

## The cinematic *Muthos*

### 1. 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 presented<sup>1</sup>. 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 activity of making sense out of a manifold of very diverse units of meaning (characters, emotions, episodes, causal, spatial and temporal relationships between scenes, etc.) proceeds through the articulation of all the events and incidents within the overarching story, “which is unified and complete”<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout his philosophy of film, Noël Carroll has introduced and developed several surveying devices that help us to better realize how this *muthos* takes place in the case of film viewing as well as to realize the different levels, both diegetic and

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, 199: 20.

perceptual, where this activity takes place. These devices are the relation between point-glance and point-object focal perspectives, the relation between music and emotion, erotetic narrative, the narrative enthymeme and the relation between reading-for-the-story and reading-within-the system.

The objective of this paper is to propose a panoramic and comparative view of these explanatory devices and to present and assess their common *rationale*. All of them describe the way films are basically constructed through complex and juxtaposed sequences consisting of the instauration of a given range of possibilities and the cropping out or selection of one of those possibilities. Another common feature lies on the way these devices attribute the viewer an active role in the extraction, elaboration and development of cinematic meaning. Film viewing appeals constantly to the memory and to the activation of different cognitive abilities in the spectator.

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 the images we "read into" clouds or into the inkblots of a Rorschach test<sup>3</sup>, *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"<sup>4</sup>. 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"<sup>5</sup>. 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

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<sup>3</sup> E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Gombrich, 1960: 186.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Gombrich, 1960: 193.

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 color 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 color”<sup>6</sup> 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”<sup>7</sup>.

In narrative arts, and specifically, in literature or film, more than visual schemata, the reader or spectator is mostly 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 example of this deceived “matching” is presented in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where the narrator consistently avoids supplying the reader with information<sup>8</sup>. 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.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted by Gombrich, 1960: 188.

<sup>7</sup> Gombrich, 1960: 202.

<sup>8</sup> 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).

Watching a movie, we are perfectly able to fulfil the elements that permit a smooth transition from one shot to the other<sup>9</sup>, 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’ ” and thus contribute to the explanation of the power of contemporary movies.

## **2. The hermeneutic devices**

### **2.1. Visual**

“Point/glance” and “point/object” are terms introduced by Edward Branigan<sup>10</sup> 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 at<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> E. Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema*, New York: Mouton, 1984, p.103.

<sup>11</sup> 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 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.”

In his cognitivist approach 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”<sup>12</sup> and a perfect vehicle for communicating emotion. First of all, it is a biologically selected device: an adaptive behaviour of animals upon encountering other animals consists in the way they tend to follow the other animal’s glance until they reach its target object<sup>13</sup>. Children too characteristically follow their mother’s glance to its object, and looking where an interlocutor is looking is a fundamental condition of verbal communication. It is thus one of the most basic and disseminated ways through which we acquire information about other persons and the environment.

Point-of-view editing mimetizes this perceptual behaviour and therefore constitutes itself as 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. And since while involved in

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<sup>12</sup> N. Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p.127.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. Gordon, *The Structure of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Cf. Carroll, 1996: 127-128.

this explicative activity, the spectator is constantly reporting a point/object shot back to a preceding point/glance shot, she is in fact *knitting* the narrative in a succession of *saccades* ranging backwards and forwards across the film. (This *knitting*, as we shall see, occurs in many more dimensions and the spectator is often called to fulfil this *role*.)

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 corresponding emotion”<sup>14</sup>. 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 (cf. Carroll, 1996: 130). 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.

If, on the one hand, point/object shots serve point/glance shots by acting as *focusers* of emotions, point/glance shots, on the other hand, provide “a rough guide to what is salient, emotionally speaking, in the point/object shot” (Carroll, 1996: 132). If the point/glance shot “initiates our recognition that the character is disgusted by what he

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<sup>14</sup> R. Wollheim, *Painting as Art*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p.88.

sees” (Carroll, 1996: 132) we’ll find ourselves inevitably looking for the bloody knife in her opponent’s hand, and not the perfect ironing of his shirt. Object shots *tell us* what we had been looking at; glance shots tell us what we should look for next. Both have the ability to elect with precision relevant elements from within a range of heterogeneous candidates (emotions or states of affairs). The evident character of the *tension* between those salient elements and the discarded ones provides a kind of sense of intelligibility – we attain a *distinct* conception of what is going on - and the unification of the spectators’ common experience.

## 2.2. 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 fan of choices is also patent in the case of “modifying music” (Carroll, 1996: 139-145). Non-vocal and non-programmatic music – in a way similar to the human face<sup>15</sup> - are expressive of “inexplicit, ambiguous and broad” (Carroll, 1996: 141) 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,

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<sup>15</sup> The parallel between musical and facial expressions is a recurrent one. Cf., for instance, Wittgenstein’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*: “If I say, regarding a piece by Schubert, that it is melancholic it is as if I was giving it a face (I don’t express approval or disapproval). I could instead be using gestures. In fact, if we want to be precise, we use gestures or facial expressions.”

music is not *per se* sufficient to reach the sort of “emotive explicitness”<sup>16</sup> 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 resonance” to a *diegetically efficient* level. Joy delivers the blissful get-together of two lovers, sadness is articulated into loss, and melancholy is matched by drifting clouds on a September sky. Thus, the expression “modifying music” should be read in a twofold way: music *modifies* film and film *modifies* music. It also means that this *modification* constitutes a reciprocal *modulation*. 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. 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. On the other hand, the ability to articulate unexpected complexes of musical *modifiers* and strictly cinematic indicators has constituted an important way through which movie makers have enriched and increased the ancient artistic *flirt* with the question of what the *proper grammar* of emotions may consist in.

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Kivy, quoted in Carroll, 1996: 141.



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 economic and straightforward way across the movie and “to guarantee that the audience will follow the action in the way the filmmaker deems appropriate” (Carroll, 1996: 144). 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. And that too would be helpful to understand why some movies retain their power even after numerous consecutive viewings. Arguably, it would also help to understand why, in spite of that tight control, “almost every summary statement of a movie (...) contains one or more descriptive inaccuracies”<sup>17</sup> and that it shall always subsist a “lack of fit between technical description [of movies] and a phenomenological account of them” (Cavell, 1971: 12).

Depending on the spectator’s previous experience as a viewer, the emotional range proposed by a given point/glance shot can be more or less wide or encompass a

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<sup>17</sup> S. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971: XX.

different segment of the emotional expressions' spectrum from spectator to spectator. The use of a well known symphonic movement may bring with it different memories or feelings connected to previous experiences of that music and thus "fill in" the film with an array of very diverse possible emotional connotations. To most viewers, Visconti's use of Mahler's Adagietto in *Death in Venice* conveys a mixed feeling of loss, melancholy, nostalgia and suffocated desire. To spectators more familiar with Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*, however, it is impossible to dissociate it from the idea that, in the context of this work, the movement conveys serenity and a state of calm *apatheia*.

All these devices activate cognitive capabilities in the spectator that are common to her ordinary experience. On the one hand, the fact that movies emulate or represent "fairly generic features of human organisms" (Carroll, 1996: 92) explain their power and the fact that it is sometimes hard to attain a critical distance towards them. Also, the "focusing" function of part of these devices eliminates, to some considerable extent, any diegetic *uncertainty* by providing a satisfactory discrimination from among the emotional range *inaugurated* by the more diffuse element. It does so in a much more precise way than what we can ever expect to attain in everyday life, which makes movies "so much more legible than life" (Carroll, 1996: 144). Thus, the narrative control over the spectator's attention is much greater than the one present in other art forms.

But on the other hand, and since a significant part of this control derives from the presentation of an inexplicit component one expects the viewer to manipulate with the help of the *indicators* or *focusers*, film attributes the viewer the chance to complexify the diegetic path (take the case of Mahler's Adagietto, for instance) and therefore to share the "thrill of making", as suggested by Gombrich.

#### 4. 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 focuser(s). This is what Noël Carroll calls “erotetic narrative”<sup>18</sup>.

As was already exemplified, movies, in general, “exploit generic, recognitional abilities”. “Recognition” is the key term here. The proficiency with which the spectator recognizes the moving pictures as representations of real objects is extended to the way she is able to recognize the narrative unravelling of the plot. This is so not only because movies use narrative as “the most familiar means of explaining human action” but specially because movies employ the *erotetic* model of 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 herself employs, namely “practical inference” (Carroll, 1996: 87). 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

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Carroll, 1996: 87-93.

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)) but also because the spectator is given an overarching set of questions that are to organize her overall fruition. 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.

Using erotetic narrative, the flow of narration – just like the flow of visual information<sup>19</sup> - is kept “under strict control” (Carroll, 1996: 91). 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 action<sup>20</sup> 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 depictions; to engage in practical inference entails *sine qua non* the capacity to recognize narrative depictions of practical inferences. Therefore erotetic narrative is proposed as a model for “the basic film narrative”.

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<sup>19</sup> This is achieved through the cinematic employment of naturally generative pictorial representation and variable framing.

<sup>20</sup> Micro-narratives are indeed present throughout the entire literature on philosophy action as a way to justify each author’s arguments.

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.

## 5. 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? If we already know that Lieutenant Ripley is looking at the Alien, we know for sure that the physiognomy of her close-up exclusively portrays terror<sup>21</sup>. If we already know whodunit, scenes where

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<sup>21</sup> Of course we cannot reduce the function of point/glance and point/object shots to that of generating micro-expectations in the spectator. Even more important, perhaps, is the way their succession knits the

detectives gather clues could easily have become redundant and the tension they elicit deprived of erotetic tension. 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 Noël Carroll proposes yet 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. And although his object of analysis is the paradox of our insistence in reading tokens of over-standardized literary genres, I'll try to amplify the scope of his thesis in order to encompass the problem of second-viewings as well.

Analysing the compelling attraction of *junk fiction*<sup>22</sup> – be that literary or cinematic – Carroll proposes that “our interest in a story may not be exhausted by knowledge of how it turns out” (Carroll, 1994: 232). Instead, the reader or viewer seeks in them the chance to get involved in specific kinds of “activities” and namely the chance to enable her interpretive or inferential powers. And for this to happen she may very well dispense with the pre-requisite of having to be *in albis* regarding the plot's specific outcomes. Baseball games may be repetitive, but this doesn't preclude their

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film together and inhibits the awareness of the syncopated, *staccato* rhythm of editing, making us adhere completely to the visual flow. By emulating ordinary perceptive behaviour, it makes us follow *naturally* the story and its visual cues.

<sup>22</sup> N. Carroll, “The Paradox of Junk Fiction”, in *Philosophy and Literature*, vol.18, n. 2, October, 1994, pp. 225-241.

affording “the opportunity to activate and sometimes even to expand our powers” (Carroll, 1994: 237). It is not the case, however – as was suggested by Thomas J. Roberts<sup>23</sup> - 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 norm<sup>24</sup> 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*. Carroll’s opposing thesis is that instead of simply reading or viewing within-the-system in a kind of comparative reading, one reads or primarily with a keen and irreducible focus on the plot. It is after all the specific plot that “affords the reader the opportunity to exercise her interpretive powers” (Carroll, 1996: 234).

Now, I would like to insist on an argument posited by Carroll as merely hypothetical:

“Perhaps it is even the case that the repetitiveness of the story-types aids us in entering the game, since experience with very similar stories may make certain elements in the relevant stories salient for interpretive and inferential processing.” (Carroll, 1996: 233)

Although this doesn’t preclude the priority given to the plot’s traction, reading the plot *must* also entail a constant reference to the story-type. In fact, as I have tried to show 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 left open by the narrator may even become a tool in the author’s hands. In the “continual process of constructing a sense of where the story is headed” (Carroll, 1996: 235) the reader is, to some important extent, conditioned by the genre’s paradigmatic rules in her

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<sup>23</sup> T.J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Athens: University of Georgia Press,, 1990.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Carroll, 1994: 230.

making conjectures about what's going to happen, and in the way she anticipates events and experiences expectations regarding the fulfilment of those predictions. Carroll's examples show us how this is done intra-diegetically and how each story, no matter how stereotypical, provides its own traction. Nonetheless, as his quoted hypothesis suggests, we cannot eliminate the fact that the pleasure contained in this "self-rewarding cognitive activity" (Carroll, 1996: 235) also involves the awareness of the recurrent formulas of the genre. 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*?

Stressing his disagreement with Roberts, Carroll opposes the "simply learning or knowing the details of the story" (Carroll, 1996: 234) and the *transactional value* we derive from the *activity* of actually reading or viewing a story, deriving satisfaction from successful predictions ignited by the plot's intrinsic twists and turns, for instance. If comparative "reading-within-the-system" is accepted as the basic level of engagement it seems to preclude the chance of this transactional value *ever* to be produced: to see one is to have seen them all. Carroll argues that, although reading in a system is not infrequent, it does not constitute the basic mode of reading or viewing generic fiction. And this for two main reasons: a) most viewers are "neither fans nor connoisseurs nor critics" (Carroll, 1996: 231); b) and even these "sometimes become absorbed in a mystery story (...) without that experience bringing to mind particular stories of the same sort that [they] have already encountered" (Carroll, 1996: 231). Significantly, though, he adds that the recognition "that this is a sort of set-up with which we have been confronted before" (Carroll, 1996: 232) also accompanies the reader's or viewer's experience. We are to assume then 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 that would remain an extremely truncated experience particularly in cases of genres so disseminate that they become part of the set of “cultural commonplaces” that sustain the rhetorical character of narrative films<sup>25</sup> and aid the spectator throughout the operation of “narrative enthymeme” (Carroll, 1996: 281) through which she makes sense of the action. 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 feasible?

Take the case of a viewer who had never been exposed to genre fiction so as to be able to recognize any of its recurring elements. Still she knows *she is going to watch a movie*. Based on that she presupposes a number of characteristics – namely, narrative features – and she’s capable of recalling those characteristics whenever required in the process of narrative enthymeme. *Film becomes the genre* as opposed to other narrative genres such as written fiction. The constitution of this “structure of anticipation”<sup>26</sup> is

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Carroll, 1996: 281: “Narrative films may be thought of as rhetorical, then, in so far, as they are structured to lead the audience to fill in certain ideas about human conduct in the process of rendering the story intelligible to themselves.”

<sup>26</sup> Social psychologists have always been interested in the analysis of the function of “structures of anticipation” in social interaction. Prejudices, misconceptions and clichés form an essential component of the way human beings deal with uncertainty by enabling us to anticipate other people’s social behaviour in particular circumstances. Whenever we travel to a foreign country it’s inevitable that we activate a web of prejudices that will assist us in dealing with the flow of new information. They constitute filtration’s devices, cognitive tools that support our social orientation and a much needy reference basis. The new

inevitable and enables the activity of reading for the plot. Carroll's solution to the paradox of junk fiction seems to be looking for the behaviour of that *virgin viewer* as the basic core of fiction following, getting to it in a kind of *reductio* by the suspension of all references to the genre. But on the other hand he acknowledges the importance of the recognition of previous set-ups analogous to the one we're considering now. To him this recognition is secondary to "reading for the plot". To me it is one of its essential components.

It seems therefore that the system is given the role of a narrative *side-kick* 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 Knight<sup>27</sup> remarked that to think in this way 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

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information is then organized according to the way it confirms or negates those prejudices. Accordingly, genre should be read as an important "structure of anticipation" that allows the reader to acknowledge what is new and what is predictable when she reads the plot. The shuttle between genre and work, then, emulates an important aspect of our cognitive and social behaviour, just like the interaction between point/glance and point/object shots emulates ordinary perception. Their power lies on the way they activate our generic recognition capabilities.

<sup>27</sup> Knight, 1997: 348.

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 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. Again, this doesn’t diminish the basic character of “viewing for the plot”. But this too takes place in parallel with the activation of an emotional atmosphere.

The strictly cognitive pleasure or transactional value of anticipating puzzles and solutions and watch them confirmed cannot be separated from the *feeling* with which those interpretations and inferences are made. Since Carroll is arguing in favour of story-focus as the “more basic mode of reading [or viewing] junk fiction” one should then try to investigate what constitutes a more basic motivation for the reader: the

following of the plot *tout court* or the entry into a particular emotional environment. To my view, however, both are inextricable.

Also, if we deviate a bit from an exclusive attention to the cognitive activity of co-constructing a plot to acknowledge the importance of the particular emotional state that derives from following a plot under each specific genre (to follow a thriller is not the same thing as to follow a love story) one is in a better position to understand in part why certain works retain their seductive power even after numerous viewings. The spectator goes back to them in order to repeat a particular emotional mood, one that is inseparable from the way that particular plot is constructed. So much so that certain movies are not interchangeable in order to produce a certain emotional effect. (They become, so to speak, a *genre* in and of themselves (they become what we call “cult movies”).)

Particular works constitute ways of responding to the genre’s agenda and it’s virtually impossible to perceive them without that holistic reference. But just like the way point/object shots, or visual track, or answering scenes, act *retroactively* upon their counterparts, so too the *genre* is affected and indeed re-constructed in each reader or viewer’s *muthos* by the *focus* provided by the current work. If genres are not fixed and immutable paradigms defined exclusively by repetitions but are “also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change”<sup>28</sup> then there is some room to support the hypothesis that *genres too are being constructed* by the spectator throughout her increasing familiarity with certain groups of works. Watching or reading fiction, she is not only co-constructing the diegetic thread - flashing back and forth, self-rewarding herself, etc. – but co-constructing the genre as well. Arguably, that’s one of the attractions of junk fiction. The reader or the viewer is constantly collecting items that

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<sup>28</sup> S. Neale, “Questions of Genre”, in *Screen*, 31: 1 (Spring 1990), 45-66, p.56.

will allow her to compose a *sense of genre* that will later participate in the narrative enthymeme.

Having a more or less articulated sense of genre is particularly noticeable when we listen to conversations between *aficionados*. But it is also extremely relevant in aiding any viewer to envision or anticipate the range of things that are apt to happen next. This way, the shuttle between genre and work is neatly linked to the very structure of erotetic narrative. The genre becomes a sort of “horizon of expectations of expectations” meaning that to possess a sense of genre is an efficient way to *recognize expectations* arising within the movie itself. The genre becomes a necessary condition for the identification of questioning scenes (it tells us what questions to consider) and the proper ignition of diegetic expectation. Knowing beforehand that vampires cannot face daylight one wonders if (or when) the house’s automatic blinds could be activated from outside the modern vampire’s beach house.

Unless we are committed to a Platonic view of the relationship between genres and works, genres don’t exist apart from their formulations. The common features between two examples of *film noir* don’t subsist outside those two examples. Moreover, they don’t subsist outside the fact that the spectator is engaged in anticipating sense within a specific plot and that that activity of anticipation resembles other engagements. Notice that I’m suggesting that *we are led to compare similar activities*, not similar stories; Carroll’s assumption that “reading-for-the-plot” constitutes the basic activity in fiction reading or viewing remains relatively true, albeit with the proper consideration of the importance of the memory of previous set-ups.

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”<sup>29</sup> between the kind of things they are *doing* in the particular film they’re presently watching and what they’ve done in other films. But noticing *family resemblances* however does not commit us to the kind of basic comparative reading or viewing that Carroll criticizes in Roberts’ argument. Experiencing the feeling that we’ve dealt with some similar kind of narrative sequence before doesn’t oblige us to, so to speak, depart from this specific plot.

## 6. 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. Through reflective equilibrium intuitions are focused since the principles of justice allow us “to see our objective at the distance” and the principles of justice acquire substantial and real weight by incorporating themselves and shaping up the realm of intuitions<sup>30</sup>.

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 inter-action is a way through which his model of justice

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<sup>29</sup> 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).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, p.20.

as fairness is capable of “generating its own support” (Rawls, 1971: 138). When we map the *a priori*<sup>31</sup> 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’d 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*. By granting the citizen the possibility to establish by herself this reflective activity, focusing a range and materializing a rational focus, his social and political model pretends to constitute a more powerful way to attain political commitment, consensus and consent since the citizen is more prone to accept the disposition of the *social basic structure* as if it is a product of her own “choice” (another way of sharing the “thrill of making”...).

Rawls’ example enables us to isolate the relevance of the cognitive shuttle as a common feature throughout all these dimensions. What if that commitment is generated, in part at least, by the very engaging on a shuttle, a constant comparison and recalibration of a diffuse array of unclear moral and political notions by means of a focusing point that allows us to “see our objective in the distance”? 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

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<sup>31</sup> 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.

questioning and answering scenes. Whenever the subject is summoned to engage on the extraction of particular elements from a proposed set, or to focus that set, or to anticipate events based on a set, or to acknowledge the connection between other elements of the set and the particular elements she is now considering, she becomes, so to speak, author of her own experience and participates in the “thrill of making” that constitutes one of the avatars of aesthetic experience. The pleasure and aesthetic commitment she experiences is, to some significant extent, derived from the recognition of the power of her own cognitive capabilities.