The Specificity of Media in the Arts

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I

The idea—which I shall call the medium-specificity thesis—that each art form, in virtue of its medium, has its own exclusive domain of development was born in the eighteenth century, almost at the same time that the distinctions between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic and between the fine arts and the practical arts crystallized. Yet despite its age, the medium-specificity thesis continues to exercise a tenacious grip on the imaginations of artists and theorists alike. On the contemporary art scene, this is perhaps most evident in the arena of video aesthetics, where one group, the image processors, advocate their stylistic explorations on the grounds that they are concerned with the basic attributes of video. Summarizing their position, Shelley Miller writes: “Electronic image processing uses as art-making material those properties inherent in the medium of video. Artists work at a fundamental level with various parameters of the electronic signal, for example, frequency, amplitude or phase, which actually define the resulting image and sound.”

Undoubtedly many video avant-gardists are predisposed toward the medium-specificity thesis because, given backgrounds in the fine arts, their thinking has been and is swayed by the still influential tenets of Modernism à la Clement Greenberg. This approach to painting and sculpture is strongly essentialist. Greenberg proclaims:

A modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium. This means, among other things, renouncing illusion and explicitness. The arts are to achieve con-
creteness, "purity," by acting solely in terms of their separate and irreducible selves.

Modernist painting meets our desire for the literal and positive by renouncing the illusion of the third dimension.2

For Greenberg, optical, two-dimensional effects are the medium-specific domain of painting, while tactile, three-dimensional effects are the domain of sculpture. And video artists, influenced by this version of Modernism, believe that the proper direction of their art form will be involved in the isolation and definition of the quidity of the video medium. Moreover, with Greenberg, these medium-specificity proponents are advocating that the differences between media should supply us with a standard of what art should and should not be made. And, if medium-specificity is transgressed, the medium-specificity critic is thought to have a reason to evaluate a given work of art negatively.

Contemporary photographic criticism also shows some recurrent tendencies toward upholding the medium-specificity thesis. For example, in his extremely popular book, Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes argues that photographic representation is essentially different from representation based on analogy or copying, i.e., the kind of representation found in painting. Barthes writes: "The realists, of whom I am one and of whom I was already one when I asserted that the Photograph was an image without code—even if obviously, certain codes do infect our reading of it—the realists do not take the photograph for a copy of reality, but for an emanation of past reality: a magic, not an art."3 Furthermore, realist aesthetic preferences appear connected to Barthes's realist account of photographic representation—specifically, his taste for photos that afford the opportunity for the spectator actively to discover uncoded details.4

The persistence of the medium-specificity thesis has significance for educational policy as well. For when video makers and photographers strive to form their own academic departments or divisions, a prospect already before us, they are likely to do so by asserting their autonomy from other arts on the basis of medium-specificity arguments.

II

The medium-specificity thesis holds that each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration. This domain is determined by the nature of the medium through which the objects of a given art form are composed. Often the idea of "the nature of the medium" is thought of in terms of the physical structure of the medium. The medium-specificity thesis can be construed as saying that each art form should pursue those effects that, in virtue of its medium it alone—i.e., of all the arts—can achieve. Or the thesis might be interpreted as claiming that each art form should
pursue ends that, in virtue of its medium, it achieves most effectively or best of all those effects at its disposal. Most often the medium-specificity theorist unconsciously relies upon (and conflates) both these ideas. Each art form should pursue only those effects which, in virtue of its medium, it excels in achieving. The thesis holds that each art form should pursue ends distinct from other art forms. Art forms should not overlap in their effects, nor should they imitate each other. Also, each art form is assumed to have some range of effects that it discharges best or uniquely as a result of the structure of its physical medium. Each art form should be limited to exploiting this range of effects, which the nature of the medium dictates.

The idea that each art form has its own domain and that it should not overlap with the effects of other art forms hails from the eighteenth century, when theorists such as Jean Baptiste Dubos, James Harris, Moses Mendelsohn, and, most famously, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing revolted against the kind of art theory proposed in Charles Batteux's tract entitled *The Fine Arts Reduced to the Same Principle*. As Batteux's title should suggest, pre-Enlightenment art theorizing tended to treat all arts as the same—e.g., as striving for the same effect, such as the imitation of the beautiful in nature. Enlightenment proponents such as Lessing, possessed by the epoch's zeal for distinctions, sought to differentiate the arts in terms of their medium-specific ingredients. Using the concept of a sign in advance of semiology, Lessing felt that the proper subject matter of each medium could be extrapolated from the physical properties of its constituent signs: poetry, whose words are encountered sequentially, is a temporal art, specializing in the representation of events and processes, while painting, whose signs, daubs of paint, are encountered as only spatially contiguous, should represent moments.

The impression that proponents of the medium-specificity thesis impart is that one need only examine the physical structure of the medium, and the sort of effects the art form based in that medium should traffic in more or less jumps out at one. Paint is the major ingredient in painting. Therefore, painting should primarily exemplify flatness (or, at least, be constrained to exemplify only effects that are consistent with flatness). However, it is far from clear that one can move so neatly from the physical medium to the *telos* of the art form. For example, if anything can lay claim to being the physical trait that essentially defines film, it is its flexible celluloid base. But what does this suggest to us about the kinds of things that could or should be represented or expressed in the medium? Indeed, why suppose that the essential characteristics of a medium necessarily have any directive consequences for the art made in that medium? Of course, this point also pertains when we are speaking of other than essential aspects of the physical medium. If some sort of writing instru-
ment, e.g., a typewriter (or, to be more up-to-date, a word processor), and some material surface, say paper, are the customary, basic materials of the novelist, what can we extrapolate from this about the proper range of effects of the novel? 

Perhaps we will be told that language rather than print is the novelist's basic material. But then what different effects should poetry and the novel pursue, insofar as they have the same basic material? Maybe a move will be made to suggest that sound is the basic material of poetry, whereas events and actions are the basic material of the novel. Of course, it is very difficult to understand why we are to construe actions and events as physical constituents of a medium on a par with candidates like the paint of paintings. And, undoubtedly, the medium-specificity theorist, at this point, will tell us that we need not be committed to a simple notion of the medium restricted solely to its physical characteristics. But once we abandon a supposedly physicalist account of the medium, how are we to determine what the basic elements or constituents of the medium are? Whether or not it is true that actions and events are the basic elements of the novel, of course, is not my concern. My interests in the preceding dialectic lie in what it reveals about medium-specificity arguments, viz., that it is not an easy task to identify the basic materials of a medium, let alone to move from a simple enumeration of a medium's physical elements to the effects the art form embodied in the medium should be committed to explore. Indeed, it is often difficult to know at what level of analysis we should focus our attention vis-à-vis medium-specificity accounts. For though they generally suggest that their starting point is some physical element or constituent, medium-specificity discourse also easily drifts into consideration of nonphysicalistic elements or constituents: space and time, for example, are often said to be the basic ingredients of film. But why are these more pertinent to the medium-specificity theorist than the flexible-celluloid base of cinema?

Of course, if we already have a specific use for a medium, say poetry, then we may be able to say what features of the medium, even what physical features, are relevant for serving that purpose. However, here it pays to note that a feature, like sound in language, might be better characterized as a feature relevant for the purposes of poetry rather than as the basic, determinant feature of the medium. Basic-feature talk seems to imply or connote that prior to any uses of the medium, a medium could have a feature that would be more important and more indicative than any other of its features concerning what ranges of expression the art form embodied in the medium should explore. But, in fact, we have no idea of what features of the medium are important unless we have a use for the medium.

Furthermore, once we realize that it is our purposes that mold the medium's development and not the medium that determines our artistic
purposes, we realize that the problem of overlaps between media is vitiated. We may have a purpose, such as the dramatic portrayal of human action, that will cross media, selecting the features of each medium that best facilitate our purpose. These features in each medium, in turn, either may resemble or may sharply contrast with those of other media. The provisional purposes we designate for a medium may in fact be best pursued by imitating another medium. Thus, Jean-Marie Straub, in his film *The Bridegroom, the Actress, and the Pimp*, mimes theater outright in order to make—quite effectively, I might add—his reflexive point that all film is "staged." Moreover, it is likely that when we introduce a new medium like video or photography, we will have to begin by attempting to adapt it to already existing purposes and strategies, e.g., portraiture, whose implementation perforce will recall the effects of other media. With such incipient arts, that is, practitioners will have to begin somewhere. The evolution of the medium will depend on the purposes we find for it. The medium has no secret purpose of its own.

Another way to approach this point is to remember that all media have more than one constituent component. To simplify, let us say that paint, paint brushes, and canvases are the basic materials of painting. How does the medium-specificity theorist know to identify paint as the pertinent element in this group? And, having identified paint as the lead element, how does the Modernist know to identify the potential for flatness, as opposed to impastos of ever-widening density, as the relevant possibility of paint that is to be exploited? Clearly paint itself cannot dictate how it is to be used—paint can be adapted for covering houses, covering canvases, portraying funerals, or proffering color fields. Paint does not determine how it will be used, but the purposes for which paint is used—art and/or Modernism—determine the relevant features of the medium for the task at hand. Flatness, for example, could be made to express Modernist ideals of purity and rigor. In short, the purposes of a given art—indeed, of a given style, movement, or genre—will determine what aspects of the physical medium are important. The physical medium does not select a unique purpose, or even a delimited a range of purposes, for an art form.

The fact that a medium is generally composite in terms of its basic constituents leads to other complications for the medium-specificity thesis. For different features of the medium may suggest radically different directions of artistic development. Film has photography as a basic element, which has led many to designate it as a realist art. But the appearance of movement generated by the sequential structure of the film strip is equally basic to cinema, and it has led some to champion cinema as a magical art. In such cases, which aspect of the medium should be emphasized? Can the medium-specificity theorist offer a nonarbitrary basis for selecting the program suggested by one basic feature of the medium over another? Per-
haps the medium-specificity theorist will opt for the program suggested by that element of the medium that is a *sine qua non* of the medium. But in our film example, both photography and the sequential structure of the film strip are *sine qua nons*.

Of course, the medium-specificity theorist may argue that no problem arises for him because basic elements of the medium suggest different lines of development. For, it may be said, the artist can pluralistically pursue more than one line of development. However, there are often cases where the candidates for the basic features of the medium suggest programs of development that conflict with each other. Both cinematography and editing are counted as among the basic elements of cinema, ones purportedly enjoining radically opposed styles: realism versus montage. Here it is impossible that the artist can fully explore the range of effects his medium excels in, because it is impossible simultaneously to exploit the cinematic potentials of rapid editing and deep-focus, realist cinematography. Similarly, video's capacity for immediate transmission makes it a useful device for creating certain news documents, while its potential for instant feedback enables it to be employed for abstract image processing. But one cannot make an abstract, image-processed news document.

A medium may excel in more than one effect, and these effects may be incompatible, thus making it impossible for the artist to abide by the medium-specificity thesis by doing what the medium does best. For it is not possible to do all that the medium does best. Nor does the medium-specificity thesis have a nonarbitrary way to decide which of conflicting “medium-based” styles is to be preferred. Obviously, one will gravitate toward the technique that serves one’s purposes best. What aspects of the medium are to be emphasized or exploited will be determined by the aims of the artists and the purposes of the art form. If poetry is to be read silently on the page, then it makes sense to emphasize certain aspects of the medium, such as where each line ends; if poetry is primarily to be declaimed aloud by bards, however, line endings will not be a very determinant feature of the medium, even if our poets compose their songs ahead of time on paper. A medium is used to serve the purposes of an art form, a style, or a genre. Those purposes make different aspects of the medium relevant, rather than vice-versa.

In response to my claims about the priority of use, it may be asserted that there are certain uses to which a medium cannot be put. And this, it might be said, is the basic truth of the medium-specificity claim. However, if the force of *cannot* here is that of either logical or physical impossibility, then the medium-specificity thesis is nothing but a truism, one irrelevant to art criticism or art making. For if it is literally impossible for a given medium to be put to a given use, then it never will be. Thus, since there is never any likelihood that media will overstep themselves in terms
of what is logically or physically possible for them to do, there is no reason to warn them to be wary in this regard.

Clearly the existing output of any medium will only consist of objects designed to serve uses that it is logically and physically possible for the medium to perform. Use determines what aspects of the medium are relevant for aesthetics, rather than some essential trait of the medium determining the proper use of the medium. But if the use of the medium is key, then effects will be evaluated in terms of how well they serve presiding purposes. Some uses of painting, landscape, for example, enjoin the exploitation of pictorial depth—obviously a logical and physical possibility of the medium. Such instances of pictorial depth, then, will be evaluated in light of the degree to which they serve the purposes to which they are connected. Our landscape paintings with their depth cannot be rejected on the grounds that paintings cannot disregard the essential flatness of the medium. Quite clearly some paintings do and, therefore, can ignore the Modernist’s constraints concerning pictorial flatness. In such cases, excellence in the service of a definable purpose—e.g., accurately portraying recognizable landscapes—will be our leading criterion for accepting each modification of the medium, at least where there is agreement about how to use the medium. Moreover, where there is not agreement, reference to traits of the medium will have little sway concerning alternative styles, since traits of the medium are only significant vis-à-vis uses. Rather, we will have to find other reasons for advocating one use over others.

It may be felt that whatever persuasiveness the foregoing account has, it can be resisted on the grounds that there are straightforward examples where artistic failure can be incontestably ascribed to ignoring the medium-specificity thesis. Imagine a silent film drama in which we see a gun pointed at X, followed by an intertitle reading “Bang!,” followed by an image of a prostrate, dead X. One explanation of what has gone wrong here is that the filmmaker has failed to execute the scene in terms of what the medium does best—viz., showing things. However, we must ask whether the putative error here would be an error in any kind of film or only in certain types or genres of film with very special purpose. Put this way, I think we see that the sequence just described might be a brilliant invention in a comedy or in a film striving after Brecht’s vaunted alienation effect. On the other hand, the sequence is an error within the Hollywood style of the action genre for which, among other things, considerations of pacing as well as of spectacular effects would favor showing the gunshot. Style, genre, and art form, and the purposes rooted therein, determine what elements of the medium will and will not be relevant. That is, contra the medium-specificity thesis, there are no techniques that are unavailable to an artist because of a failure to exploit certain characteristics of a given medium (or because of overlaps with other media). Rather there are styles,
genres, art forms, and their presiding purposes, which determine the viability of a technique within a context of use. Where certain artistic failures occur—such as in cases of canned theater—we are not confronting transgressions of the medium but errors within prevailing styles that cannot be recuperated by references to other existing styles or other defensible purposes.

Earlier I assumed that the "cannot" in the medium-specificity thesis—i.e., "Make no medium do what it cannot do"—signalled either logical or physical impossibility. However, there is another sense of "cannot" that the medium-specificity theorist is banking on. According to the medium-specificity approach, we are told that if one wants to identify the aspects of the medium that a given art is to exploit, then one must look to those aspects that differentiate the medium in question from all other media. Thus, it is the purported flatness of paint that distinguishes it from sculpture. So painting-as-surface is the painter's proper arena. Here we see that the medium-specificity thesis is to be read normatively—"Do not make an art form do what it cannot do" means "Do not make it do what it ought not do because some other art does it." Thus, the medium-specificity formula is an injunction.

As an injunction, the medium-specificity thesis has two components. One component is the idea that there is something that each medium does best—alternatively, best of everything else a given medium does or best in comparison with other media. On both counts, Lessing thought that painting represented moments best and poetry actions. Rudolf Arnheim thinks that films represent animated action best. Also, the medium-specificity thesis holds that each of the arts should do that which differentiates it from the other arts. We can call these two components of the medium-specificity thesis the excellence requirement and the differentiation requirement, respectively. There are many problems with the medium-specificity thesis. Some of these are a direct result of the combination of the differentiation and excellence requirements.

An underlying assumption of the medium-specificity thesis appears to be that what a medium does best will coincide with what differentiates media (and art forms). But why should this be so? For example, many media narrate. Film, drama, prose, and epic poetry all tell stories. For argument's sake, let us say it is what each of these arts does best—i.e., what each does better than anything else it does. Yet, narrative will not differentiate these art forms. What does the medium-specificity thesis tell us to do in such a situation?

If film and the novel both excel in narration, (1) should neither art form narrate since narration fails to differentiate them? or (2) should film not narrate since narration will fail to differentiate it from the novel and the novel claimed the domain of narration first? or (3) should the novel give up narration and let the newcomer have its chance?
The first alternative is simply absurd. It would sacrifice a magnificent cultural invention—narration—for whatever bizarre satisfaction we can derive from adherence to the differentiation requirement. That is, to what end would we be forgoing artistic excellence in cases like this? Clearly attainable excellence will always be more important to us than differentiation for its own sake.

The second alternative is also unattractive. In this case, the medium-specificity theorist would appear to confuse history with ontology. Film is to forego narrating just because literature already has that turf staked out. But surely this is only an accident of history. What if movies had arisen before writing? Then would novels have to find some occupation other than narrative? And what might that have been?

Clearly, accidents of history should not preclude an artistic medium from exploring an area in which it excels. Nor should accidents of history be palmed off as ontological imperatives, another proclivity of the medium-specificity thesis. That is, according to one very natural construal of the medium-specificity thesis, the special subject matter of each art form follows from the nature of the medium it is embodied in. However, in fact, we have seen that the medium-specificity thesis is even more complicated than this because a medium is supposed to specialize in what it excels in as a result of its nature, but only where that area of special achievement differentiates the medium in question from other media. So, the question of differentiation is not simply a question about the nature of what a medium in isolation excels in, but a question about the comparison of arts. And it is quite possible that a new art may be invented which excels in an area where an older art already excels. To award the older art the domain just because it is already established seems arbitrary, as does the third alternative above—awarding the domain to the younger art just because it is younger. If two arts both excel in an area it seems natural to permit them both to explore it. What reason do we have to be against this option? Following this policy, we will enrich ourselves by multiplying the number of excellent things we have. This is surely the case with narrative. The world is richer for having novels and fiction films and epic poems and dramas and operas and comic books and narrative painting, etc., though the differentiation component of the medium-specificity thesis would seem to urge us to forsake some if not all of these treasures should we choose to regard the medium-specificity thesis as a guideline for deciding what art can and cannot be made.

The specificity thesis has both an excellence component and a differentiation component. Perhaps one interpretation of the theory is that each art form should pursue those projects which fall in the area of intersection between what the art form excels in and what differentiates the art form from other art forms. But this does not seem to be an acceptable prin-
principle because, among other things, it entails that an art form might not be employed to do what it does best just because some other art form also does it well or, for that matter, can merely do it passingly. Again, the specificity thesis seems to urge us willingly to sacrifice excellence in art on principle. But I think that excellence is always the overriding consideration for deciding whether or not a particular practice or development is acceptable.

Indeed, I believe that what could be called the priority of excellence is the central telling point against the specificity thesis. To dramatize this, let us imagine that for some reason the only way that G. B. Shaw could get backing for *Pygmalion* was to make it as a talking picture—perhaps in the possible world we are imagining, Shaw was only reputed as a successful screenwriter. Let us also suppose that in some sense it is true that theater is a better showcase for aesthetically crafted language than talking pictures. Would we decide that *Pygmalion* should not be made, even though film will afford an adequate mode of presentation for it? I think our answer is “no,” because our intuitions are that the medium-specificity thesis should not be allowed to stand between us and excellence.

Nor need the excellence be a matter of the highest excellence achievable in a given medium. One interpretation of the medium-specificity thesis urges that a medium pursue only that which it does best of all the things it does. But if a medium does something well and the occasion arises, why should an art form be inhibited especially just because there is something that the art form does better? Certain magical transformations—weaklings into werewolves—can be most vividly executed in cinema. But it can also be done quite nicely on stage. Should this minor excellence be forgone in a stage adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* either because language, not transformation, is what theater handles best or because film can make the metamorphosis more graphic?

The medium-specificity thesis guides us to sacrifice excellence in art. We should eschew Groucho Marx’s movie monologues because they more appropriately belong to theater, just as the *Laocoön* should have been poetry. But is there reason to give up all this real and potential excellence? There is the medium-specificity argument conceived of as a rule that tells us what art should or should not be made. But on what grounds? It is not a moral imperative. So what is its point? What do we gain from abiding by the medium-specificity dictum that compensates or accounts for the sacrifices of excellence the medium-specificity theorist calls for? Here it is important to recall that the medium-specificity thesis has often been mobilized to discount acknowledged artistic accomplishments.11

The medium-specificity theorist may maintain that his position is basically committed to the proposition that each medium should only pursue those effects that it acquits better than any other medium. This not
only raises the question of why a medium should only pursue that which it is thought to do better than any other (in opposition to what it is merely thought to do as well as other media, or what it does well but not as well as other media are thought to do); it also raises the question of whether it makes sense to compare arts in terms of whether they are more or less successful in performing the same generic functions. Can we say whether film, drama, or the novel narrates best, or is it more appropriate to say they narrate differently? Moreover, the relevant issue when commending a given artwork is not whether it is an instance of the medium that is best for the effect the artwork exemplifies, but whether the artwork in question achieves its own ends.

Surprisingly, there is little by way of defense for the medium-specificity thesis, especially when it is thought of as a way of determining what art should and should not be made. The thesis usually succeeds by appearing to be intuitively self-evident. Undoubtedly, the medium-specificity theorist leads listeners to accept the thesis through an implicit analogy with tools. Tools, for example, a Philips-head screwdriver, are designed with functions in mind, and efficiency dictates that we use the tool for what it is designed for. If you wish to turn a screw with an x-shaped groove on top, use a Philips-head screwdriver. If you wish to explore the potentials of aesthetically crafted, dramatic language, employ theater. If your topic is animated action, use film. Likewise, just as you should not, all things being equal, use a Philips-head screwdriver as a church key (though it can open a beer can), you should not, all things being equal, use cinema to perform theater's task and vice versa.

But I think that to carry over the tool analogy to an art form is strained. Art forms are not tools, designed and invented to serve a single, specific purpose, nor are they even tools with a delimited range of functions. Most art forms were not self-consciously invented and, therefore, they are not designed. Painting was not invented to celebrate flatness. Moreover, even with self-consciously invented arts like photography, film, and video, it was soon realized that these media could perform many more tasks than they were expressly and intentionally designed for. Indeed, our interest in an art form is in large measure an interest in how artists learn or discover new ways of using their medium. But the idea of the artist discovering new ways of using the medium would make no sense if the medium were designed for a single, fixed purpose, as the strongest variants of the medium-specificity thesis seem to suggest.

An art form is embodied in a medium which, even in the cases of the self-consciously invented arts, is one whose many potentials remain to be discovered. But discovery would not be a relevant expectation to have of artists, nor would an interest in it be relevant to an art form if the task of the art form were as fixed as that of a Philips-head screwdriver. A correla-
tive fact against the idea of the fixedness of function of art forms is the fact that art forms continue to exist over time, obviously because they are periodically reinvented and new uses are found for them. But if art forms were as determinately set in their function as are things like Philips-head screwdrivers, one would expect them, like most tools, to pass away as their function becomes archaic. That art forms are constantly readapted, reinvented, and redirected bodes ill for the central metaphor suggested by the medium-specificity thesis: that of the art form as specialized tool.

Furthermore, the notion of “efficiency” as it figures in the allure of the medium-specificity thesis is suspect. For it is not clear that if film undertakes the task of painting—showing a still setting—it will be inefficient in the sense of incurring more labor. Nor is it obvious that expenditures of time, material, or labor are really relevant in the appraisal of artworks. Excellence of effect is what we care about. Moreover, if “efficiency” is thought of as “operating competently,” then it is difficult to see how the medium-specificity theorist can employ it in a non-question-begging fashion since things such as the *Laocoön* do support some measure of aesthetic experience even if they supposedly transgress their medium.

One way to attempt to defend the medium-specificity thesis is by asking, “Why else would there be different art media if they were not supposed to pursue different ends?” The medium-specificity thesis is, in this light, an inference to the best explanation. Given the fact that we have a number of arts, we ask “why?” The answer that seems most reasonable is: “Because each art has, or should have, a different function.” Again, there is some underlying idea of efficiency.

An important presupposition of this argument is that it is legitimate to ask why we have different arts. It also supposes that it is legitimate to expect as an answer to this question something like a rational principle.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein, where there is no question, there is no answer. We can, I think, use this principle to rid ourselves of the preceding argument. For its question, when stated nonelliptically, is not “Why are there diverse arts?” but “What is the rationale that explains or justifies our possession of exactly the diverse arts we have?” Now there may be an answer, or, better, a series of answers to the former question—answers of an historical and/or an anthropological variety. For example, we have film because Edison wanted an invention to supplement the phonograph. Perhaps we have painting because one day a Cro-Magnon splashed some adhesive victuals on a cave wall and the result looked strikingly like a bison. And so on. But we have no answer to the second question—“What is the rationale for having exactly the several arts we have?” Rather, each art arose due to a chain of events that led to its discovery or invention and to its subsequent popularization. The result is the *collection* of arts we have, which we only honorifically refer to as a system. The arts are not system-
atic, designed with sharply variegated functions, as the medium-specificity thesis holds. Rather, they are an amalgamation of historically evolved media whose effects often overlap. There is no rationale for the system, for in truth, it is only a collection. Thus we have no need for the explanation afforded by the medium-specificity thesis.

As I mentioned earlier, one area where it will be tempting to resort to medium-specificity arguments is in the justification of the formation of new arts-educational departments, such as film, video, photography, holography, and so on. Proponents of such departments will argue that their medium is distinct from the other arts in such a way that it will not receive its due if condemned to existence in departments dominated by specialists in literature, theater, and fine art. Furthermore, it may be added that the medium-specificity thesis is of great heuristic value insofar as it entreats students to think deeply about the specific elements of their trade.

I do not wish to demean the fact that the medium-specificity myth has and can have useful results. But I wonder whether the students who benefit from this myth are really doing something as simple as considering the materials of their arts rather than the "state-of-the-art" techniques, conventions, and styles that dominate their practices. And, furthermore, the medium-specificity thesis can result in undesirable consequences. Students can become mired in the prevailing traditions of their medium, closed to the possibility of innovating inspiration from the other arts. Indeed, my own prejudice is to suspect that once students have mastered the basic techniques of their medium, their best strategy is to explore not only the history of their art, but other arts and culture at large for new and stimulating ideas.

Concerning the usefulness of medium-specificity arguments for the justification of new academic departments, it can be said that this is a rhetorical matter, not a logical one. That administrators may be persuaded by such arguments, or that the proponents of new arts-educational disciplines feel they need such arguments, does not show that the medium-specificity thesis is valid. On the other hand, such departmental realignments can be defended without reference to medium-specificity. We may argue that the practice in question has become or is becoming so important to the life of our culture that it warrants intensive and specialized study, even if the enterprise does overlap with the practices of preexisting forms such as theater, literature, or fine art.

III

In concluding, I would like to emphasize that the strongest and most pervasive instances of the medium-specificity argument maintain that the various media (that art forms are embodied in) have unique features—
ostensibly identifiable in advance of, or independently of, the uses to which the medium is put—and, furthermore, these unique features determine the proper domain of effects of the art form in question. However, it seems to me that what are considered by artists, critics, and theorists as aesthetic flaws, traceable to violations of the medium, are in fact violations of certain styles, the purposes of those styles, and their characteristic modes of handling the medium. That medium-specificity arguments are often connected with advancing the cause of one artistic movement or use of the medium should indicate that what is urged under the banner of medium specificity is linked to implicit conceptions of preferred artistic styles.

Even when analysts are not concerned with saying how a medium should be used but are only attempting to describe the unique, artistically pertinent features of a medium, I suspect that they are really speaking of styles within the medium. If we are told, for example, that temporal manipulation is the artistically relevant, unique feature of film, our informant clearly is thinking of film in relation to certain styles of filmmaking. For real-time exposition is also a feature of the medium, one pertinent to alternate styles of filmmaking, which, of course, have different purposes.

Similarly, if we are told that the potential for wordless action and spectacle, rather than ornate language, is the key element of an authentic, nonliterary theater, then it is evident, I think, that we are being asked to advocate one style of theater while being confused about the reasons for doing so. We are led to believe that our decision is based upon some facts about the nature of the theatrical medium rather than assessing the purposes of the style of the nonliterary theater we are asked to endorse.

The task of the theorist of an art is not to determine the unique features of the medium but to explain how and why the medium has been adapted to prevailing and emerging styles and, at times, to either defend or condemn the prevailing or emerging purposes artists pursue. Such debate should not proceed by arguments about what the medium dictates, but rather by finding reasons—artistic, moral, and intellectual—that count for or against those styles, genres, artworks, and their subtending purposes which confront us.

NOTES

The Specificity of Media


7. In the paragraph above, I am accepting the frequent presupposition of specificity theorists that media can be individuated on the basis of their physical structures. But this does seem problematic. Why claim that daguerreotypes should be grouped in the same medium as celluloid-based photography? The physical structure and certain of the physical potentials of these processes are so different. Why not claim there are at least two media here? Obviously, the question of individuating media is not simply a matter of physicalistic considerations. Media are cultural and historical constructions. The topic of the way in which media are individuated is too large to include in this paper. For the purposes of my argument, I am hypothetically assuming the adequacy of our present distinctions between media.


9. It is interesting to note that most often when medium-specificity claims are advanced in support of the program of a particular art, generally, the theorist does not contrast the art he champions with every other art—which one would expect given the theory—but only with selected arts. Thus, painting is contrasted with sculpture, or video with film, or photography with painting, or film with theater, etc. Film, for example, is not usually contrasted with the narrative novel in order to find film's proper domain of effects, nor is video contrasted with music. The theory is only applied to certain neighbors of the art in question, normally ones with which the art in question is competing for attention and for audiences. The differentiation requirement, in such contexts, does not seem to be a matter of ontology but a rhetorical lever in aesthetic power struggles. This is discussed at greater length in my "Medium Specificity Arguments and Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video and Photography," in *Millennium Film Journal* nos. 14/15 (Fall/Winter, 1984-85).

Parenthetically, it is worth pointing out that most frequently medium-specificity arguments are used in the context of comparing only two arts. This may be the cause of the fact that it is difficult to find elaborately articulated statements of the general thesis. Rather, the general thesis is most commonly assumed as a premise for the purposes of a more local argument.

10. Here we are not speaking of the arts excelling relative to each other but excelling in terms of one thing that they do compared to other things that they do.


12. Here an analogy with human beings may be helpful. Human beings are not designed with a fixed function and, as a result, we do not attempt narrowly to constrain the ways in which they can fruitfully develop. We accept a range of alternative, even competing, lifestyles. Likewise with the artforms embodied in artistic media.

13. Another reason that I advocate the priority of stylistic considerations over mediumistic ones is that our stylistic aims, needs, and purposes lead to changes in the very physical structure of media. It is because we are committed to certain stylistic aims that we mold dancers' bodies in a certain way; it is because we already are committed to certain styles of realism that various technical innovations, like cinemascope, are introduced into the film medium. The physical structure of a medium does not remain static. It is modified as a result of the
needs and imperatives of our existing and emerging styles, genres, and art movements. Those often literally shape the medium, rather than the medium dictating style.