that natural languages are less-well-suited to express. This was a particularly common view of film among silent filmmakers, impressed that their work could be understood in any country regardless of its difference in culture, language, customs, etc. Proponents: V. I. Pudovkin, F. W. Murnau, et al.

Option 4: Film is *the illusion of movement in a photographic medium*. Proponents: Noel Carroll, Arthur Danto. Danto argues that novels, for example, tell stories and so do films. But whereas the page of a novel *does not move* (and in respect to the *turning of the pages*, **that movement** plays no part in conveying the story), a film that tells the same story *does move, and the means by which the story is told has* ***movement as an essential feature* of the object [film] that conveys it**. Danto’s argument is known in philosophy as ‘argument to the best explanation’. Having compared a page of text, which cannot, in any of its parts, move, to what a section of a film, in *all of its parts* can [**move, of course!**], he is saying “the best way to explain how films differ from any other nearby **visual** medium [painting, photography, slides, drawings] is that movies *move*.” This is also called a *transcendental argument* (which many philosophers think is a kind of argument that Immanuel Kant invented, but which I think is nothing more than a very common philosophical move: when trying to figure out “what sort of thing is an X?”, a good method is to ask “what are the conditions in which X is possible?”. The answer will reveal what is distinctive about X, and **after all,** that’s what the Ontology of X will tell us!

Carroll expands on Danto’s insight by changing the definition of film to cover the existence of abstract films (cf. Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*)

All of these approaches to the ontology of film have objectors. We will talk a bit about them next time.

No Flashbacks in Shakespeare!!!

Cavell argues there are various disanalogies between film and dream experience. A) only you can recall your dreams, whereas if you and someone else have seen a film, they can help you remember what happened. That makes experiencing a film more like waking than dream experiences. Also, dreams are quotidian in their narrative content (often such that when we wake up, the feelings we had are all out of proportion to the actual events to which we seem to have been reacting), whereas films are full of novel and interesting, far-from-quotidian content. Final stick in the heart of the film-as-dream approach: we know very little about dreams, and very much about films. The former doesn’t seem to be a resource for understanding the latter (perhaps the reverse is more likely to be true?).

FILM AS A LANGUAGE

Was particularly popular and common during the silent film era (makes sense…the resources of a silent film could, like music, transcend cultural and natural-language barriers). This seems more promising, despite the introduction author’s attempt to treat it as **at best** an appeal to the fact that films communicate (but then quickly points out that facial expressions and even a footprint can ‘communicate’, and are not themselves ‘linguistic’). Currie seems to have attacked this view with evidence that various features of language are missing in film, but I wonder if he recognizes that the capacity for *symbol use* is perhaps the most fundamental capacity at the heart of the capacity for language, in which case, his appeal to the arbitrary conventions of language might only show that the *natural languages* human beings have generated *were lesser versions of a more subtle and powerful language* that could be comprised by the realistic representations in a film. JP: but it doesn’t seem to be useful to worry too much about whether film is *as detailed and exactly like language* as Currie seems to require. The question is, does it help to think of film has having *language-like* features, even if they only bear a loose, family resemblance to the features of natural languages (which, after all, **are not art forms essentially!**).

The author claims (bottom 61, top 62) that film editing *has no grammar*. He seems to disallow the use of ‘grammar’ to describe the rule-like features of film editing because they are ‘provisional, not mandatory’. But again, this is to forget that *what is being transmitted* in language is often much more narrowly tailored to the conditions of *practical life* in which subtleties and ambiguities are *problematic*. It is like saying that classical music cannot be mathematical because, while there is evidently structural features of music that can be represented mathematically, there are not *hard and fast rules* for the construction of a sonata that all sonatas must follow (unlike arithmetic, where *all* the ways numbers can be processed to produce other numbers are *fully specified* in that part of mathematics).

Start with Danto and Carroll in the morning and emphasize the overview of that when talking about the introduction (after sketching the alternative approaches to ontology in class).