

## **Philosophy of Film *Without Theory***

**Craig Fox & Britt Harrison, Eds.**

**Palgrave Macmillan**

In many ways, this edited collection of eighteen original essays represents both a second wave in post-theory film-thinking, and an entirely new point of departure. In 1972, V.F. Perkins described how André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer had put paid to the era of “orthodox theory” represented by Eisenstein, Epstein and Balázs, with their turn towards film’s reality. Britt Harrison and Craig Fox’s book, building on one successful conference (with another to come in October 2023) and a 2020 Special Issue in *Aesthetic Investigations*, performs a similar task in a return to philosophising with the films themselves after decades of reliance on theoretical frameworks for our understanding and appreciation of them. Unlike Bazin and Kracauer, however, the editors and their contributing authors are (broadly) more concerned with film-philosophical disposition, critical method, and conceptual inquiry than with modes of representation. In this review, I will outline what the book’s stated aims are in thinking and doing film-philosophy without theory, and show how its individual chapters contribute either to those aims, or to debates concerning them.

Fox and Harrison carefully introduce the book by informing us of some of those characteristics to theorising with which it aspires to dispense:

the search for and justification of law-like regularities, universal or unifying generalisations, and/or totalising claims; the postulation and exploitation of unobservable theoretical posits (both physical and metaphysical); concept creation (rather than clarification); the pursuit of a-historical, a-temporal, context-free, non-situated facts; the use of mathematical and algorithmic techniques and expression; the reduction of person-level characteristics, features, and abilities to a sub-personal level; the assumption that any resistance to physicalism entails a commitment to supernaturalism; prioritising the third-personal point of view often to the exclusion of all others, even presuming the possibility and authority of the view from nowhere, and so on. (4)

By contrast, then, a turn towards the philosophising of or with film *without theory* will be increasingly defined by its jettisoning of these instruments, in efforts of close reading, engagement and analysis of films, the clarification of concepts in relation to them, and a greater sense of criticism's situatedness, among other things.

A useful conversation with "philosophical turn" film scholars Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey then follows, in which they 1) acknowledge the historical lure of theory (its capacity to seemingly overturn previous ways of thinking about an issue without necessarily engaging directly with the issue itself, its productive links with academic capital), whilst 2) also accepting its enduring validity in certain senses (i.e. that it is defined by generalization, which is sometimes necessary), before 3) pointing towards the key aspect of (film-)philosophy they seek to affirm in contradistinction: its rejection of scientism. In this, Allen and Turvey also serve to set the distinctly Wittgensteinian register of the book, recognisable not only by its vocabulary (aspects, seeing-as, ordinary language, etc.), but also in its broadly inquiring (as opposed to explicatory) disposition.

Andrew Klevan then provides a picture of what a philosophy of film still scientifically in thrall to theory's tendency towards generalities looks like, with Berys Gaut's assumption of film's "emotional impact" coming under particular scrutiny. Klevan goes far in his puncturing of macro-philosophical gesturing, but readers will have to look outside the chapter to his other work on Ordinary Language Film Studies to its micro-level alternative (cf. Klevan, 2020). Nevertheless, he outlines a formidable range of problems within theoretical film philosophy ("starting from nowhere", assumptions, "elastic concepts", reductionism) that set a high bar for the chapters that follow.

Amongst these, a particular theme that emerges is the challenge of triangulating philosophy, film and art in terms of their relation and priority. Katheryn Doran, for example, explores the question of whether film can justify the claim that ambiguity is a philosophical quality, and not an artistic one (as suggested by Murray Smith), and shows how points of view within John Sayle's *Lone Star* serve to unseat our sense of moral privilege. Point of view is also at stake in Rupert Read's contribution, though here the case is made for Alfonso Cuarón's

space-based *Gravity* to be seen as a Wittgensteinian film which rejects scientism and entertainmentism in favour of disclosing ways in which film form and forms of life reflect one another – and the kinds of kinship with philosophy that the viewer might discover as a result. Where Read focuses on the use of the tracking shot in *Gravity*, Max de Gaynesford explores how single-shot (or long take) cinema recommends itself to thoughts about dream, memory, and experience, and how cinematographic approach squares with Robert Bresson's insistence that editing is what distinguishes film as artform.

Gaynesford's discussion segues well into other contributions that are more concerned with the nature of film as art. John Gibson, for instance, performs a wonderful reading of Fellini's *Le Notti di Cabiria* to question whether artistic fidelity to reality is what is required by the Wittgensteinian notion of the "ordinary". Carla Carmona recalls Arthur Danto's notion that art can only raise the question of its nature as such, not answer it, and that it is the business of philosophers to attend to the latter. Carmona rejects the philosophy/art distinction to propose an aesthetic reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy, whose resistance to providing answers by drawing attention to aspects lends itself to what is described as "frictional seeing", a mode in which tensions between images dissolve the requirement for their complete explanation. The argument is highly persuasive, but the use of Godard's *Histoire du Cinema* as example slightly less so, if only because Godard's dialectics does not sit comfortably with more the Pyrrhonic or quietist versions of Wittgenstein to which Carmona seems to allude.

Part III of the book turns to Stanley Cavell. Craig Fox also takes up the question of film's status as art, accepting the challenge via a reading of Cavell's 'Music Discomposed', in which the answer to whether something qualifies as an artwork is largely down to a matter of trust: do we trust that the artist is sincere? The question is apt in relation to Fox's choice of film, Kamran Shirdel's documentary *The Night it Rained*, because the film is both an invitation to think about whose version of events to trust, and a meditation on the relationship between cinematic form and trustworthiness. Fox's efforts ultimately steer us towards thinking about film in terms of its meaningfulness, independent of the director's own intentions. Fox's suggestion of labelling his stance as a "humanist modernism" points

towards a more community-oriented approach to film-thinking than the individualism presented in Klevan's critique.

In trying to hold philosophy, film and art in conversational tension with one another, there is often a risk of not fully doing justice to the films themselves, which often play second fiddle to the competition between philosophy and theory. David Macarthur's contribution avoids this issue by not focussing on any film in particular, but instead on film's capacity to register Cavell's distinctive version of skepticism as it plays out in narrative cinema. He writes that "film has the resources to help us counter a skeptical denial of others" (161), an idea which itself offers a useful counter to Malcolm Turvey's earlier observation that the notion that remarriage comedies address skepticism about other minds is "absurd" (27).

Another point of debate – also raised by Turvey – lies with Cavell's fondness for genre (and therefore generality by extension). William Rothman defends Cavell's paradigmatic approach thus: "The comedy of remarriage – hence genre in film in general, hence film itself – is what every chapter of *Pursuits of Happiness* is about, what the book as a whole is about, the subject of the book's philosophical investigation" (179). Arguably, this defence of genre precisely supports Turvey's criticism, which is that comedies of remarriage may be what the book is about, but not what the films discussed in the book are about. The willingness to commit to interpretation that binds films together rather than treating of them individually is a motion which begins to mark out stronger distinctions between the more Wittgensteinian and the more Cavellian scholars included in the volume, and should hopefully serve to prompt further discussion along these lines.

The problem of potentially reducing film to the philosophy it might serve to illustrate is addressed by Eran and Inbal Guter, who open their chapter with the metacritical observation that the use of any film as an *example* immediately places it within a different language game (in which the criteria for exemplarity circumscribe the discussion as much as the choice of film). In their analysis of the Philip Glass/Godfrey Reggio collaboration, *Visitors*, they draw on the Wittgensteinian notion of 'aspect-seeing' to show how the audio-visual harmonising of the film invites us to revisit the concept of the human in a spirit of wonder, to "see one another anew" (196).

Not all is Wittgenstein or Cavell: the penultimate part of the book extends the range of philosophers to include Aristotle and Iris Murdoch, whilst the final part sees Augustine and Deleuze appear in Heber-Percy's chapter on Kieslowski. Some of these chapters again provide productive counters to ideas presented by authors in its first three parts: Rob van Gurwen's claim that "*punctum* scenes in documentary are halfway between art and history" (206), for instance, draws on a concept from Roland Barthes with which one suspects Wittgenstein might take issue, not only for its theoretical character, but also given its description of highly contingent and subjective moments with an "unanalyzable expressive aspect of physical movement" (217). Lucy Bolton's reading of Murdoch in relation to Garth Davis' *Mary Magdalene* carries the observation that "*Mary Magdalene* is a profoundly affective film experience" (231), which sits in significant tension with the critique of Berys Gaut's empathetic philosophy provided earlier by Andrew Klevan. Sebastian Sunday's systematisation of "high reflectiveness" in relation to Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* avoids the application of any particular philosophy, but consequently has to lean heavily on narrative exposition as a result, such that the question of what counts as film-philosophising is raised once more.

In Part V of the book, James Conant's analysis of the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho* seems to come closest to synthesising much of what the volume sets out to achieve. As if receiving the cue from Carmona and Fox, Conant dives deep into the ways in which the famous shower scene raises the question of cinematicity itself, and what it means to aestheticise an event whose reality would be too horrific to watch, let alone enjoy. (Fox and Conant are both alive, for example, to the intentional fallacy underpinning much of film theory, and recognise Cavell's contribution to exposing that fallacy). Conant is one of the few who dares to venture that there might be more to film in its *latent* virtues than those that are readily *patent*. By this he means allowing our attention to be drawn away from some of the scene's more self-consciously dramatic aspects, and towards the indirectness of its horror. On this view, it is in the gap between the represented scene (which features little blood and guts) and the viewer's imagining of it that "the real action of this scene unfolds" (243).

In reminding us (as Rothman does also) that films bear, if not require, repeat viewing for their philosophical character to emerge, Conant simultaneously shows up the theoretical impulse as one which almost doesn't need film to be present at all for it to be vindicated in many of its assumptions. In contradistinction, film-thinking must respond directly to the medium, without the requirement for legitimacy that an appeal to theory might provide. Nevertheless, Conant's own appeal to the notion of "aesthetic unity" may leave readers who are more inclined to seek out the centrifugal forces of the cinematic image over the centripetal a little nervous, as they might smack of an assumed commonality and/or tradition over difference and departure – concepts perhaps more commonly associated with the theoretical impulse.

If it weren't for the efforts of the film theorists, we might not have the more subtle and attentive modes of criticism that emerge from this volume, revealing cinema to be a complex art, with the power to transform thought and not just serve as its object. This book follows in the path of titles such as Read and Goodenough's *Film as Philosophy* (2005), Carel and Tuck's *New Takes in Film-Philosophy* (2011) and Sinnerbrink's latest edition of *New Philosophies of Film* (2022) as an extremely welcome contribution to the field, whose variety provides much ground for future dialogue.

## References

- Carel, H. and Tuck, G. (eds.) (2011) *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
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