

The Cinematic Muthos

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I. Introduction.

The Greek word *muthos* names the role of the viewer or the reader in the process of recognizing a given narrative form or structure. It constitutes an active work of composition, integration and synthesis of heterogeneous elements and the establishment of a dynamic identity to the story being presented¹. It consists also of a sort of “negotiation” between the expected and the unexpected elements of a narrative, the foreseeable and the unforeseen. Through it, the spectator is able to sustain and calibrate a level of expectation that explains for much of the narrative tension and the fruition provided by it. Not everything is predictable and not everything is unpredictable. The narrative structure provides the viewer or reader with a number of macro and micro ranges of possibilities and, therefore, with the chance to discriminate between the congruity and the incongruity of any diegetic sequence (i.e., the occurrence of events or reactions within those ranges and those which fall outside them).

The objective of this paper is to propose an explanation for the way our experience of film is basically constructed through complex sequences consisting of the instauration of a given range of possibilities and the cropping out or selection of one of those possibilities, thus investing the viewer with an active role.

This interaction and the spectator’s active intervention are not, of course, an exclusive of film. Ernst Gombrich, for instance, insisted on the way art viewers are constantly led to project their stored *vocabulary* of familiar graphic forms onto fuzzy or accidental shapes. We enumerate

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¹ Cf. P. Ricoeur, “Life in Quest of Narrative”, in David Wood (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London: Routledge, 1991, p.20; cf. D. Knight, “Aristotelians on Speed”, in Richard Allen and Murray Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.349.

the images we “read into” clouds or into the inkblots of a Rorschach test², *submitting* them to our need for perceptual classification and our sense of intelligibility. Art has always relied on this interaction between suggestion and projection, of “making” and “matching”³. Giorgio Vasari praised the “rough and unfinished” bas-reliefs sculpted by Donatello in one of the Singing Galleries for the Florentine cathedral because “all things which are far removed (...) have more beauty and greater force when they are a beautiful sketch than when they are finished”⁴. Their incompleteness “heightens the imagination” and invites the viewer, so to speak, to *finish* the work by following the artist’s suggestion and by projecting his visual schemata onto the rough sketch. Our enjoyment of such pieces is deeply connected to the awareness of our own cognitive *collaboration*-, namely, by “watching our imagination come into play, transforming the medley of colour into a finished image”. Leonardo da Vinci’s traditional reluctance to finish his works was also linked to his awareness of the power of “matching” in the apprehension of visual forms. According to this painter, the best method for “quicken[ing] the spirit of invention” would be to “look at certain walls stained with damp, or at stones of uneven colour”⁵ and learn how to “see in them” “the likeness of divine landscapes” or “battles and strange figures in violent actions” and “expressions of faces and clothes”. The skilful artist is then able to inspire the spectator the same projection of visual schemata. Leaving her work with a sufficient level of incompleteness and indeterminacy she allows the beholder “to experience something of the thrill of ‘making’ which had once been the privilege of the artist”⁶.

In narrative arts the reader or spectator is constantly asked to fill in *time gaps*. If we see our heroin rushing out her office door and then suddenly we see her quietly on the phone on her couch at home, we don’t worry about the lack of information regarding that ellipse. A virtuous writer such as Agatha Christie could perfectly well play with her reader’s usual skill to fill in elliptical gaps in thriller novels and trick her to assume much *more* or much *less* than what turns out to be the case. A classic ex-

² E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*-, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960.

³ Cf. Gombrich, 1960: 186.

⁴ Quoted by Gombrich, 1960: 193.

⁵ Quoted by Gombrich, 1960: 188.

⁶ Gombrich, 1960: 202.

ample of this deceived “matching” is presented in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where the narrator consistently avoids supplying the reader with information⁷. The relevancy of that information or even the awareness that there is a narrative gap escapes the experienced reader: she *knows* very well how to fill in the gaps.

Watching a movie, we fulfil the elements that permit a smooth transition from one shot to the other⁸, not only assuming the means by which that spatial transition occurred but also justifying the character’s change of disposition, the different light or the new outfit. This paper shall consider other ways through which movies exert a controlled appeal to the spectators’ cognitive capabilities and to their *collaboration* in *filling in the gaps*. I shall assume the hypothesis that the spectator’s more or less conscious awareness of her active role in film viewing could lead her — as Gombrich suggested — “to experience something of the ‘thrill of making’ ”.

II. The Hermeneutic Devices

i. Visual

“Point/glance” and “point/object” are terms introduced by Edward Branigan⁹ in order to describe one of the simplest conjunctions of perspectives in film’s editing: point-of-view-editing. The point/glance is of a person looking, generally to an object situated off-screen, and the point/object shot is of whatever that person is looking at¹⁰. In his cognitivistic ap-

⁷ A filmic example of the way spectators may be deceived exactly through the way they fill in the elliptical gaps or even fail to notice the oddness of the characters interaction in some scenes, is M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

⁸ Cinema is a distinct art form since it portrays time by means of time, i.e., “the temporal properties of elements of the representation serve to represent temporal properties of the things represented” (G. Currie, *Image and Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.96) and furthermore because it is “concerned with the temporality of things represented rather than with the temporality of that which represents”. Movies have developed numerous ways of representing the relation *occurring some time after* and spectators throughout the world have learned this vocabulary.

⁹ E. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema*, New York: Mouton, 1984, p.103.

¹⁰ The relation between the two kinds of shots was first studied by the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov. In 1919, he juxtaposed shots of various objects (a bowl of soup, a smiling child, and a dead body) against identical archive clips of a famous actor (Ivan

proach to film theory, Noël Carroll uses this binomy within the wider project of explaining the universal mass-appeal of movies. His thesis is that this kind of editing constitutes a “cinematic elaboration of ordinary perceptual practices”¹¹ and a perfect vehicle for communicating emotion.

Point-of-view editing mimics this perceptual behaviour and constitutes a *representation of perception*. It deletes the movement between glancing at the “viewer” and at the viewed object but the spectator quickly disregards that “leap” since normally “it is the endpoints of the activity, and not the space between, that command our attention” (Carroll, 1996: 128). Its functionality derives from the rather economic way with which it manages to (a) represent both a glance and its target-object, thus (b) supplying us with relevant information regarding the observed observer, while (c) at the same time it serves the purpose of keeping active the film’s diegetic network of expectation / relaxation. In fact this expectation is twofold: it is both “the expectation that a glance will be followed by its target” (Carroll, 1996: 129), and the establishment of a more or less basic range of possible emotional expressions triggered by the character’s facial expression, the expectation activated by the need to *read out* the correct emotion contained within that range and, finally, the presentation of the object that shall assist the spectator in making that filtering.

History of Art is filled with examples of the way particular objects serve the purpose of individuating or determining the emotional expression of those affected by them. Without them there is “likely to be in the spectator’s mind uncertainty, vagueness, or ambiguity, about the correspond-

Mozhukhin). Although the shot of the actor remained exactly the same, viewers felt that the shots of the actor conveyed different emotions suggested by the other stimulus. He discovered what was later labelled as the Kuleshov Effect: the mental tendency of viewers to attempt to figure out how filmed shots fit together, even if the shots are totally unrelated. In his famous interview with François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock mentioned the importance the Kuleshov Experiment had in his own work: “Hitchcock: “You see a close-up of the Russian actor Ivan Mousjoukine. This is immediately followed by a shot of a dead baby. Back to Mousjoukine again and you read compassion on his face. Then you take away the dead baby and you show a plate of soup, and now, when you go back to Mousjoukine, he looks hungry.”

¹¹ N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.127.

ing emotion”¹². The movies’ particular characteristics allow that the fulfilment of this specification be done in a way much closer to our “perceptual prototype”, i.e., in a consecutive or diachronic way, first glancing at the “facial range” — the point/glance shot acting as a “range finder” (cf. Carroll, 1996: 132) and then considering the “filtering object” — the point/object acting as “focuser”. And while point-of-view editing deletes the perceptual *pathway* between both, it allows for the possibility of playing with the proper timing of that “revelation”. A proper detention of the spectator on a point/glance shot is important in order to allow her to quickly survey the range of the character’s possible emotional states, oscillating between interest and excitement, enjoyment and joy, surprise and startle, distress and anguish, fear and terror, etc. A shot too short won’t activate the *oscillation* that derives from the need to anticipate the character’s exact feeling. Too long a shot disperses that concentration.

ii. Audio-Visual

There are, of course, other ways of triggering in the spectator this kind of cognitive tension and relaxation. When a sudden cry is heard from outside the scene and the characters rush out to see what is going on, a number of possibilities prompt into mind. The scream becomes a “range finder”. The following scenes are driven by the need to specify that range and elect one of its possible explanations. This cropping out within a range of choices is also patent in the case of music. *Pace* Hanslick, non-vocal and non-programmatic music — in a way similar to the human face — are often expressive of abstract emotive qualities. “Filling in” the movie, music adds significantly to the movie’s emotional density. It is able to ignite and sustain a certain emotional *mode* in a very economic way: joy, sadness, melancholy, etc. Akin to point/glance shots, it situates the viewer inside a kind of emotional *paradigm*. However, and also like point/glance shots, music is not *per se* sufficient to reach the sort of “emotive explicitness”¹³ that shall satisfy the spectator’s need for diegetic intelligibility. It awaits then a *reference* or an *object* that can supply this focusing within the range. Similarly to the function attributed to point/object shots, the movie’s representational contents act as “indicators” that narrow down the score’s “emotive

¹² R. Wollheim, *Painting as Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p.88.

¹³ Peter Kivy, quoted in Carroll, 1996: 141.

resonance” to a *diegetically efficient* level. The juxtaposition of the two different symbolic systems is sometimes even taken to serve ironic purposes or to enhance the *pathos* of a scene, such as when an emotionally over-saturated melody is sharply contrasted by a scene representing something that lies completely outside that melody’s emotional range. Take, for instance, the scene in *True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) where the character played by Dennis Hopper is questioned and then killed by the mob gang led by Christopher Walken. The soothing music from Delibes’ *Lakmé* appears *prima facie* quite *inadequate*. But its vivid contrast with the imminent violence enhances the feeling of disruption and excess that characterizes the expectation of a sudden burst. The mismatch between *range* and *indicator* adds to the spectator’s unrest as a kind of *cognitive supplement* or emulation of the brutal disarrangement that is being represented.

There is yet another important function shared both by point-of-view editing and by modifying music and that is to lead the audience in the most controlled, economic and straightforward way across the movie. That is most efficiently done when the spectator is given strategic elements that enable her to activate common cognitive capabilities. Moreover she is given the impression of being able to *construct*, so to speak, her own *version* of the cinematic narrative, by anticipating, connecting a point/object scene with preceding point/glance shots, or choosing indicators from the scene as the most relevant focusers of its music’s expressiveness (to her, maybe it’s not the cowboy that extracts bravado from the musical score’s energetic and dynamic qualities; maybe it’s the horse, or the opening up of the landscape, or the whip that flashes under the sun). And although this is done under a more or less *relentless* control assuring that the untutored spectator will indeed follow the intended path and recognize each scene under the aegis of the overall desired expressive quality, I would argue that for at least some movies the relationship between *modal* elements (point/glance or music) and their focusers (point/object or visual elements) is an inexhaustible one.

iii. Narrative

Together with these visual and audio-visual diegetic cues, there is also a more strictly narrative device where we can find the same kind of *cognitive interaction* between a more or less diffuse modal range and its fo-

cuser(s). This is what Noël Carroll calls “erotetic narrative”: “later scenes in the films are answering questions raised earlier, or at least providing information that will contribute to such answers” (Carroll, 1996: 89). This facilitates the assimilation of the work — and hence its power - mainly for four reasons. First, the spectator follows the character’s actions as constituting consequences of the same sort of practical reasoning she commonly employs. This is comparable to the way successive point/glance and point/object shots represent ordinary visual perception in such a way that the spectator tends to lose the awareness that she is witnessing the performance of a conventionalized narrative tool. Second, by saliently posing questions and being able to sustain that interrogative mode throughout the film, erotetic sequences create expectation. This is also comparable to the way point/glance shots generate micro-expectations concerning the exact emotion being portrayed, which is then satisfied by the introduction of its object. Third, movies create a captivating layering of micro and macro questions by which not only each scene is justified by its antecedent or consequent (either by being its complete or partial “answer” or its “question” or by “sustaining” the question raised earlier, etc (cf. Carroll, 1996: 98)). The way this network of questions permeates the movie is comparable to the way modifying music “fills in” the movie. The spectator’s cognitive work is similar: a controlled *shuttle* between a non-explicit or interrogative framework and those elements that are meant to illustrate or answer. Fourth, the universal appeal of erotetic narratives is based upon cognitive data and the implied premise of cognitive theory is that the spectator is motivated by a desire for discovery and orientation, and namely that she is motivated by a desire to objectify and stabilize emotive inexplicitness. Allied to the easy reception of pictorial representation, these four factors provide a sort of “what you see is what you get” kind of experience and movies appear to show themselves *completely* to their audience. The way the question / answer model is shown by Carroll as the most “natural” way to present information regarding action¹⁴ makes it a suitable parallel to the equally “natural” way pictorial representation depicts its object: to recognize an object entails *sine qua non* the capacity to recognize its de-

¹⁴ Micro-narratives are indeed present throughout the entire literature on philosophy action as a way to justify each author’s arguments.

pictions; to engage in practical inference entails *sine qua non* the capacity to recognize narrative depictions of practical inferences.

Important here is the fact that, resembling the preceding cases, the spectator is led to feel the need for a *complement*. Answering scenes, point/object shots and visual cues serve the purpose of this complement *vis-à-vis* questioning scenes, point/glance shots or musical tracks. But like names outside a propositional framework, when they stand alone they also lack the proper *meaning* that derives from their mapping onto their respective counterparts.

iv. Genre

If we take erotetic narrative at its *face value* and perceive movies as vectorised networks of answers following questions, one is left with some puzzles. Namely, why do most movies retain their appeal even after all the *questions* have been answered? Why do spectators go back over and over again to movies they've already seen before? And why do spectators insist on turning into blockbusters movies that were constructed according to the strict — and universally known — rules of highly standardized and conventionalized genres where the thread connecting diegetic questions and answers is quite trivial and predictable? It seems that a significant paradox persists in the way audiences continue to be interested in consuming movies they already know, either by literally knowing them already or by recognizing the recurrent diegetic *recipe* of the genre to which they belong. If we maintain that the shuttle between indicative and unspecific segments of the movie and their respective focusers lies at the core of the spectator's cognitive activity, what sustains the energy of this *transaction* once all ranges have been narrowed down to univocal meanings? Music is more difficult to perceive as exhausted, since its relation to the visual track is already a synchronic one but in most Hollywood movies the musical score was so conditioned by the production system's narrative formulas that themes were often served as *leit-motive* strictly connected to characters or emotions in the way programmatic or vocal music is connected to its denotative content (e.g., the use of music in cartoons or in B-movies). Repetition only adds to this explicitness.

Answering these questions one should, of course, be aware of the importance of elements such as the movie's photography, the intelligence of

its editing or a particular actor's performance, as important factors that may sustain the aesthetic relevance of a work over successive viewings. But there may be another way of elucidating some of these matters without abandoning the cognitive analysis of the spectator's *muthos* and her active engagement in film-viewing. Many times, the fiction reader or film viewer is actively involved in specific kinds of "activities" that activate her interpretive or inferential powers. And when this happens she may very well dispense with the pre-requisite of having to be *in albis* regarding the plot's specific outcomes. There are good reasons to refute Thomas J. Roberts'¹⁵ suggestion that by watching a movie-token of a kind of movie-type or genre the viewer is simply exploring yet another modulation of the overarching paradigm, slowly becoming aware of the elasticity of the genre's possibilities, and acquiring the possibility to recognize deviations from the norm¹⁶ or the way those deviations become accepted and incorporated in the narrative canon. According to this theory, the plot becomes a mere pretext to *read the genre*. One reads primarily with a keen and irreducible focus on the plot, although reading the plot *must* also entail a constant reference to the story-type. In fact, as with the *Roger Ackroyd* example, the reader's familiarity with the genre's rules and the consequent ability to project narrative schemata to fill in the diegetic gaps may even become a tool in the author's hands. To some important extent, the reader is conditioned by the genre's paradigmatic rules in her making conjectures about what's going to happen, and in the way she anticipates events and experiences expectations regarding the fulfilment of those predictions. It is not that we are reading or viewing "comparatively", as suggested by Roberts, but that we are constantly accompanied by a "sense of familiarity with the story-type" (Carroll, 1996: 232). But what exactly is the nature of this *familiarity*?

We shall assume that the *presence* of the genre *has to be* a component of the "core phenomenon" or basic mode of formulaic viewing. Of course, we can engage on the basic activity of "reading or viewing for the plot" without any reference to a genre just like we can follow a foreign film without any kind of familiarity with the country's cultural specificities. But

¹⁵ T.J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.

¹⁶ Cf. Carroll, 1994: 230.

that would remain an extremely truncated experience particularly in cases of genres so disseminate that they become part of the set of our cultural commonplaces. We don't need to ask for the reasons of the Private Investigator's misogyny at the beginning of a *film noir*. It is *certainly* due to a complicated love history, one that the current case is set to solve or aggravate. If "reading-for-the-story" means the suspension of the reference to the genre as a significant component of the narrative enthymeme then it seems that there is a contradiction between both activities. In any case, to defend that "reading for the plot" can be done without reference to the genre would commit us to elucidate the exact components of that set of common cultural commonplaces as to separate them from any formulaic feature. Is this reasonable? I think not.

It seems therefore that the system is given the role of a narrative *sidekick* assisting the viewer's experience and invoked, whenever necessary, in order to supply for key narrative, thematic and iconographical elements that the present token-fiction either complicates, assumes or subverts — as is the case with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. But does this constant assistance provided by the genre's rules necessarily entail that to "see one is to see them all"? Deborah Knight¹⁷ remarked that to think that spectators already *know* the story if they know the genre charges the concept of *knowing* with an excessive metaphysical burden, as if all possible narratives were already contained within the genre and *knowing* the story-type would *ipso facto* entail the knowledge of its tokens. This would require that "for any genre, the story-type is in a neat way self-identical, fixed, prescribed, invariant, and singular" (Knight, 1997: 348). But genres are not like that. And specially, genres are not like that when they are used in the spectators' *muthos*. We need then a weaker version of "genre". Far from the image of story-types as immense warehouses of eventual plots or a canonized background of norms, Knight prefers to describe them as "horizons of expectations" (Knight, 1997: 348). The story-type opens up a "range of possibilities from which the particular text [or film] makes a selection" (Knight, 1997: 348). Knight's choice of words in this passage suggests a way in which we could link the relationship between genre and work with the cognitive devices analysed above. The shuttle between the genre's key

¹⁷ Knight, 1997: 348.

features and the work's specific plot is also a way through which spectators are called to construct the narrative.

Ordinary viewers, however, employ an even weaker notion of *genre*. To them the genre is not about a specific set of narrative rules, recurrent motifs or character types but, first of all, about the *promise of a certain emotional state*. Similarly to music or point/glance shots, the genre sets the emotive *modal dominant* against which the particular work is to be understood. Spectators going to see a *teen-slasher* horror movie already anticipate an emotional range that the movie is set to focus. Readers of Harlequin novels pick up their next copy in the airport gift shop with the excitement of a first date. Indeed a significant factor that leads audiences to movies that derive from a repetitive formula has to do with the search for that particular emotional state, one which only that kind of genre is able to transmit.

Thus, in a similar way to the case of the cinematic devices presented before, spectators are engaged in a reconstructive shuttle between the awareness of the "family resemblances"¹⁸ between the kind of things they are *doing* in the particular film they're presently watching and what they've done in other films.

III. Conclusion: Reflective Equilibrium.

In his *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls describes the notion of "reflective equilibrium" as a kind of shuttle between the rationally chosen principles of justice and the range of our most common and disseminated moral and social intuitions. This constitutes a movement of inter-accommodation between the transcendental artificiality of the principles and the more *natural* or spontaneous character of those intuitions.

¹⁸ I'm using here Wittgenstein's concept of *family resemblance* as substitute for simple identity. When we recognize the physiognomic resemblance between relatives it is not so much the observation of identical facial features but the mixture of identity and non-identity that sustains that feeling. A mixture of known and unknown, a thread of loose fibres, some of them uniting and some separating: "The strength of the rope lies not in the fact that there is a single fibre throughout its entire length, but that there are many fibres on top of each others" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §67).

Similarly to the procedures we've been analysing, there is a range — the domain of our intuitions — and a focus — the principles of freedom, liberal equality of opportunities and difference. Apart from other considerations, Rawls considers that the possibility to engage on such an interaction is a way through which his model of justice as fairness is capable of “generating its own support” (Rawls, 1971: 138). When we map the *a priori*¹⁹ principles to the intuitional range, we tend to incorporate those principles into the social basic structure and *focus* our intuitions accordingly “acquiring the correspondent sense of justice” (Rawls, 1971: 122). The fact that the principles of justice comply with our diffused moral intuitions shows that the former were anticipated by the latter although in a raw and non-reflective manner.

I would like to insist on the way Rawls shows how the very activity of this *shuttle* constitutes a way by which justice as fairness *generates its own support*. Rawls' example enables us to isolate the relevance of the cognitive shuttle as a common feature throughout all these dimensions. What is it about cognitive shuttles of this kind that generate commitment (e.g., the political commitment, or our allegiance to movies)? Films too are capable of “generating their own support” and a final hypothesis is that some kind of *reflective equilibrium* also takes place whenever we are led to balance point/glance and point/object shots, music and visual track, genre and plot, or questioning and answering scenes.

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¹⁹ The exact extension of this *a priori* clause is determined by what Rawls calls the “veil of ignorance” that falls over the citizen making her enter the *Original Position* where she remains without knowing her actual economic, social, sexual or political statute. Unaware of her specific circumstance, she's obliged to attend to all possibilities.

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