

When is Film Art?

(This is the written version of a talk at the Pacific APA, 2007, in Pasadena.
Chris Grau was the commentator. Contact him for comments.)

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Introduction

Intuitively, some films qualify as artworks and others do not. Few would deny that *Un Chien Andalou* qualifies as art, while many would feel little temptation to apply this honorific to the average Hollywood blockbuster, television melodrama, or sleazy porn flick. But what marks the boundary? When is film art? Some might restrict the label to *avant garde* cinema, European art house films, and video installations, while others are inclined to expand the category to include films intended for wide audiences, including Anthony Mann's noirs, Sergio Leone's westerns, and Mario Bava's masterworks of low-brow horror. Some have even suggested that the art/non-art boundary does not exist. All film is art, though some of it is better art or higher art. How, if at all, should we draw the line?

This, it turns out, is not just a question for those with a special interest in film. It has interest for aesthetic theory more broadly, because film can serve as a test case for definitions of art. Some theories of art seem too restrictive, because they prevent us from classifying certain films that are aesthetic masterpieces into the category of art.

In what follows, I will first try to motivate an answer to the boundary question: When is film art? The theory I propose might be co-opted for use in answering the more general question—When is anything art?—but I will leave that larger task to another occasion.

1. Inclusive and Restrictive Views

1.1 Is All (or Most) Film Art?

In the early days of cinema, it was sometimes suggested that film is never art. Film is, at best, a photographic record of an artistic performance, but not an artform in its own right. This view, echoing similarly dismissive attitudes towards photography, was difficult to sustain. After all, film is much more than a recording. The camera is no innocent eye. Filmmakers need to make numerous choices about every shot, and, of course, film production involves editing, and editing typically results in a final product that is quite different from what an eyewitness to the filmed events would or could see. These days it is hard to find anyone who would seriously defend the claim that film is never art. More typical is the opposite view that all or most film is art. According to this view, there is no principled way to draw the line between say *L'Avventura* and *Die Hard*.

The most visible recent defender of this view is Noel Carroll, whose book on *Mass Art* is an effort to raise popular entertainment media from their denigrated status. Carroll gives several arguments for concluding that films produced for mass consumption, including television sitcoms, qualify as art. First, he notes that such films have genres and forms that are descended from genres and forms of works that are

uncontroversially considered works of art. This gives such films “prima-facie claim to art status,” (1998: 196). Second, the creators of sitcoms and other popular works engage in activities characteristic of artistic practice: writing, acting, choice of shooting styles, and so on. Third, such words would count as art according to leading accounts of the nature of art. Carroll has in mind so-called classificatory approaches, which define art by appeal to how art works are identified as such, as apposed to more antiquated theories, like formalism, which define art by appeal to evaluative criteria. A fourth argument, implicit in Carroll and related to his third, is that those who deny art status to popular works are simply confusing the art/non-art distinction for some evaluative distinction, such as good-art/bad-art or high-art/low-art. Popular works may tend to be less good than so-called art films, and they may lack high-brow or high-culture status, but that should not prevent them from being classified as artworks.

Let me respond to these objections in turn. First, does descent from artistic forms and genres guarantee status as art? It would, of course, if forms and genres were sufficient conditions on being artworks, but this can hardly be assumed. Consider, for example, the genre comedy. The question, “Are comedies always art?”, seems to be as unsettled, as the question, “Is film always art?” Indeed, both questions are unsettled for similar reasons. All comedies clearly share certain things in common, but are those things sufficient for being artworks? Carroll’s first argument seems to beg the very question at issue. One can dramatize the point by showing that even when it is obvious that a traditional genre is being exploited, the question of whether the resulting product is a work of art can easily be addressed. For example, consider a comedic television commercial, a suspenseful re-enactment on *America’s Most Wanted*, or a tragic soap opera. Are these artworks? Even highlighting the fact that these are comedies, suspense films, and tragedies does not resolve the question. And, to the extent that one is reluctant to extend the label “art” to such items gives us prima facie reason to think that falling into traditional genres or artforms is not a sufficient condition.

A similar response can be made to Carroll’s second argument: the claim that most films are created by means of similar activities. Is the use of actors and the choice of camera angles sufficient for counting as an artwork? The answer is far from obvious, and it seems to be precisely what is under debate. It seems to follow from Carroll’s argument that airplane safety films, infomercials, and various training films count as art. Perhaps that’s an outcome we will be forced to accept, but Carroll’s argument does not cut any ice, since someone who denies that all film is art will deny that any of these aspects of production are sufficient. Against this, Carroll will undoubtedly say, given all the similarities, it looks like mere fiat to stipulate that some films are art and others are not. And, taken as an attempt to shift the burden of proof, his first two arguments have some weight. But, given that Carroll’s taxonomy broadens the umbrella of art beyond where intuition normally takes us, that is evidence for the hypothesis that some tacit boundary is in place. It is not mere fiat to say that we, as a matter of fact, tend to draw a boundary somewhere. If one can explain how we do that, and if our intuitions are normatively defensible, then we will have reason to conclude that the boundary is real.

Carroll’s third argument states that most films satisfy the conditions laid out in prevailing classificatory theories of art. Unfortunately, he doesn’t spell this out in detail. On my reading of those theories, Carroll’s claim is difficult to defend. Consider, briefly, three theories: Dickie’s Institutional Theory, Levinson’s Historical Theory, and Carroll’s

own Narrative Theory. Dickie (***) says a work of art is an artifact of a kind created to be presented to artworld public. Now it should be obvious that many popular films are not created for the artworld, so, on the face of it, they do not seem to qualify as art.¹ Next, consider Levinson's (***) Historical view, which can be roughly stated as follows: something is a work of art just in case it is intended to be regarded in ways in which objects in the extension of "artwork" have previously been regarded. Here again, I think most films fail the test. Did the creators of *Die Hard* intend their film to be regarded in ways characteristic of the ways that uncontested art films and other artworks are regarded? Presumably not. Not only is there no explicit intention to be making something that falls in the same class as recognize artworks, there is also a sense in which the manner of regard sought is radically different.

Even Carroll's (***) own Narrative theory is hard to square with the conclusion that most film is art. Carroll emphasizes the point that artworks typically belong to a narrative: a manner of making art exists, then a complication arises, and then something new is created in order to deal with that complication. As Carroll recognizes, this account is primarily designed to handle the possibility of new artforms (avant garde movements that respond to complications in previous approaches), and is, thus, is hard to apply to popular entertainment films. To establish that such films belong to art narratives, Carroll cannot claim that they are resolving prior complications, so he must find some other way to fit them into the narrative. His solution is to appeal to the fact that these works use traditional genres and forms, but this is just to repeat his first argument and render the appeal to narrativism about art completely superfluous. Perhaps Carroll could try to get his narrative theory to do some work by emphasizing the fact that popular entertainment films would not have come into being without the influence of prior works that are uncontroversially classified as art, such as the comedies and tragedies of classical theater. But this move would render his narrativism too inclusive to be considered a theory of art. Suppose a field general basis his battle plan on some lines from Homer. Is his plan, or the written summary there of, an artwork simply in virtue of being influenced by an artwork? If more plausibly, we take the art-making narratives to involve more deliberate intentions, à la Levinson, to produce objects that are, in some fundamental sense, of the same kind as previously existing "artworks" we can rule out the field general's plans, but we may also be able to rule out many films made for mass production. In sum, Carroll may face a dilemma: his narrativism may be too inclusive to be plausible or restrictive in a way that excludes many films from the category of art.

A fourth argument, implicit in Carroll is that those who want to deny art-status to certain films are simply drawing the wrong distinction. The contested films are simply low art (or in some cases, bad art) rather than non-art. Is the claim that sitcoms, TV commercials, and porno videos don't count as art simply the result of an elitist urge to regard high art as the only legitimate form? Supposing that is right, there is still an interesting question to ask about, When is film High Art? But I actually don't think that's the issue here. I think there are films that are not high art, but still art, and others that do not legitimately qualify as art at all. For example, I don't think a quick film shot on my digital camera of the beach front I am visiting on a getaway weekend is a work of art. Plus, similar issues arise for every medium. Are holiday snapshots art works simply

¹ One might argue that such films are "of a kind" with those that are presented to the artworld, but, like Carroll's first argument, that would be question begging. Are they of the same kind in the relevant respect?

because they are photos? Is a story I make up in an email to explain to my colleagues why I will be late to a meeting a case of artistic fiction? If we extend the category of film art to include all films, then one might be forced to extend the category in other domains, and the result would be so inclusive as to render the label “art” uninteresting and unrecognizable.

That said, it must be confessed that the word “art” or “artwork” is sometimes used in a very inclusive way. People in marketing refer to a mock-up of an advertisement of consumer package as “the artwork.” And phrases such as “comic art” or “album art” are quite common and natural. One way to get at the distinction I am after is to notice that “artwork” is used much more broadly than “work of art”. The artwork used for an advertisement may not be a work of art. So the question I am interested in could be posed as, When is a film a work of art? As will become clear shortly, I think some low art films may qualify, so I don’t think this question derives from confusing the art/non-art distinction for the high/low distinction.

In summary, there is an intuitive distinction between films that clearly qualify as art (e.g. *Un Chien Andalou*) and those that don’t (say, video porn or digital holiday films). Carroll may have resources to exclude some cases (do holiday films belong to a traditional genre), but he seems committed to the view that most film is art. His arguments for the inclusive approach are inconclusive, however, and we might be better off trying to explain the intuitive distinction.

1.2 Are Only Art Film Art?

If we seek to capture a boundary between film that is art and film that is not, one obvious strategy is to restrict the label to art films. By “art films” I have two things in mind. First there are films made by professional artists that are intended to be exhibited in galleries along side paintings and sculpture. These include early experiments by Marcel Duchamp and Hans Richter, as well as works by so-called video artists, such as Pipolatti Rist, Bill Viola, and Matthew Barney. I take it that the status of such works as art is uncontroversial. Second, art films include films that are shown in independent movie theaters (or “art houses”) and made by auteur directors, such as Truffaut, Godard, Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Teshigahara, Bunuel, and, more recently, Guy Maddin, Lynne Ramsay, and Wang Kar-Wai. Art house films are highly varied, of course, but it has been argued that they tend to have certain features in common. Bordwell, for example, notes that their characters tend to lack clear goals, they tend to be ambiguous, they tend to be realist (in that, for example, they deal with situations or characters that are more like ordinary life than is typical in mainstream cinema, and they are often shot on real locations), and they tend to express the distinctive style of their directors (hence the auteur tradition). Art house films also tend to be iconoclastic or anti-establishment to some degree, and they are often to challenge rather than to entertain. If they entertain, it is because their narrow audiences are entertained by challenged and violations of conventions. So defined art house films are perhaps less obviously works of art than gallery films, but most people these days would be inclined to put them in that category. And, indeed, films by auteur directors are frequently shown at the world’s great museums.

It is tempting to say that only art films are art, and films made for mass audiences, are not art. This position could even be defended by appeal to leading definitions of art, including those that I mentioned a moment ago. Consider Dickie's hypothesis that artworks are artifacts created to be presented to the artworld public. Matthew Barney and Godard certainly qualify, whereas *Jerry Maguire*, *Debbie Does Dallas*, and overwhelming majority of television broadcasts do not. Or consider Levinson's historical approach: it's not a stretch to think that autrue directors typically see their films as belong in the category that included traditional forms of art. Kurasawa was an avid painter, Tarkovsky was a poet's son, Kiarostami is a serious photographer, and these links to more traditional art forms are evident throughout the work. (I will skip Carroll's narrative theory because I think it either entails that all film is art, as Carroll suggests, or it works out to be a minor variant on institutional and historical theories).

Since these theories of art are independently motivated, this seems like a reasonable way to settle the debate. A film is art just in case it qualifies as art on a good theory of art. The only difficulty is these theories deliver negative verdicts for films that one might want to consider works of art: Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal*, John Ford's *The Searchers*, and Seijun Suzuki's *Tokyo Drifter*. These are works intended for mass audiences and, as far as I know, not intended to be like paradigm cases of art or presented to the art world. They are all poplar genres rather than genres with extensive pedigree in fine art (a detective noir, a Western, and a Yakuza film). And their story lines are fairly conventional. (*Tokyo Drifter* is more plot than story, like many art films, but in a way that typifies the genre.) Yet these films seem worthy of the honorific art, and not just because they are great films, but because they are, in some clear sense, artistic: John Alton's cinematography in *Raw Deal* is deliciously stylized, John Wayne's character in *The Searchers* has motives that seem transparent at first but become opaque and disturbing on reflection, and the visual design and soundtrack of *Tokyo Drifter* make it suitable for display along side Warhol and Lichtenstein.

Such examples can be easily multiplied. Directors such as Hitchcock, Chabrol, Michael Powell, Renoir, Polanski, and Kurasawa are all autuers, but their films are intended for mass audiences and were released into mainstream theaters. Faced with such examples, we have three choices: would could simply bite the bullet and say such films are not art; we could show that these films really are accommodated by accounts like Dickie's and Levinson's; or we could reject these accounts, in their current form, as adequate definitions of art or adequate criteria for determining when film is art. I think the third option is best.

It might be tempting to bite the bullet and say that these films are not art. One can, after all, say that such films are artistic, while insisting that they are not works of art. But there is something unbecoming about this move. First of all, it smacks of elitism. Why reserve the word art for those works made for a narrow, over-cultured sub-culture? Second, some films that are intended for the art world that have less aesthetic merit than some films that are not. David Lean's *Brief Encounter* is not only a better film than Atom Egoyan's *The Adjuster*, it is better in dimensions that matter to aesthetic evaluation: it is more beautiful, more graceful, more evocative, more provocative. To deny that *Brief Encounter* is art, despite its intrinsic superiority of the Egoyan's art film seems a heavy burden for a theory to bear.

One might try to argue that Dickie and Levinson's theories are more accommodating than they appear; perhaps, though some subtle maneuvering, they could allow that some art films are art. This is not an option I want to explore here, because I think these theories—as stated—may be problematic on independent grounds. They have difficulty accommodating any art that is created outside artistic institutions and traditions. For example, works created by some outsider artists and members of small scale societies who reside outside art history as we know it. These failings are really of the same kind as the problem under consideration here. Historical and institutional theories tend to underestimate the significance of a work's intrinsic qualities in determining whether it counts as art. Non-art films are excluded because they belong to the wrong traditions or pander to the wrong audiences. But traditions and audiences are not the only thing that matters. Given this general problem with historical and institutional approaches, we might be better off looking for an alternative. I take up that task in the next section.

2. Film, Art, and Aesthetic Affordances

2.1 Affording the Aesthetic Stance

As presented Dickie and Levinson's theories emphasize the intentions of the creators in attaining status as art. Sometimes, however, creatures do not conceive of their creations as primarily belonging to the class of artworks, but viewers come to recognize that they can be fruitfully regarded in this way. This is not to say that a work becomes art when it's taken up by a art-consuming audience. A theory of that kind would face the difficulty of saying which audiences had the power of conferring art status. Moreover, audiences do not *transform* works into art, rather they *discover* that a works deserves to be regarded in that way.

If this intuition is right, the key to understanding what makes a film count as art is what goes on in this discovery process. How does a viewer recognize when a film that was not intended to be screened at the Museum of Modern art belongs in the same category as those that were intended for that purpose? A tempting first-pass answer is that this occurs when the film in question is similar to pre-ordained art films. It is well known that the mind uses similarity when categorizing, and it is not implausible that art films generate a kind of prototype that can be used to determine which non-art films are art. Films that share certain features in common with art films get grouped in the art category even if they were not intended as art works.

This appeal to prototypes may be part of the story, but it's not very illuminating as stated. First, it doesn't specify which dimensions of similarity are doing the work. A film like *Raw Deal* shares many features in common with films that aren't art (bad, disposable detective films). To say films are like art when then are like art films borders on an empty claim; it would be nice to know what the art-making features are. Second, this appeal to prototypes doesn't explain why art films qualify as art in the first place: why is similarity to *that* category sufficient for counting as art? Perhaps a Levinson or Dickie style theory could be used to answer this question, but only at the risk of making art-status a matter of fiat. Art films, it seems, are not art simply in virtue of their creators' intentions to be regarded a certain way or presented to the art world. Intentions are

cheap, after all. Rather, there is something about them that seems to warrant such regard. So the prototype view simply postpones the question of features are art-making. And finally, it's far from obvious that the psychological task of determining whether a film is art *requires* comparison to some previously identified set of art films. Do we really need to compare Polanski to Bunuel in order to determine whether his films are art?

One might be tempted, given these worries, to resort to aesthetic formalism, and say that a film is art just in case it has significant form: intrinsic features, such as color, shape, motion, and rhythm that elicit aesthetic emotions. Such formal feature may indeed be sufficient for attaining artistic status, but they are hardly necessary. Formalism is an outmoded theory precisely because it is now recognized that content can matter to art as much as form, and two formally identical objects can differ with respect to their status as art works. This was the lesson of Duchamp's readymades and Warhol's Brillo Boxes. In the case of film, the importance of content is evident since most motion pictures, include certified art films, have narrative components that are essential for appreciation. *Au Hasard du Balhazar*, for example, loses its power, if it is viewed as a montage of interposed images of people and a donkey.

But formalism gets something importantly right: art status seems to depend on there being something about the work that elicits an aesthetic response on the viewer. The trick is to expand beyond form and recognize that a wide range of features might do the trick: form, plot, facts about the creators' intentions, facts about what is innovative in the film, and so on. Let us suppose, with the formalist, that there are certain kinds of emotional responses that are characteristic of aesthetic appraisal. This assumption is too controversial to defend here, but I take up that task elsewhere (***). But, unlike the formalist, let us assume that these emotions are tuned not just to form but also to other features of works: whether they are original or clever or evocative, for example. Works that have such features to elicit aesthetic responses in us; they cause us to regard them in an aesthetic way.

This suggests as answer to the title question: a film is art when it affords an aesthetic stance. This formula can be adumbrated as follows:

First, I chose the term "affordance" from Gibsonian psychology because I think it captures the idea that some films naturally invite being seen in a certain way. Affordances are potential interactions with objects that are recognized when we experience them. Chairs afford sitting and hammers afford striking. For Gibson, these are behavioral interactions, but I see no difficulty in talking of psychological interactions: puzzles afford thinking, keepsakes afford reminiscing, and quiet rooms afford relaxing.

Second, when I say that a film affords an aesthetic stance, I do not want to restrict this claim to intrinsic properties of the film. The aesthetic stance might be afforded, in some cases, upon learning something about the filmmaker's intentions or the context in which it was made. In many cases, such factors are not necessary for the aesthetic affordance, but where they are, I do not want to deny that the films qualify as art. To deny that would be to err in the direction of formalism.

Third, I use the phrase "aesthetic stance" to refer to a psychological state in which aesthetic principles are recruited in the evaluation of a work. Elsewhere I argue that aesthetic principles are basically triggers from aesthetic emotions: some features elicit these emotions in us. The psychological mechanism by which such works are elicited are the principles. Sometimes these principles are explicit, and sometimes they are not. It's

beyond the scope of this discussion, but I should note that I actually think aesthetic concepts can be analyzed as aesthetic principles. When we say that something is bold, or elegant, or balanced, or moving, we are registering the fact that it has some feature that induces an aesthetic emotion in us. The judgment that something is balanced is a positive aesthetic feeling brought on by the recognition that its parts are distributed in a certain way (compare Williams on thick concepts); we don't have conscious access to what configurations suffice, but we register the positive feeling when patterns within a certain range are detected. When we view a work aesthetically, we view it in a way that makes use of aesthetic principles including those that are implicit in the use of aesthetic concepts. The aesthetic stance goes beyond ordinary viewing because it brings other information—the principles—to bear on what is seen. By comparison, imagine viewing a pile of books with an eye to seeing how to fit them into a bookcase with variably sized shelves. When we view the books this way, we can see which ones fit where. To view something from an aesthetic stance is so size it up aesthetically. It is to look for beauty, originality, solutions to artistic problems, use of metaphors, sensitivity to emotions, and so on. An object that affords the aesthetic stance is one that invites these applications of these principles. For example, it may do so possessing some aesthetically evocative features in an overt way: overt metaphors, highly graphic cinematography, violation of narrative conventions, and so on. Prototypes can play a role here as well. If a film seems like a typical art film, it may thereby invite the aesthetic stance.

Still, it is important to distinguish the present theory from the prototype view. Like the prototype account, I have made no effort to specify the exact features that afford aesthetic-stance taking. There is nothing like a checklist here that could be used to deduce whether a film is a work of art. Such a list would require a careful empirical study of our aesthetic principles and their conditions of evocation. But it should be clear that, even in this schematic formulation, it has many advantages over the suggestion that a film is art when it is similar to the prototype art film: first, it says what kind of features to look for (those that are encoded in aesthetic principles), second, the account can potentially explain why art films qualify as art films in the first place (art films afford the aesthetic stance), and, finally, it does not assume that each film must be compared to canonical art films in order to determine whether it is art (what matters is the stance invoked).

The main strength of this account, in the present application, is that it provides a way of saying that many non-art films are works of art. Works by Ford, Suzuki, Hitchcock, and many others may qualify. But it does not entail that all film is art: holiday films, typical TV commercials, soap operas, porno films, and run-of-the-mill Hollywood blockbusters tend not to invite application of aesthetic principles. I take this claim to be empirical, though I hope it is highly plausible.

2.2 Some Objections

There are some knee-jerk objections one might have to this proposal, which I will quickly survey three before closing.

Objection 1: Isn't this trivial? Affordances are dispositional, and every film (indeed every object) could be looked at in an aesthetic way.

Reply: To say that something affords a response does not simply mean it allows that response; it must also, in some sense, invite it. I can sit on a kitchen counter, but a kitchen counter doesn't afford sitting. Likewise, it is possible that any film could be viewed from an aesthetic stance, but only some invite that stance.

As a rejoinder, one might argue that this line of reply is difficult to reconcile with the art status of readymades. Duchamp's readymades, for example, were supposed to be things that precisely did not invite aesthetic evaluation. If the affordance story has any hope of explaining art status more generally, it would need to accommodate readymades. In response, let me simply point out that the very act of declaring that something is art and presenting it to the artworld is an explicit invitation to view something from an aesthetic stance. So, far from being a counter-example, readymades are trivially easy to explain on an affordance theory.

Objection 2: This definition is vague. Whether a film affords the aesthetic stance can vary along a continuum. Does a blockbuster with stunning cinematography count?

Of Reply: I consider this a welcome consequence of the theory. Art may come in degrees, and there may be borderline cases of art. If a work only affords a single dimension of aesthetic appraisal, it might not be above threshold, because one dimension does not suffice for taking up the aesthetic stance. But some films may afford more aesthetic evaluation than others, either because the affordances are stronger or because more dimensions are afforded, and the theory allows one to say that art status varies in such cases. I think it is intuitive to say of some early British Hitchcock films, for example, that their status as art is borderline.

Objection 3: The theory seems to entail that there is no bad art, because an ineptly crafted film will not afford the aesthetic stance.

Reply: I deny they change. To afford an aesthetic stance is no guarantee that the stance will deliver a good verdict. Films that overtly attempt to be beautiful, or innovative, or challenging can fail. We can detect the attempt—hence inviting the aesthetic stance—while also registering the failure. Some pretentious art films or bad student projects suffer this fate.

Of course, other objections might be devised, including some that target foundational assumptions of this proposal: are there aesthetic emotions? Are there aesthetic principles? Many would say no. Perhaps there is some way of characterizing the aesthetic stance that requires neither of these things, so an opponent of aesthetic emotions and principles might still be able to adopt an account related to the one I am proposing.

Conclusion

I have argued that a film is a work of art when it affords an aesthetic stance. This suggestion is designed to steer a course between two extreme views: the hypothesis that films are (almost) always art and the hypothesis that only art films are art. In making the

case the aesthetic affordance view, I raised passing concerns about some prevailing theories of art. Could this approach be elevated into theory of what, in general, makes something count as art? Perhaps, with some elaboration. For example, it would have to be restricted to *artifacts* whose stance-affording features were brought into being by an intentional action of some kind (otherwise mountains might qualify as artworks, because they afford the aesthetic stance). Such a project will be explored elsewhere. But, by way on conclusion, let me note that film presents a rewarding domain for testing and developing theories of art. It is a domain where many of the most salient examples are not, intuitively, works of art, but others quite clearly are. Finding borders here is tricky. I sketched one way, and I hope that further reflection on this question can lead to insights into the nature of art more broadly.