Poetics and Aesthetics, Analog and Digital: a case study on the film's photography direction Night Shyamalan's Old

Poética y Estética, Análogo y Digital: un estudio de caso sobre la dirección de fotografía de la película Old de M. Night Shyamalan.

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Abstract

This article is the result of a case study based on the methodological procedures of a focus group carried out with Cinema students, in São Paulo, in May 2024. The study selected a sample of six Cinema students, young people with more than half of the course degree already completed, therefore with some knowledge and practice of film production and with some repertoire of appreciation of cinematographic techniques and discourses. The primary purpose of the Study was to investigate whether these students would aesthetically perceive the language resources used in the poetic construction of director of photography Mike Gioulakis in the film Night Shyamalan's Old. There were two language resources: the use of analogue cameras and celluloid film to capture the film's images. Based on the premise that the majority of students would watch the film on digital devices, there was a possibility that the language resources would not be completely grasped. As the premise turned out to be true, the Study resulted in important findings and even more important questions

Keywords: Poetics; Aesthetics; Analog; Digital; Shyamalan's Old.

Resumen

Este artículo es el resultado de un estudio de caso basado en los procedimientos metodológicos de un focus group realizado con estudiantes de Cine, en São Paulo, en mayo de 2024. El estudio seleccionó una muestra de seis estudiantes de Cine, jóvenes con más de la mitad de los título del curso ya finalizado, por lo tanto con algún conocimiento y práctica de la producción cinematográfica y con algún repertorio de apreciación de técnicas y discursos cinematográficos. El objetivo principal del Estudio fue investigar si estos estudiantes percibirían estéticamente los recursos lingüísticos utilizados en la construcción poética del director de fotografía Mike Gioulakis en la película Old, de Night Shyamalan. Hubo dos recursos lingüísticos: el uso de cámaras analógicas y película de celuloide para captar las imágenes de la película. Partiendo de la premisa de que la mayoría de los estudiantes verían la película en dispositivos digitales, existía la posibilidad de que no se dominaran completamente los recursos lingüísticos. Como la premisa resultó ser cierta, el estudio dio como resultado hallazgos importantes y preguntas aún más importantes.

Palabras clave: Poética; Estética; Analógico; Digital; Old, de Shyamalan.

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Introduction

On July 19th 2021, at the Jazz in the Lincoln Center, in New York City, the film *Old*, written, directed, and produced by M. Night Shyamalan was released. Based on the French-language Swiss graphic novel "Sandcastle", by Pierre Oscar Lévy and Frederik Peeters, the body horror thriller film features an ensemble cast led by the Mexican actor Gael García Bernal. The film grossed $90 million worldwide against an $18 million budget while receiving mixed reviews from critics, who criticized the screenplay, dialogue, and acting performances: "Both Bernal and Vicky Krieps gave exquisitely subtle performances [...]. Unfortunately, the other characters aren't nearly as fully developed, although the talented cast does its best to bring depth to underwritten roles that amount to little more than stereotypes." (OUELLETTE, 2021), but praised particularly its cinematography: "with spare methods and sharp images, the director turns a simple premise into strong fantasy" (BRODY, 2021).

Actually, the responsible for the "footage methods" and "sharp images" of the film was Mike Gioulakis, photography director, whose Shooting on Kodak Vision3 35mm, built Shyamalan's images of the beachside horror movie *Old*. After three collaborations between Gioulakis e Shyamalan (the movies *Split* - 2017, and *Glass* - 2019, and the Apple+ TV series *Servant*) *Old* was their first celluloid-originated production together.

The Gioulakis' decision for the use of the celluloid looked like it had been opposed to the use of the digital language. According to the director of photography, the choice was due "chiefly because you are able to focus more on how the camera tells the story, rather than getting drawn into continually nit-picking the look of the image on set in a digital environment" (GIOULAKIS, 2021). Combining poetical and technical aspects in his argumentation, Gioulakis clearly exposed the distinction between the cinematographic results by means of digital and analog languages: "As 90% of *Old* was set on the beach, we tested different flavors of digital and film formats on the ocean shore in LA during pre-production, and 35mm film gave us such a lovely look right from the start" (GIOULAKIS, 2021).

Gioulakis' argumentation extended to the movie production stages, in other words, the possibility of creating images' textures in the digital environment or the decision to capture the images analogically: "Despite all of the softening and grain tools you can use in post-production, the detail in the wave crests and the water on our digital test footage was still way too sharp and crisp. Film automatically softens those sorts of things right out" (GIOULAKIS, 2021).

Beyond the cameras, the films were also part of the analog equipment used in the shooting. The Kodak Vision3 250D Color Negative Film 5207 was Gioulakis' choice for the movie's daytime beach exteriors, brighter day interiors, plus dawn and dusk scenes, with Kodak Vision3 500T Color Negative Film 5219 used for low-light and night-time sequences. The argument that based these decisions came from the coloring aspects: "The 250D has lovely color rendition, and it is wonderfully versatile in that you can shoot in broad daylight and at both ends of the day. The 500T brings beautiful warmth to the image and is similarly versatile in low-light situations" (GIOULAKIS, 2021). In contrast to the capture of images through digital means, films would even influence the capture of the actors' skin color: "We had a lot of bare flesh in this film, and there is something about the contrast and color of skin tones that is so real, natural and visually appealing when captured on film and so hard to replicate when you shoot digitally" (GIOULAKIS, 2021).

Finally, and after this extensive and consistent argument, the photography director's choices were corroborated by the film's director: de "The filmed test footage looked beautiful, and Night [Shyamalan] was determined to shoot 'Old' on analog 35mm celluloid" (GIOULAKIS, 2021).

The poetics of the film *Old*, specifically the construction of the imagetic discourse determined by the use of analogue language, is the core of this article. We try to comprehend how this decision by the film's director of photography was perceived aesthetically by young film students, accustomed to both producing and watching films made and reproduced digitally. To this end, we begin by defining what we call "poetics" and "aesthetics" in this article.

1. The concepts of Aesthetics and Poetics

In this article we will define the concept of Poetics based on Aristotle's approach. In the first paragraph of Poetics, the philosopher uses the term "poetics" (ποιητικῆς) to specify the subject dealt in his text: "Let us here deal with Poetics, its essence and its several species, with the characteristic function of each species and the way in which plots must be constructed".[1] It is notable that Aristotle uses, in the first part of the paragraph, the word *sinistasthai* (συνίστασθαι), with the meaning of "composition", as it would be consolidated especially from the 19th century onwards. Next, Aristotle specifies that he will deal with poetics and the possibility of it being "excellent": "if the poetic composition is destined to excellency – and also of how many and what are its parts, as well as of all other questions that result from the same method; here's what we'll talk about."[2] It is important to note that, to define the "excellence" of poetic composition, the philosopher used the Greek term *kalôs* (καλῶς), a relative adverb to the substantive *kalós* (καλός): Beauty, which we will talk about shortly. For now, it is essential to just define that, in this article, the concept of Poetics will be linked to the "composition aimed at excellence". And, as our object of study will be a work of art, we will define the concept of Poetics "in the broad sense of the scope of creation and production of artistic works"[3] (MAZZIERO, p.315, 2024).

In turn, the concept of Aesthetics will be defined here based on the thoughts of Plato and Kant.

Plato makes it clear that, when mentioning the word Aesthetics, he is referring to the scope of human perception, the sensory perception: "In the same way, I continued, we hear with our ears, how do we perceive with our other senses everything that is the object of perception?"[4] The philosopher clearly differentiates the human capabilities of thinking and perceiving: for the first, he uses the verbal form *noeistai* (νοεῖσθαι): "Multiple things, additionally, are seen but not thought, while these, ideas, are thought but not seen"[5] – Plato characterizes the scope of human reason through the use of derivatives of the verb *noéō* (νοέω), in perfect connection with the term *nóisis* (νόησις), "the rational intellect of sensitive phenomena"[6] (MAZZIERO, p.386, 2024); to the second, Plato uses the verbal form *aesthésesi* (αἰσθήσεσι), "realized", and the substantive *aesthetá* (αἰσθητά), "perception", to characterize how and when these "sensitive phenomena" are perceived by the human senses.

Kant, in turn, limits the concept of Aesthetics to human subjectivity. In the first paragraph of his Aesthetic Judgment, Kant uses, interconnected, the terms – and, therefore, the concepts – of "judgment of taste" (Geschmacksurteil), "aesthetic" (ästhetisch) and "subjective" (subjektiv): "The judgment of taste is, therefore, not a judgment of knowledge, a logical judgment, but rather an aesthetic judgment, by which we understand that whose basis of determination can only be subjective."[7]. In line with Plato, the German philosopher makes a point of differentiating the areas of "thinking" and "feeling". When taking as an example the observation of a functional work of Architecture, Kant states: "Apprehending a regular and purposeful structure with one's own faculty of knowledge (whether in a clear or confused way of representing it) is something entirely different from being aware of that representation through the sensation of satisfaction".[8] It's important to observe that Kant uses the term *Erkenntnisvermögen*, the "capacity of intellection", as opposed to *Empfindung*, the "sensoriality" contained in the expression *Empfindung des Wohlgefallens* ("sensation of satisfaction").

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1 περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τε καὶ τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς, ἥν τινα δύναμιν ἕκαστον ἔχει, καὶ πῶς δεῖ συνίστασθαι τοὺς μύθους (ARISTÓTELES. *Poetics*, 1447a).

2 εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἕξειν ἡ ποίησις, ἔτι δὲ ἐκ πόσων καὶ ποίων ἐστὶ μορίων, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα τῆς αὐτῆς ἐστι μεθόδου, λέγωμεν ἀρξάμενοι κατὰ φύσιν πρῶτον ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων. (ARISTÓTELES. *Poetics*, 1447a).

3 en el sentido amplio del ámbito de creación y producción de obras artísticas (MAZZIERO. Estética y Poética, 2024).

4 οὐκοῦν, ἦν δ᾽ ἐγώ, καὶ ἀκοῇ τὰ ἀκουόμενα, καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις αἰσθήσεσι πάντα τὰ αἰσθητά; (PLATÃO. *The Republic*, VI, 507b-c).

5 καὶ τὰ μὲν δὴ ὁρᾶσθαί φαμεν, νοεῖσθαι δ᾽ οὔ, τὰς δ᾽ αὖ ἰδέας νοεῖσθαι μέν, ὁρᾶσθαι δ᾽ οὔ (PLATÃO. *The Republic*, VI, 507b-c).

6 la comprensión racional de los fenómenos sensibles (MAZZIERO. *Estética y Poética*, 2024).

7 Das Geschmacksurteil ist also kein Erkenntnisurteil, mithin nicht logisch, sondern ästhetisch, worunter man dasjenige versteht, dessen Bestimmungsgrund nichtanders als subjektiv sein kann – KANT, I. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p.68.

8 Ein regelmäßiges, zweckmäßiges Gebäude mit seinem Erkenntnisvermögen (es sei in deutlicher oder verworrener Vorstellungsart) zu befassen, ist ganz etwas anderes, als sich dieser Vorstellung mit der Empfindung des Wohlgefallens bewußt zu sein – KANT, I. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, p.68.

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Therefore, as in this article we will address the appreciation of a work of art, the concept of Aesthetics will be linked to the concept of Poetics and will indicate "the scope of appreciation and processes of apprehension of artistic Discourses"[9] (MAZZIERO, p.315, 2024).

2. The research and its method

Having defined the concepts of Poetics and Aesthetics for this article, our intention was to investigate whether the poetic procedures (already taking the concept of Poetics "in the broad sense of the scope of creation and production of an artistic work") by photography director Mike Gioulakis in his work in the film *Old* would be perceived aesthetically (already taking the concept of Aesthetics as "the scope of appreciation and processes of apprehension of artistic Discourses"). To this end, we structured a research method characterized by the Case Study, which "aims to understand in depth the how and why of a given situation that is supposed to be unique in many aspects, seeking to discover what is most essential and characteristic about it" (FONSECA, 2002, p. 33). As we would be focusing specifically on a film, we would be in line with (ALVES-MAZZOTTI; GEWANDSZNAJDER, 2006, p. 640), who proposes that: "The most common examples for this type of study are those that focus on just one unit". Therefore, the case to be studied would be the aesthetic appreciation of the poetic speech of director of photography Mike Gioulakis in the film *Old*.

Since our case would also depend on understanding the language resources used by the photography director – notably those whose data we already had, that is, the option to use cameras and celluloid films, analogue, instead of digital – and on understanding how these resources would be perceived, we need to define that our case study would be determined by a research procedure called "semi-structured interview", in which: "the researcher organizes a set of questions (script) on the topic being studied, but allows, and sometimes even encourages the interviewee to speak freely about subjects that arise as developments of the main theme".

However, due to the difficulty of measuring the perception of a large number of viewers of the film, we decided, with MOURA and SANTOS (2000) and BARBOSA (1999), to add to the Case Study "a qualitative strategy that uses an informal discussion group, of reduced dimensions, with the purpose of obtaining in-depth information"; we would use the Focus Group research procedure, which: "allows the interviewer to observe the interaction between participants, who may express a collective opinion or divide into subgroups with opposing ideas." BAUER; GASKELL, 2008, p.156).

Finally, as we would investigate whether and how the analogue language resources used would be perceived, we decided not to interview people who, perhaps, were unaware of such resources. Therefore, we selected a group of 6 (six) Cinema students, all of them from the "Cinema and Audiovisual" course at Centro Universitário Belas Artes de São Paulo, all with more than half of the course already completed; therefore, students already with some knowledge and practice of film production and with some repertoire of appreciation of cinematographic techniques and discourses.

We provided the six students with 2 (two) copies of the film: a DVD version and a digital version; the first, closer to the analogue reproduction universe (after all, it would be impossible to provide a film version, projection equipment, and a screening room for the work) and the second, completely digital, which would be reproduced on a computer, a tablet, a cell phone, in short, on a digital reproduction device. Then, without specifying a reproduction platform or equipment, we asked the six students to watch the film and attend the Focus Group on May 6, 2024.

Finally, we structured the questions that would guide the dynamics of the Focus Group:

1. What platform did you watch the film on? (because the film was captured using analogue material, we aimed to find out whether the reproduction equipment would allow the viewer to perceive the use of this cinematographic language resource).In case

9 La instancia de apreciación y procesos de aprehensión de los Discursos artísticos (MAZZIERO. *Estética y Poética*, 2024).

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the majority of students watched the film on a digital device, we provided a 58-inch television set to play excerpts of the film in which the shots on analog equipment are clear.

2. When watching the film, did you notice any difference in the images captured? (we aimed to find out if the poetic procedure of the director of photography would be understood by film students).

If the majority of students did not mention having noticed any difference in the film's images, the third question would be asked:

3. Do you know that capturing and reproducing images with analog equipment results in a different image discourse than capturing and reproducing images with digital equipment? (even considering previously that the answers would be affirmative, this question aimed to alert students to the fact that there was a possibility that the poetic resource of analogue capture had been used by the photography director.

If the majority of students did not mention having noticed any difference in the film's images, but had become aware of this fact when mentioned, scenes would be shown and commented on in which the shots on analog equipment are clear.

4. Did you consider it important to use the language resources of the recording and the consequent reproduction on analog equipment of the scenes you watched?

Based on the answers, the term "important" could vary to "adequate", "effective", "essential for the narrative", and many other considerations that came from the students' answers.

The focus group would be recorded in video and audio; the students' responses and comments would be transcribed, analyzed by the two researchers and, finally, summarized below.

3. The main responses and comments extracted from the focus group

On May 6, 2024, at 10:04 a.m., at the Centro Universitário Belas Artes, in São Paulo, the focus group began, with the presence of the two researchers who authored this article and the six students.

3.1 Main answers and comments to question 1: What platform did you watch the film on?

Only student 4 responded that he had watched the film on a television set, reproduced on the DVD copy provided; student 2 watched the film on his cell phone (iPhone 12 Apple – 128GB); the other students watched the film on computer screens: student 3 on a 21.5" monitor and students 1, 5 and 6 on laptops with 15.6" monitors).

As the majority of students stated that they had watched the film on a digital device, the 58-inch television set in the room would be used during the focus group activity.

3.2 Main answers and comments to question 2: When watching the film, did you notice any difference in the images captured?

Student 4 stated: "Yes. I'm not sure what equipment they used, but it looked like an older film" and he added, asking: "Did they record it on celluloid?"

When the researchers confirmed or denied the question, student 3 addressed her colleague: "I really noticed something different; the film looked grainy." Student 5 agreed with his colleague's comment: "I noticed the grain, but I'm not sure if it was because the film was

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recorded on celluloid; I think it may have been some effect they put in post-production."

Students 1 and 6 stated, respectively: "When I watched it I didn't notice that, but now, with you talking, the images actually seem a bit ancient" and "me too, and if I have to guess, I think the effect was done in post-production; Nowadays it is very expensive to record on celluloid."

Student 2 stated: "I couldn't tell the difference". Immediately, student 6 asked him: "Did you watch it on your iPhone?" As soon as student 2 agreed, she stated: "that must have been why; on the small screen it is more difficult to see these details."

As the issue of capturing images with analogue equipment was mentioned and, above all, as the issue regarding the reproduction device was also mentioned, we decided to ask the third question.

3.3 Main answers and comments to question 3: Do you know that capturing and reproducing images with analog equipment results in a different image discourse than capturing and reproducing images with digital equipment?

As expected, all students stated that they knew the difference caused by capturing images via analogue means (in relation to capturing them via digital means) in the imagery discourse of a film.

A question then arose that was not included in the structured questions, but which, at that moment, seemed relevant: "For you, what is the difference between analogue capture and digital capture?"

Students 4 and 5 responded in a similar way: "The image looks older". Students 3 and 6 added, also in tune with each other: "More than looking ancient, the analog image has a different texture". Student 2 indicated a method he uses to recognize the difference: "If it reminds me of films from the 1970s, it was recorded using analogue media"; to which student 5 added: "Or it was 'aged' in post-production".

As the majority of students either did not mention having noticed any difference in the film's images, or were made aware of this fact when this issue was mentioned, the researchers decided to show and comment on some scenes in which the shots on analog equipment are clear. More than that: as the students mentioned on several occasions the possibility that the images had been altered due to some effect in the film's post-production phase, the researchers decided to show the students excerpts from the testimony of director of photography Mike Gioulakis – the same statements contained in the Introduction of this article.

When watching the scenes chosen and commented on by the researchers, the students reacted in different ways: students 3 and 4 saw the scenes and heard the comments as if they corroborated something they already knew; the other students mixed some surprise with the director of photography's statements, interest in asking how some shots had been taken, and admiration for the purposeful image construction of the film through the use of analogue resources. Statements like: "I knew it, look! This image is clearly made on celluloid", from student 4, and: "See that? The director of photography himself said that, if this were done in post-production, the effect would not be the same", from student 3, contrasted with the statements: "The director of photography was very careful with the capture of images during the process whole", from student 1, or: "The most important thing is that the director accepted the decisions of the director of photography; cinema is collective art", by student 2, or even: "To be so sure about how to record a scene, the director of photography has to know the equipment very well and how this equipment captures the images", by student 6, or with the question: "If the film is made of celluloid, the camera must be much heavier; How did he do this high panoramic shot?", by student 5.

However, some findings did not contrast; on the contrary, they seemed to indicate knowledge constructed in a very precise way:

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a) All six students agreed on the fact that capturing images on analog equipment produces a result that would not be achieved with visual effects made in the film's post-production phase.

b) All six students agreed that the film playback device greatly influences the perception of a film's speech; the small screen of an iPhone does not faithfully reproduce the careful image construction of the film recorded on celluloid.

c) All six students agreed that in-depth knowledge of recording equipment and techniques is fundamental to constructing a relevant cinematic discourse.

d) All six students agreed that cinematographic art depends on collaboration between professionals; as student 2 stated, "cinema is collective art".

3.4 Main answers and comments to question 4: Did you consider it important to use the language resources of the capture and the consequent reproduction on analog equipment of the scenes you watched?

Objectively, the students responded affirmatively to Question 4. Everyone considered it important – and, as expected, sometimes "appropriate", sometimes "effective", and, unanimously, "essential for the narrative" – the use of language resources of the capture and consequent reproduction on analog equipment of scenes from the film *Old*.

However, in addition to its objective nature, the answers to this last question raised more questions than certainties for researchers. A long debate among students primarily exposed two questions:

a) If all the dedication and effort of the director of photography in capturing images in analogue mode predicted that these images would be reproduced on analogue devices, he did not consider that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the majority of people, especially young people, watch films on devices whose screens are small and, often, do not allow the viewer to perceive discursive subtleties such as the way and equipment with which the images were captured?

b) The artist must be concerned with the device, mode and conditions in which the spectator will watch the film or must be concerned with making the film with the equipment, mode and language resources that he considers most appropriate to construct the film. your artistic speech?

4. Analysis of the responses obtained in the focus group

Using the concepts of Poetics and Aesthetics defined in this article, it was possible to extract important conclusions from the responses, comments and arguments of the six students involved in the focus group.

Firstly, to some extent, the poetic decision of the director of photography to record the scenes with celluloid and analog cameras depended on the aesthetic instance. If the viewer watches the film on a device with a small screen, the entire poetic construction of the director of photography will not be aesthetically understood. Based on this observation, we can structure a question of a philosophical nature: the artist's poetic choice is independent of the appreciator's processes of aesthetic apprehension; however, if the poetic procedure does not even take into account the device through which your art will be apprehended aesthetically, will your poetics have fulfilled its purpose? Can poetics – or even, should it – pass around with aesthetics?

Next, we note that, on the one hand, it is impossible to disregard that the means by which a film is apprehended in this second decade of the 21st century have undergone great transformation due to the fact that the spectator can enjoy the cinematographic work on various digital devices, whose screens vary in size and definition; this, to a large extent,

determines part of the process of aesthetic apprehension. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider that, even through a process primarily determined by digital reproduction, the analogue language resources used in the poetic construction were perceived aesthetically after the comments and arguments of the researchers, who knew part of the poetic process of the director of photography of the movie. Another question arose from this second observation, this one of a sociological nature: the process of aesthetic apprehension of a work of art is transformed when guided by knowledge of the poetic procedures that supported the construction of artistic discourse; would it be important to disseminate knowledge about the poetic processes of artists to, in this way, "improve" the processes of aesthetic apprehension of art admirers?

Finally, we found that the convergence of materials, and even language resources, analogue and digital, is possible in the construction of the poetic-aesthetic complex of an artistic discourse. The analog recording is reproduced by digital devices and the artist's poetics are aesthetically appreciated by the viewer. The reverse process has also been consolidating since the advent of digital recording equipment; films recorded with digital cameras, with memory cards instead of celluloid, are reproduced in analogue mode in several cinemas around the world and there the artist's poetics are also aesthetically appreciated by the spectator. From this observation, another question emerged, this one of a communicational nature: whether analog poetic processes are apprehended aesthetically on digital devices without any technical difficulty or problem of understanding, whether digital poetic processes are apprehended aesthetically on analog devices without any technical difficulty or problem of understanding, in the communicational construction of an artistic poetic-aesthetic complex, the nature – digital or analog – of the devices is less important and more important is the knowledge regarding the possibilities of convergence between analog and digital languages and, above all, the use of both languages in the construction and apprehension of the content of the discourse shared between artists and connoisseurs?

Final remarks

The case study of this article allowed a reflection on the poetic construction of a cinematographic discourse and the process of primarily digital aesthetic apprehension. When investigating whether Cinema students were aware of the language resource used by the film's photography director, Night Shyamalan's *Old*, who recorded scenes with analogue cameras on celluloid, it was found that, when they were reproduced on digital devices, with small screens, of different sizes and image definitions, the poetic construction was not completely perceived aesthetically.

Based on this observation, several questions were structured regarding both the issues involving the distinctions and convergences between analog and digital cinematographic processes, as well as the distinctions and convergences between the processes of poetic construction and aesthetic apprehension of works of art themselves, here specifically from a cinematographic work.

The findings and, above all, the questions that resulted from the focus group carried out for this case study were important both for understanding the coexistence of equipment and, consequently, of analogue and digital language resources in the construction of cinematographic discourses in this second decade of the 21st century, as for the broad areas of study of Poetics and Aesthetics, after all, neither this nor that are immune to the metamorphosis that the processes of creating and apprehending works of art have been undergoing; these metamorphosis, to some extent, result from the coexistence of analogue and digital languages in contemporary times; this, which we can call "the digital age".

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