

Contemporary Aesthetics

*Special Volume 5 (2016) CONTEMPORARY
PERSPECTIVES ON FILM AND PHILOSOPHY*

2016

Introduction

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Introduction

*Stefan Deines &
Mario Wenning,
Guest Editors*

Ever since the emergence of film, cinema, and TV, there have been theoretical and philosophical endeavors to try to understand and conceptually grasp these phenomena. The fact that we are confronted with "moving images" gives rise to a number of ontological, epistemic, and aesthetic questions. These questions result from the fact that these new media are based on the techniques of photography and are capable of recording movement and, later, sound. Using these techniques, we can capture scenes of our world and also depict more or less imaginary worlds and tell stories about fictitious characters. The questions revolve around the keywords 'realism,' 'representation,' and 'illusion,' which continue to be intensely debated.^[1]

Theoretical approaches to film also focus on the fact that movies have an extraordinary impact on their viewers and the cultural world in general. As far back as the 1930s, Erwin Panofsky observed that the impact of movies surpasses the influence of the traditional arts:

Whether we like it or not, it is the movies that mold, more than any other single force, the opinions, the taste, the language, the dress, the behavior, and even the physical appearance of a public comprising more than 60 percent of the population of the earth.^[2]

Consequently, a good deal of the discussion in film theory and the philosophy of film is concerned with the question of what means and aesthetic strategies are being employed to activate which kinds of cognitive and psychological dispositions and processes. Given the tremendous impact of film on its audience, it is argued, these effects need to be assessed and evaluated.

The psychological and cultural effects of movies have been criticized. Jean Luis Baudry and Theodor W. Adorno, to name but two theorists, have analyzed cinema by means of ideological critique and psychoanalysis. They have exposed the regressive, deceptive, conformist, and altogether anti-enlightening effects of cinema. Baudry compared the *dispositif* of cinema with the situation described in Plato's allegory of the cave, and explains the enjoyment of the spectator as a result of a regression into an early childhood state characterized by dependency and illusion.^[3] In a similar vein, Adorno analyzed the mechanisms by which film and movies, both segments of the so-called culture industry, help to establish an overarching social structure of capitalist reification and mass deception.^[4]

There is, on the other hand, a tradition in film theory that highlights the positive, reflective, political, and critical potential of movies. Authors such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin belong to this tradition. They emphasized the specific epistemic merits of cinema: film is interpreted as a

medium that is capable of conveying insights into the natural or social world and into our own condition and disposition that cannot be obtained, at least not in the same way, by any other means. Theorists have tried to explain this epistemic potential by analogy with the procedures and presentation methods of the sciences, and also with those of the other arts.^[5] Only during the last thirty years have we witnessed the emergence of a vivid debate on the analogy between the epistemic potential of movies and the traditional means and media of doing philosophy.

In the 1980s, Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell, albeit in a different manner and departing from different theoretical background assumptions, pointed to an internal relationship between cinema and philosophy, especially between film and the problems of skepticism. In their wake, a number of contributors have discussed the philosophical content and significance of either specific movies, certain film genres or cinema in general.^[6] The debate is neither restricted to specific philosophical topics and problems nor to determined genres or styles in cinema. Problems of theoretical philosophy and problems of practical philosophy are elaborated by drawing on film. Aesthetic and art-philosophical dimensions are being worked out. Art house movies are analyzed and interpreted along with classical genre movies and Hollywood blockbusters.^[7]

The thesis that film is a medium of philosophical insight, that cinema can be "philosophy in action," has been developed in a more or less radical form. The most radical position holds that, in the course of a movie, philosophical thoughts, theses, and arguments can be developed. As a consequence, the reception of movies can lead to new philosophical insights. Moreover, these insights can be gained in no other way than through the reception of the respective movies because the philosophical content is bound to and can be conveyed only through specific cinematic means.

Claims of this kind have led, on the one hand, to a detailed discussion revolving around questions concerning the specific potentials and limitations of the medium of cinema. Is it possible to formulate and convey philosophical thoughts and arguments in a medium that is at least partially non-conceptual? Is it possible to gain insights of a universal or general nature within the frame of a mainly narrative medium depicting the actions and experiences of individual protagonists?^[8] And is the assumption of a philosophical content that is amalgamated with filmic means and can therefore not be translated into conceptual form not inevitably a mere allegation, since it cannot be falsified and is thus non-confirmable?^[9] On the other hand, these claims have resulted in a sophisticated debate on the essence and the means of philosophy: Does philosophy consist only of definitions, logical inferences, and the formulation of statements that claim universal validity? Or do sensual, narrative, rhetorical, and world-disclosing dimensions not belong to philosophical inquiry as well?

Because of diverging opinions regarding the potentials of movies and the nature of philosophy, various positions have developed in this debate. While some authors approximate the

radical position we have sketched, others defend positions that are, in differing respects, more moderate. Moreover, there are also positions that do not try to elucidate the epistemic potential of the movies in analogy with philosophical insights but see philosophy and film as standing in a complementary relation, as did Adorno, for example. He argued that philosophy and the works of art stand in a relationship that is both incommensurable and complementary. Film, in this view, can show specific social and historical constellations and can lead to unique experiences and insights that are open to and maybe even dependent on philosophical interpretation and assessment, while not having a philosophical form or being fully translatable into such a form.

Increasingly, scholars point to a genuine ethical dimension opened up by cinema. This ethical dimension does not need to be manifest in the content or the intended function of particular films. Rather, the dynamic experience of perceiving and responding to films has the potential of bringing about a unique state of awareness. The ethical dimension of films cannot be reduced to a normative content that can be translated into propositional form or to a method of claiming normative validity, such as the categorical imperative. At the same time, cinematic ethics opens up complex ways of viewing dynamic constellations of perspectives. These ways of viewing are not only distinct from other aesthetic forms of experience; they may also lead the spectator to a change in perspective on the world beyond cinema. While such transformation processes are by no means necessary, the fact that they become possible through the invention of film gives rise to unique potentials worthy of further exploration.

The papers published in this special volume present contemporary philosophical perspectives on the epistemic, ontological, and ethical characteristics and potentials of film. The papers emerged out of presentations that were given during a conference that was held at the University of Macau on March 31 and April 1, 2015.

In his contribution, Robert Sinnerbrink underscores the ethical dimension of cinema. By way of combining the objective orientation of recent cognitive theory with the subjective perspective opened up by phenomenology, he presents an alternative to either reducing the ethical dimension to the content of films or to situating ethical significance in the processes of cinematic production and reception alone. Cinema, Sinnerbrink argues, is best understood as a "medium of ethical experience" or a "medium with the potential for ethical transformation." Perceptual and sensuous engagement with film harbors an ethical dimension in that it allows for a specific kind of perspective-taking that is both dynamic and affective. This observation, which is corroborated by Continental and analytical approaches alike and finds increasing support in empirical psychology, emphasizes the corporeal emotional significance of cinematic experience. "Cinempathy" is Sinnerbrink's hybrid neologism to characterize the unique cinematic capacity to respond to the complexity of situations others find themselves in by shifting between feeling for (sympathy) and with (empathy) these others. The example of an argument by the protagonists in Ashgar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011) reveals that cinempathy is ethically more

complex and profound than the form of perspective-taking that might be achieved in non-cinematic forms of witnessing. Cinematic ethics focuses on the complex experience of intersubjectivity in time rather than prioritizing a single perspective.

While Robert Sinnerbrink is concerned with the transformative potential of cinematic experience, Martin Seel focuses on the ethos of cinema. At its best, cinema allows those who experience it to experience their capacity to let themselves be determined. The artistic potential of film consists in its ability to answer a need rooted in the structure of human agency that includes a dimension of passivity. Film, which emerges in constant dialogue with other art forms, enables the viewer to activate his or her "involuntary receptiveness." Writing about music, Adorno referred to this dynamic state as one of "active passivity." Seel extends this idea to argue that, by way of being moved involuntarily through the moving images, humans passively test their passions and convictions. Art, in general, and movies, in particular, enable an active exploration of the passivity that is a core dimension of human agency. And yet it would be mistaken to conceive of film as a moral institution that would allow its subjects to cultivate their responsiveness. Drawing on the final closing door scene in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), Seel points to the essentially ambiguous human desire of searching for a "protective inside and a liberating outside." This desire is satisfied by films in specific ways. As a medium for conjuring up imaginative realities, it constitutes an "emblem of the unstable framing," in which the cinematic space is simultaneously more open and more closed off than the alternative spaces in which agents navigate.

Josef Früchtl focuses on the reemergence of grand narratives in contemporary film after postmodernism has declared such narratives dead. If some films signal cultural transformations, *Avatar* (2009) and *Cloud Atlas* (2012) suggest, according to Früchtl's detailed reconstruction, the reemergence of metaphysical holism combined with a utopian gesture or a "taste of utopia." Both films toy with the idea of resurrection through the technology of morphing into new bodies. The cinematic imagination of reawakening into a more authentic, higher reality is embedded in an ontology that combines pluralism and holism into a new grand narrative. The two films, like Seel's example of the closing scene of *The Searchers*, also suggest cinema's turn towards self-reflexivity in that they present by cinematic means sophisticated versions of cinema-like devices that realize heightened forms of virtual experience. *Avatar* upholds the ethical model of nature, which is regained through cinematic immersion. While disconfirming the postmodernist dismissal of grand narratives, the films discussed employ hybrid modes that realize a normative claim. In the case of *Avatar*, Christian and post-Humanist themes merge to suggest that everything ought to be considered as being connected within a "mimetically communicative action." *Cloud Atlas* draws on conceptions of reincarnation from Hindu and Buddhist religions and philosophies while performing an aesthetic justification of holism. Both films converge in gesturing towards a new utopian imperative that everything should be considered as being connected and aesthetically justified.

In his contribution, Jean-Yves Heurtebise turns to the ontology of cinematic bodies, as did Josef Früchtl in the previous article. Bergson and Deleuze present the theoretical backdrop that allows the author to reconsider the philosophical implications of embodiment in cinematic, that is, "imaged," form. Bergson conceived of the image as being distinct from objects and representations. By extension, the living body, as it is revealed in cinema, is a privileged image in that it is distinct from mere objects *qua* being alive, and distinct from mere representations in that it is acting. Deleuze's phenomenological approach to cinematic bodies reveals them as "testimonies" in a world in which agents are increasingly deprived of the capacity to act. These phenomenological approaches, Heurtebise reminds us, break with the tendency to denigrate the body that has dominated the history of ontology and occasionally found expression in cinematic form. Plato's dismissal of the body can, for example, be discerned in Robert Bresson's *L'argent* (1983), just as Descartes' mechanical conception of the body finds cinematic expression in the films by directors such as Kazan, Fuller, and Lumet. In contrast to these denigrating approaches to cinematic embodiment, Heurtebise reveals the transcendent and mystical potentials of cinematic bodies and finally returns to a Bergson- and Deleuze-inspired approach to the anamnestic dimension of cinematic bodies. This anamnestic dimension is revealed in films such as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), while David Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) signals the new, anti-Platonic dream of migrating from the imperfect real to a higher form of virtual body.

Taking the short film *La rivière du hibou* (1961), an episode of the anthology series, *The Twilight Zone*, as an example, Paisley Livingston and Trevor Ponch examine the logic and philosophical significance of so-called "twist films." In these films, a surprising twist at the end reveals that we, as spectators, are mistaken in holding some basic beliefs about the world of the movie, the story, and/or its protagonists, in spite of the fact that we attentively pursue and carefully interpret the events on screen up to the twisting point. Whether movies that lead us up the garden path in that manner allow for a philosophically interesting insight depends, according to Livingston and Ponch, very much on how they are made. Twist films reflectively enlighten us about our viewing habits and expectations as possible sources of partial perception and delusion only if a second viewing reveals meaningful hints and clues that we overlooked during the initial watching because we were too engaged in following the events of the story or wishing for a happy ending. The pivotal relevance of the second viewing leads Livingston and Ponch to an interesting discussion and a resolution of the "paradox of suspense" that results from the assumptions that we can (re-)experience suspense even after a repeated reception of the work. This contradicts the assumption that suspense seems to result from the state of uncertainty about the outcome of the presented chain of events.

In their contribution, "Edward Yang's Confusion," Nga-chun Law and Chun-cheong Lo analyze the movie, *A Confucian Confusion* (1994) directed by Edward Yang, one of the main representatives of *New Taiwanese Cinema*. The authors interpret this film as a cinematic contribution to recent

ideological and philosophical debates concerning the role of Confucianism in modern Chinese society. Based on a survey of the tradition and the different varieties of Confucian thinking, they work out various confusions that led to some overly positive assumptions concerning the role of Confucianism in modernity. One example of this is the assumption that the economic success of the states known as the "Four Asian Tigers" sprang from the influence of traditional Confucian virtues or—the idea Edward Yang develops and puts to a test in his movie—that a revitalization of Confucianism can be seen as a remedy for the centrifugal forces in modern capitalist societies. To the contrary, Law and Lo point out that in the context of modernity there is no foundation for a vital Confucian practice. Because of the prevailing ideology of atomism and individualism and the emergence of new social roles and hierarchies, the traditional relationships and institutions necessary for a Confucian life-form no longer exist.

In her contribution "Can the Audience Want?," Angela Keppler considers the peculiarities and the value of so-called quality television, especially in the form of recent American series, with and against Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno answered this question in his eponymous article from 1963 in a skeptical manner, seeing TV as a product and means of a culture industry that does not contribute to the formation of autonomous and critical subjects. Keppler, in contrast to Adorno, sees the value of quality TV in doing exactly this, by increasing our awareness and enabling new perspectives on ourselves and the social and cultural world. New TV formats accomplish this by demanding a specific aesthetic attitude from their audience, which Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, only claimed for the encounter with works of high or avant-garde art. This attitude of "active passivity," whose importance for the reception of cinematic art Martin Seel also points out in this volume, leads to a specific aesthetic experience in which a cautious perception of the aesthetic object is as important as the active interpretation and reenactment of the presented events and formal structures. In the course of her analysis of three depictions of therapy sessions taken from the series *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, and *In Treatment*, Keppler makes clear how subtle and complex the visual, aesthetic, and narrative compositions of quality TV can be.

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Published on June 30, 2016.

Endnotes

[1] Some recent discussions of these topics can be found in: *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (London: Routledge, 2009); Berys Gaut, *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); James Conant, "The World of a Movie" in *Making a Difference*, ed. Niklas Forsberg and Susanne Jansson (Stockholm: Thales, 2011), pp. 293-324.

[2] Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 15-32, ref. on p. 17.

[3] Cf. Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of the Reality in Cinema," in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), pp. 299-318.

[4] Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 98-108.

[5] Kracauer, for example, ascribes to the medium of film, with its techniques of slow motion and fast motion, the potential to "redeem" aspects of reality, meaning the potential to make aspects of reality visible that would otherwise remain unseen. Cf. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960). While the analogy of film with the sciences is usually explained in relation to its photographic dimension, its status as an art form is rather linked to the formal, narrative, and aesthetic features of film.

[6] Cf. Josef Früchtel, *Vertrauen in die Welt. Eine Philosophie des Films* (München: Fink, 2013).

[7] For example, Paisley Livingston points out the philosophical significance of Ingmar Bergmann's movies in his book, *On Film as Philosophy*; Stephen Mulhall concentrates on big Hollywood productions in *On Film*; Martin Seel, in his book on the movies, again deals with the whole artistic range of cinematic production. Cf. Paisley Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman. On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Martin Seel, *Die Künste des Kinos* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2013).

[8] Cf., for example, Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 20ff.

[9] Cf. the dilemma as formulated in Paisley Livingston, *Film*,

