



PART I
 Questioning Media

When I began graduate studies in film in the early seventies, there was still an abiding obsession with “the cinematic.” Certain directors, like Hitchcock, were cinematic; others, like Bergman, were not. Sometimes we called those other directors “literary.” It was not a polite way of speaking.

To be cinematic was to exploit the unique features of the medium – to use film as film. It seemed self-evident at the time that the best films were the most cinematic, that they were the best because they were cinematic, and that if anything were to succeed as film, it would be necessary for it to employ the peculiar features of the so-called medium.

This prejudice in favor of the cinematic was not merely a critical bias. It also appeared to be reflected in the major theoretical texts that were available to us – notably Arnheim, the Russians, Bazin, and Kracauer. These theorists thought of film as a unique medium and they appeared to presume that the nature of the medium had stylistic implications. Moreover, this approach to cinema was also reinforced by theoretical approaches in the other arts; the influential aesthetics of Greenberg with respect to painting and sculpture stressed the essential specificity of the medium as well.

Undoubtedly, the doctrine of the specificity of the medium also served what might be called academic-ideological purposes. In those days, there was an initiative to form academic departments of cinema. And the notion of medium specificity was a powerful

rhetorical lever for lifting film departments into existence. For if film was a unique medium with a unique practice – one different from literature, theater and fine art – then surely it required its own experts, housed in their own department. People in other disciplines, with approaches geared to other media, were obviously not equipped to understand film as film. Or, so we said. We needed our own discipline in order to study our own unique medium.

I lived inside this view long enough to start to see where the bodies were buried. Teaching it – attempting to make sense of it to others – made me acutely aware of where the doctrine lapsed into incoherence. I could hear myself uttering hypotheses aloud that I realized were only a step or two away from nonsense – assertions frozen midair that I knew would crack under the slightest logical pressure. And that is how the first section of this anthology came to be written. The articles here register my gradually growing skepticism about medium specificity talk. Indeed, the final article in this series worries about whether the notion of *the* medium is of any theoretical use to us whatsoever and suggests that it is not.

The first two articles – “Medium Specificity Arguments and Self-Consciously Invented Arts” and “The Specificity of Media in the Arts” – are overlapping attempts to undermine the view that film and the other arts each possess a *unique medium that has stylistic implications about what should and should not be made in it*. The scope of the third essay – “Concerning Uniqueness Claims for Photographic and Cinematographic Representation” – is more narrow than the previous two essays, insofar as it only focuses on photographic and cinematic *representation*. But it is obviously related to the others, since the putatively unique nature of cinematic representation – its photographic realism – is often cited as the relevant feature of film for our consideration by medium specificity theorists.

The last essay – “Defining the Moving

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Image” – returns to the issue of medium specificity with new arguments. Also, it advances a preemptive strike against potentially new briefs for photographic realism. Specifically, it examines how recent reconsiderations of photography by people like Walton, Scruton and Maynard might be used to reinstall the case for photographic realism in cinema and then it goes on to block such a hypothetical attempt.

Of course, even if the doctrine of medium specificity and the sort of essentialism it espouses are false, it still may be the case that cinema has an essence. “Defining the Moving Image” explores that possibility and arrives at five necessary conditions for film, or, as I prefer to call the phenomenon, “the moving image.” This falls short of essentialism, though I think that it makes a positive contribution to the ontology of film. So, despite the fact that most of the first part of this anthology is critical, it ends on a constructive note.

This first section has a pivotal role to play for the remainder of this book. Dialectically, it displaces one type of film theorizing in order to make space for another. Part I, in effect, is dedicated to dismantling medium specificity theorizing in order to prepare the stage for the type of piecemeal theorizing that follows in the rest of this volume.

As an approach to film theory, the presupposition of medium specificity has several advantages. Not only does it promote a unified approach to theory, criticism and filmmaking, it may also be used to suggest an evolutionary model for film history, inasmuch as the medium may be thought, in Hegelian fashion, to develop in such a way that it discovers its own unique potentials over time.

The medium specificity model has a tidy theoretical agenda: locate the unique style-implying features of the medium and then

find its application across every dimension of film articulation – find the devices that best realize it, or the way in which it can be realized in the deployment of every cinematic device.¹ However, this highly unified program depends ultimately upon successfully locating the specific nature of the medium. And there’s the rub. Not only have successive theorists failed to do this – often advancing conflicting candidates as to the nature of the medium – but, as well, if the arguments in this section are correct, it can’t be done. And without this particular keystone, the project of medium specificity theory, no matter how pretty in principle, falls apart.

But even if we inhabit the ruins of medium specificity, theory still has enough space in which to thrive. For it remains possible to develop theories of the various devices, modes, genres, techniques, and mechanisms of film, even if they are not referred back to some conception of the overarching essence of cinema. These theories will be piecemeal in contrast to the systematic theories of film organized around conceptions of the specificity of the medium. Thus, Part I disposes of Film Theory in order to make room for the film theories presented in the rest of the volume.

Notes

1. Though I reject the notion of the “cinematic” as it is used in the opening paragraphs of this section, often throughout the book, I talk about cinematic devices. When I use that phrase, all I mean by it are devices used in film practice. It has no connotations of “uniquely cinematic devices” or “essentially cinematic devices.” All I am talking about are historically cinematic devices – devices we recognize as being used in film (whether or not they are used elsewhere as well).

CHAPTER I

Medium Specificity
 Arguments and the
 Self-Consciously Invented
 Arts: Film, Video,
 and Photography

There are no muses. All the arts were invented by humans. However, in many cases – such as music and dance – that invention (or that process of invention) has been forgotten, lost, as it were, in history. Yet in other cases, arts have been self-consciously created. Sometimes this has been the result of hybridization – the combining of pre-existing artforms, as in opera. Or, as in the case of film, video and photography, artforms have been erected upon the technological discovery of new media. My purpose in this paper is to examine an aspect of the latter cases – the transformation of technological media into artforms. I am especially concerned with the way in which this process has recurrently led the defenders of emerging artforms to resort to medium specificity arguments – i.e., arguments that purport to establish that the new media have a range of aesthetic effects peculiar to them whose exploitation marks the proper avenue of artistic development within the medium in question.

In studying the emergence of film, video and photography as artforms – and in studying the polemics that attend these emergences – one is struck by certain arresting regularities. Each of these artforms appears to undergo an initial phase in which each attempts to legitimize itself as art by aping the conventions, forms and effects of pre-existing arts. Film initially imitates theater; photography painting; and video imitates film.¹

However, this strategy for legitimizing

the new medium as a prospective art – i.e., for getting the culture to take the new medium seriously by proclaiming it an ART – eventually evokes a countermovement, one predicated on a purist program. Proponents of this purist program argue that if the medium in question is to be truly regarded as an art, then it must have some range of autonomous effects, effects that are its own and that are not merely copied from pre-existing, established artforms. The purist then specifies the range of effects peculiar to a given medium, and goes on to urge that artists within that medium focus their energies upon experimentation within this range of effects. Needless to say, different theorists will identify different potentials of that medium. Thus, at stage two in our scenario, we are greeted by contesting recommendations about the correct line of stylistic development within that medium – recommendations, moreover, which are each putatively based upon having isolated the peculiar potentials or capacities of the medium in question.

The intent of this paper is to examine the role of medium specificity talk in the debates and criticism of self-consciously invented arts. My major aim is to discredit the philosophical foundations of such talk. I will also try to characterize why proponents of emerging arts are drawn to medium specificity talk, while offering, as well, an account of what I believe such talk really amounts to. However, before embarking upon a critical assessment of medium specificity talk, I think it will be instructive to canvas a wide variety of historical and contemporary examples in order to underscore the extreme extent to which medium specificity talk suffuses, at the very least, certain stages in the development of the self-consciously invented arts of film, video and photography.

Let us begin this review with the history of film. Early film theorists, reacting to charges that film merely mechanically reproduced theater, sought to identify effects said

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to be unique to film that could serve as a basis for cinematic expressiveness, while also differentiating film from theater. One leading figure in this enterprise was Rudolf Arnheim. He held that in various ways cinematic representation diverged from perfect recording, and, moreover, that by exploiting these divergences – that is, the unique limitations on perfect recording found in cinema – the artist would discover a necessary condition for expression. A close-up, for example, can make an object appear enormous in a way that would not occur in natural perception; a filmmaker, in turn, can exploit this cinema-peculiar failure of perfect reproduction to impart a feeling of power or gigantism in regard to the object photographed. Arnheim writes

A film art developed only gradually when the movie makers began consciously or unconsciously to cultivate the peculiar possibilities of cinematographic technique and to apply them toward the creation of artistic productions.²

Summarizing his approach to cinema in a recent article, Arnheim says

The strategy was, therefore, to describe the differences between the images we obtain when we look at the physical world and the images perceived on the motion picture screen. These differences could then be shown to be a source of artistic expression.³

So Arnheim believes that cinema has certain medium specific limitations – also, misleadingly I think, spoken of as possibilities – and that artistic expression will derive from cultivating these peculiarities. At the same time, Arnheim believes that the cinematic medium has a special subject matter, rooted in its peculiar nature, which he identifies as the depiction of animated action. (However, Arnheim never explains how this domain of subject matter logically follows from, or otherwise emerges from the types of cinema specific limitations – such as the lack of constancy of scale – which he spends most of his time analyzing.)

Like Arnheim, many Soviet montage theorists, such as Lev Kuleshov,⁴ believe that the nature of the cinema medium can be specified and that that specification can direct artistic decision making. For them, montage is the essence of film and stylistic choices in any film concerning scripting, set decoration, lighting, etc., must be subordinated to facilitating rapid editing.

In opposition to the highly assertive stylistic recommendations that Arnheim and montage-essentialists made about the truly cinematic use of film, a group of succeeding theorists, often called realists, identified photographic representation as the essence of the film medium. Such theorists include, most notably, André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Bazin held that a realist style, one that aspires to the impression of passive recording, follows from the essential photographic nature of film. For realists, the assertive, declamatory approach to stylization found in Arnheim and the montagists runs counter to cinema's essential nature as a recording device. Almost the reverse of Kuleshov, Kracauer argues that all the elements of film, such as plot construction, should be subservient to the photographic element, because that element, rather than montage, is the essential ingredient of cinema. Proper film style, for both realists and their predecessors, depends on its basis in the nature of the medium, though, of course, they disagree in their accounts of the nature of cinema.

Nor does the opposition between realists and montagists exhaust the range of essentialism in film. Especially during the seventies, undoubtedly influenced by the sort of gallery essentialism propounded by Clement Greenberg, filmmakers identified their task as that of reflexively revealing or foregrounding the essential conditions of their medium. This, of course, involves identifying film's essential characteristics and conditions. Thus, we encounter works such as Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*,

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a thirty-minute film which begins as a line of light which widens until it becomes a cone of light. The purpose of the film is to demonstrate an essential condition of the medium. McCall says “*Line Describing a Cone* deals with one of the irreducibly necessary conditions of film; projected light.”⁵

As might be expected, given the fact that photography is a constituent element of cinema, essentialist arguments concerning photography often mirror those concerning film. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes, for example, offers an account of the nature of photography that sounds surprisingly like Bazin’s – i.e., photography as an emanation of past reality. And, he, Barthes, conjoins this with an aesthetic preference for photos that afford the viewer the pleasure of discovering unexpected details, a preference again reminiscent of Bazin’s *parti pris* for depth-of-field cinematography.⁶

Other, nonconverging accounts of the nature of photography also abound. Paul Strand grounds his defense of the “straight” approach to photography on the notion of medium specificity. He writes

The full potential power of every medium is dependent on the purity of its use, and all attempts at mixture end in such dead things as color-etching, the photographic painting and, in photography, the gum print, oil print, etc., in which the introduction of hand work and manipulation is merely the expression of an impotent desire to paint.⁷

And, he adds,

The photographer’s problem therefore is to see clearly the limitations and at the same time the potential qualities of his medium, for it is precisely here that honesty, no less than intensity of vision, is the prerequisite of a living expression. This means a real respect for the thing in front of him, expressed in terms of chiaroscuro . . . through a range of almost infinite tonal values which lie beyond the skill of human hand. The fullest realization of this is accomplished without tricks of process or manipulation through the use of straight photographic methods.⁸

Like Strand, Edward Weston was also opposed to photo-painting – photography that imitates the strategies and conventions of painting. Weston bases his attack on photo-painting in a firm belief in medium specificity. He says

Each medium of expression imposes its own limitations on the artist – limitations inherent in the tools, materials and processes he employs.⁹

Weston goes on to claim that “among all the arts photography is unique by reason of its instantaneous recording.”¹⁰ The conception of photography in this light leads Weston to uphold shooting, in opposition to optical or chemical manipulation, as the proper terrain of the photographer.

Continuing this inventory of “essential natures,” essentialist grounds have also been proposed for photographic styles inimicable to straight shooting. Laszlo Maholy-Nagy believed that his photograms, directly produced by deploying objects on light sensitive paper, produced perceptions attainable only by means of photography. He holds

The photogram, or cameraless record of forms produced by light, which embodies the nature of photographic process, is the real key to photography.¹¹

This recognition is supposed to guide our concern with the productive rather than the reproductive aspect of photography. Moholy-Nagy contends that with photography, light and shadow were for the first time fully revealed.

Through its black-white-gray reproductions of all colored appearances, photography has enabled us to recognize the most subtle differentiations of values in both the gray and chromatic scales: differentiations that represent a new and hitherto unattainable quality in optical expression. This is, of course, only one point among many, but it is the point where we have to begin to master photography’s inward properties, and that at which we have to deal more with the artistic function of expression than with the reproductive function of portrayal.¹²

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Though essentialist accounts of film and photography continued throughout the seventies, the popularity of medium specificity arguments in these fields has been often superceded by politicized, semiotic accounts of a generally antiessentialist bent. However, medium specificity characterizations remain strong in the area of video, where what is and has been at issue since the beginning of the attempt to create an art of video has been its differentiation from film. Frank Gillette writes

As you investigate videotape you enter into another reality. You investigate taped reality in a way which is peculiar to itself. No other medium quite gives you the advantages. What I'm trying to do is to develop a grammar, a syntax. A way of relating evolves from this probing, this experimentation with the media in terms of holistic phenomenon. In terms of the language of television, one assembles some kind of aesthetic that is intrinsic to television.

What I'm consciously involved in is devising a way that is structurally intrinsic to television. For example, what makes it *not* film? Part of it is that you look *into* the source of light, and with film you look *with* the source of light. In television, the source of light and the source of information are one. . . . What I'm involved with is designing frameworks where work with television can pertain to its own linguistic references, its own syntax, its own way of making sense, its own shared premise. Where it no longer parrots film. The content of my work is looking for a language with which to speak with videotape.

I believe in context not content. The context of what I do is to make sense of the state of information and evolve a way of navigating through it. That best relies on what I refer to as a set of circumstances that can be extrapolated from the series of changes. And not from my prior history or from my anticipated future but out of my immediate circumstances. Videotape is the medium *par excellence* for that.¹³

One area of video theorizing where medium specificity arguments occur with great frequency is in advocacy of image processing. Hollis Frampton writes that film

. . . builds upon the straight cut, and the direct collision of images, or "shots," extending a perceptual domain whose most noticeable trait we might call successiveness. (In this respect film resembles history.) But video does not seem to take kindly to the cut. Rather, those inconclusions of video art during which I have come closest to moments of real discovery and peripeteia, seem oftenest to exhibit a tropism toward a kind (or many kinds) of metamorphic simultaneity. (In this respect, video resembles Ovidian myth.)

So that it strikes me that video art, which must find its own Muse or else struggle under the tyranny of film, as film did for so long under the tyrannies of drama and prose fiction, might best build its strategies of articulation upon an elasticized notion of what I might call – for serious lack of a better term – the dissolve.¹⁴

Of course, from a very early date the potential of video for use in terms of what is called instantaneous transmission has also led many to claim for the medium a special advantage, or maybe even a destiny, in the service of certain forms of documentation, such as news reportage.

. . . the most distinctive function of television is its ability to show distant events at the moment when they are taking place. The Kefauver hearings, with a close-up of the hands of gangster Frank Costello; the Army–McCarthy hearings; the complete coverage of orbital shots; the presidential nominating conventions; the Great Debates of 1960; the live transmissions from Europe and Japan via satellite – this is television doing what no other medium can do.¹⁵

Positive reference to the exploitation of the special nature of the video medium, as an automatic form of commendation, also appears frequently in video criticism. Lizzie Borden writes

Some of the closed-circuit environments by Nauman have been among the most abstract works in video: given properties inherent in the medium, such as simultaneity of feedback, these pieces create their own conditions of presentation, independent of externally determining frameworks such as broadcasting or the monitor within an arbitrary display situation.¹⁶

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And more recently, John Hanhardt has explicated the importance of Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* and *TV Chair* in terms of video's distinctive "ability to show on a monitor in real time what the camera is recording."¹⁷ Such criticism implicitly assumes that cultivating the inherent, unique properties of the medium is *prima facie*, aesthetically valuable.

What film, video and photography share, along with being technologically complex media for the production of visual imagery and representations, is an historical circumstance in which each attempts to have itself taken seriously within the culture by means of promoting itself as an artform. Given this situation, the strategy appears to be to mount the claim that the forms in question have a right to the mantle of art because there is something that, in virtue of their respective media, they can do that other arts cannot, or that these forms can do better than other arts. That is, since by dint of their media, these enterprises achieve something new and/or better than what is found in existing arts, they deserve recognition as new arts – ones that do not or should not copy existing forms and which are, therefore, autonomous. Medium specificity arguments are attractive for the purpose of transforming a new medium into a new artform, because they appear to provide a way of individuating arts and, thereby, isolating new ones. At the same time, this operation is based upon a close look at the medium in question, which, in these cases, at least provides an agreed upon starting point for disputants to discuss.

Of course, it is not my claim that medium specificity arguments are the only type of arguments used to legitimize arts like film, video and photography. One also finds arguments in support of each of these media based upon various cognitive-value claims – e.g., that these arts bring about the possibility for new perceptions, that they change perception, or that they incar-

nate the mind or consciousness, or that they exemplify some new form of consciousness. But now I will only consider medium specificity arguments.

The most popular source for medium specificity arguments is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*, a treatise that crystallized one major trend in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Lessing wrote

I argue thus. If it be true that painting employs wholly different signs or means of imitation from poetry – the one using forms and colors in space, the other articulate sounds in time – and if signs must unquestionably stand in a convenient relation with the thing signified, then signs arranged side by side can represent only objects existing side by side, or objects whose parts so exist, while consecutive signs can express only objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other, in time.

Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts so exist are called bodies. Consequently, bodies with their visible properties are the peculiar subjects of painting.

Objects which succeed each other, or whose parts succeed each other in time, are actions. Consequently, actions are the peculiar subjects of poetry.¹⁸

Corresponding to the practice of art of his time, Lessing's theory is stated in terms of imitative representations. Due to the structure of the constituent forms of its medium, each art has a specificable domain of things that it most suitably represents. Generalizing his position to abstract art, we can read Lessing's theory as claiming that each art, in virtue of its medium, has a uniquely appropriate range of effects such that only that medium can discharge.

If Lessing supplies the *locus classicus* of medium specificity arguments, it is also true that avant-garde filmmakers and video makers of the sixties and seventies were led to the advocacy of medium specificity because of the influential theory of Greenbergian modernism as regards the fine arts. Many film, video and photographic artists (not to mention critics) had backgrounds in the fine

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arts, or practiced their trade in the context of the gallery, the museum, the art school, or other artworld venues. This tempted them, as it did dancers and performance artists of the same period, to model their polemics on the dominant modernist line of the art world, which, in Greenberg's, Fried's and their imitators' formulations, were highly essentialist.

Interestingly, by taking their marching orders from gallery tastemakers, the proponents of arts such as film selected incongruous candidates for the essential characteristics of their medium. For they often chose candidates that really seemed to be merely extrapolations from the choices made by theorists of painting.

For example, people came to be interested in making films that acknowledged their surface, though a surface doesn't seem to be an attribute that one can literally apply to film images. For, there is no surface to speak of in regard to film images – the screen is not the surface of the film image, nor is the chemical configuration on the film strip the film's surface. Oddly enough, by emphasizing what they thought of as “the film's surface,” for the sake of purism, such filmmakers were actually imitating another medium, viz., painting.

Even where filmmakers, video artists, dancers and performance artists do not apply the categories of Greenbergian essentialism so blatantly, they nevertheless tend in general to be influenced by the origin of the theory in the fine arts, insofar as they emphasize the *visual* dimension of their medium. Thus, a piece of performance art might engage in reflexively stressing the frontality and shallowness of theater space. Also, recalling painting, a video image might be said, rather peculiarly, to foreground its status as a real-object. But such enterprises at least hint at a striving after the effects of modernist painting at the same time that this is done, curiously, in the name of medium-purism. The derivation of the polemic in the gallery renders these quests

for purism strangely self-defeating, practically speaking.

But apart from the local ironies and incongruities that beset the Greenbergian derived medium specificity polemics of film, video and photography in the sixties and seventies, it must be stressed that any version of the medium specificity theory confronts enormous – I think insuperable – problems.

The medium specificity approach has two components – an internal component, which specifies the relation between a medium and an artform embodied in this medium in terms of a domain of legitimate avenues of representation, expression and exploration; and a comparative component, which specifies the relation between one artistic medium and other artistic media in terms of the legitimate domains of effects of all the parties canvassed by our comparisons.* The internal component identifies the range of effects that accord with the special limitations and possibilities of the medium in question, while the comparative component holds that there should be no imitation of effects between media. We can pursue the problems inherent in this position by first considering the perplexities caused by the internal component of the approach and then by turning to the difficulties of the comparative component.

The internal component examines the relation between the medium and the artform embodied in it. Each medium has a distinctive character, conceived of in terms of limitations and possibilities, which sets the boundary for stylistic exploration in the artform embodied in the medium. Our earlier inventory of medium specificity talk indicates how easily proponents of this line shift from speaking of limitations to speaking of possibilities and capacities. But these

*The internal component considers what a medium does best of all the things it does. The comparison component considers what a medium does best compared to other media.

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are hardly the same sorts of things. Why should the limitations of a medium be grouped with the medium's potentials? How do these things fit together? Some theorists, like Arnheim, hold that limitations create possibilities – i.e., limitations in terms of representation make expression possible. But this is a controversial thesis because, contra Arnheim, expression in film seems possible without exploiting the limitations of the medium but through exploiting its representational powers – e.g., its powers of recording already expressive objects and scenes. There is, however, a broader point to be made here – namely, unbeknownst to most proponents of medium specificity, they are often simultaneously espousing two different theories – one that a medium has special limitations – limitations on what it can represent perfectly – which are supposed to direct stylization, and secondly, that a medium has special potentials – potentials for best representing certain subject matter – which mark what endeavors should be pursued in the medium. Arnheim primarily holds a limitation theory of medium specificity while Lessing holds a special power theory. These approaches may not be easily connectable since one is based on the idea that a medium imperfectly represents certain things while the other holds that there are certain things that the medium most adequately represents. But it is by no means clear that we can be sure that these two different approaches can always be coherently combined to lead to the same results. Arnheim says that cinema has a special capacity to represent animated action, but it is not apparent how that follows from the representational limitations of the medium. Indeed, isn't this very power the opposite of anything we could meaningfully construe as a limitation of cinema?

There are other problems with the notions of "limitations" and "possibilities" in these theories, apart from the ambiguities involved in attempting to combine them.

For example, if we read the idea of medium-limitations in a literal way, the medium specificity thesis appears trivial. For it the notion of medium limitations amounts to "Do not make a medium do what it cannot," then the slogan is otiose since it is quite frankly impossible to make a medium do what it can't. It is a waste of energy to warn artists not to do the impossible, since if the enterprise in question is literally impossible, it will never be executed. A famous example of Lessing's concerns the sculpture "Laocöon" which attempts to depict a movement-packed action in the face of the fact that it is impossible for figures in stone to move. But, of course, the statue neither attempts or achieves something impossible. It tries to project the impression of movement, as Lessing recognizes, by designing a frozen movement in a way that suggests continuity with the past and the future of the action in question. Nothing literally impossible is at stake. If we say that the statue is full of movement, we are employing a useful metaphor but we are not saying that the sculpture has done something literally impossible or violated either a law of logic or physics. The sculptor can't do anything that violates logic or physics. And there's the end to one strong reading of the medium specificity thesis.

Similarly, a strong reading of the "possibility" variation on the medium specificity approach shows it toothless. For if the slogan is to be "only aspire for effects that are possible in your medium," the same objection suffices; for we can be certain that no artist will ever execute anything that is literally unattainable, literally not possible, in his medium.

The answer, of course, to the preceding objection is to note that it rides on construing the medium specificity thesis in terms of logical possibility, whereas what might be meant by medium specificity theorists is that when speaking of the possibilities of the medium, they are speaking of the special powers of the medium, i.e., what the me-

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dium achieves with great ease or with little resistance. Thought of this way, the medium specificity thesis becomes “Aim at those goals that the medium most perspicuously facilitates.” A similar rewriting of the notion of “limitation” might yield the slogan “Do not pursue effects that are difficult within the medium.” However, these rewritings do not, I think, bolster the credibility of the medium specificity thesis. For even if we do not buy into the myth that the production of any work of art should entail a struggle, I do not see how, given art as we know it, we can accept principles that presume that the best line of production in art is the line of least resistance or the easiest approach.

Moreover, these reformulations of the medium specificity thesis will also be difficult to implement because we will be hard put to determine what is easy or difficult in a medium. Here, perhaps, we will have to abandon purely internalist considerations and speak of ease and difficulty via comparisons between media. But this will quickly lead us back to the sorts of issues we have just been considering. Certain action-packed events, like chariot races, are said to be easier to mount and to execute convincingly in film than they are in theater. But chariot races in theatricalizations of *Ben Hur* were staged on treadmills in the first decades of this century. If these chariot races were exciting, suspenseful and spectacular, what difference does it make that they would have been easier, in some sense, to execute in film? Similarly, it may be easier to convincingly dissolve a staked vampire into smoke in film than it is in theater, but an effect of this sort was quite breathtaking in Gorey’s recent stage version of *Dracula*. Why should comparative difficulty make any difference if the final effect is excellent? Of course, it might be said that the overall effect of a work that fails to exploit the specific potentials of a medium cannot, of necessity, be successful. But this is to elevate the issue to a matter of logic, which it clearly is not. Whether embracing a difficult effect in a medium will result in

success or failure cannot be prejudged; we must simply wait and see what the outcome is. And failure in such cases need not be attributed to the medium; it may rather be said that artists in that medium have not yet discovered a convincing way to secure the effect in question.

Perhaps it will be urged that even if these medium specificity slogans are not without exception, they are our best rules of thumb for making recommendations about the projects artists might embark upon. It may be argued that if one does not pursue that which the medium facilitates, then things are likely to go badly for the artist. So the best line of attack is generally the easiest. In some sense, of course, this may be the safest way for artists to proceed. However, it is not customary, I think, for us to encourage artists to minimize risks. Also one wonders whether the rules of thumb adduced in such cases are really based on the nature of the medium or whether they really refer to the routine practice in the medium? Of course, an artist has a better chance at a limited form of success if he repeats what has already been done. But who would accept adherence to existing stylistic formulas as an imperative for all art?

A related modification of the medium specificity thesis would be to say that specification of the medium’s powers helps us explain why certain works succeed and others fail. It is often said, for example, that stage plays or screenplays with much dialogue and restricted movement are not easily acquitted in cinema. Such attempts, often disdained as “canned theater,” result in awkward films. But it is important to notice that often our paradigm cases of “canned theater” – viz., early talkies – were not simply bad movies; they were also bad theater. Their directors used their actors, sets, props and dramatic materials unimaginatively or inconsistently. As theater productions they would have been just as execrable onstage as they were onscreen. The problem was not that the film medium was being used to do