



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

What is Film-Philosophy?

Citation for published version:

Sorfa, D 2016, 'What is Film-Philosophy?' *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 1-5.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Film-Philosophy

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



What is Film-Philosophy?

David Sorfa, University of Edinburgh

(david.sorfa@ed.ac.uk)

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the twentieth volume of *Film-Philosophy* and to inaugurate our new relationship with Edinburgh University Press. *Film-Philosophy* will continue to be the Open Access publication that it has always been. Whilst in its early years this made *Film-Philosophy* something of a rarity, nowadays the increasing movement towards Open Access across so many disciplines has shown it to have been a pioneer. With this in mind, it may be worth reflecting on the history of our journal here. *Film-Philosophy* began as an email discussion list in 1996 when the internet was still young and this list was rather romantically termed a ‘salon’ by its founder Daniel Frampton. The Film-Philosophy Salon was based around extended book reviews and occasional article-like pieces that were sent out via email and encouraged debate and discussion. Flame wars were still rather rare and these discussions tended to be civil, informed and informative. However, as the membership of the list grew, discussions became more fraught and increasingly full inboxes began to fill with invective, vitriol, misunderstanding and spam (now, of course, common in online comments sections). As the ad hoc community of academics and PhD students matured, the popularity of the list increased and the tone of the discussion at times deteriorated.

After a decade of managing the list single-handedly, Daniel invited a number of young (well, relatively speaking) scholars to London to consider the future direction of the list. What they all had in common was that their research investigated the intersection of film and philosophy. At that time this was, if not necessarily unheard of, then certainly far less

Film-Philosophy 20 (2016): 1–5

DOI: 10.3366/film.2016.0001

© David Sorfa. The online version of this article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited. For commercial re-use, please contact permissions@eup.ed.ac.uk.
www.euppublishing.com/journal/film

common than it is today. The meeting on Tabernacle Street in London on 25 February 2006 included Benjamin Noys, Jon Baldwin, Sarah Cooper, Catherine Constable, Richard Stamp, Douglas Morrey, David Martin-Jones, John Mullarkey, Damian Sutton and myself, although not everyone was able to attend. Daniel could no longer afford the time to oversee the list and asked us to take over *Film-Philosophy*. Our big decision at that gathering was to begin publishing material in a more methodical academic manner and to institute double-blind peer review. The journal moved away from sending out its material via email and began to publish more conventional journal articles and book reviews on its website, www.film-philosophy.com. Always fighting against the perception that being 'online' meant that the work we wrote and published was somehow less rigorous than pieces published in print, we ensured that articles were properly peer-reviewed and eventually began to publish in paginated PDF format.

The utopian spirit of 1990s cyber-anarchism has always been part of our ethos, and it is gratifying to see that Open Access (we have always tried to avoid the pejorative diminution of being addressed as an 'online' journal) is now becoming the standard that *Film-Philosophy* has espoused from its very beginning. All of the original Tabernacle Street group are still involved with the journal. As we have grown older and more established, the journal has grown with us. It now has an expanded Editorial Board, which is soon to be joined by an Advisory Board, in large part due to the increased volume of submissions which the growth of the area has prompted, and the increasingly diverse range of expertise required to assess the variety of film-philosophical approaches that are emerging. The journal has now become part of the academic firmament of Film Studies, its pages including works by Jean-Luc Nancy, Steven Shaviro, Patricia Pisters, Randall Halle, Simon Critchley, amongst others. While we have discussed the possibility of becoming a traditional print journal in the past, we are happy to remain virtual in our new relationship with Edinburgh University Press and so become EUP's first fully Open Access journal.

While the email list retains an important function as a mailing list, keeping the global F-P community informed of events and developments in related research, its original networking and discussion facility has now moved to a more physical space. In 2008, Greg Tuck and Havi Carel organised a 'Film and Philosophy Conference' at the Arnolfini Centre in Bristol under the auspices of the University of the West of England. Greg and Havi asked the Film-Philosophy Board, as we now styled ourselves, to contribute to a final discussion session at the end of the conference. The conference, with keynotes by Karin Littau, Stephen Mulhall, Julian Baggini, Vivian Sobchack, Robert Sinnerbrink and Catherine Constable

Introduction: What is Film-Philosophy?

alongside many other speakers, was so successful that we decided to make this an annual event. The Film-Philosophy Conference has been held at the universities of Dundee, Warwick, Liverpool John Moores, King's College London, Queen Mary, Amsterdam, Glasgow and Oxford with Edinburgh in 2016 and our tenth anniversary scheduled for 2017 at the University of Lancaster.

At *Film-Philosophy*, we describe ourselves as 'an open access peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated to the engagement between film studies and philosophy', and this strikes me as good as any a summary of what film-philosophy as a subject discipline might be. While many of the Board work in Film Studies and English departments, we do count some excellent philosophers amongst our numbers. We tend to favour 'Continental' approaches, but we are open to 'Analytic' philosophy as well. The latter, of course, has a long tradition of dealing with aesthetics, which is a central concern for film-philosophy.

However, *Film-Philosophy* supports the strong argument that cinema can *do* philosophy in a way that is unique to the medium. Therefore, film is not only capable of presenting extended thought experiments or illustrating philosophical concepts, but is philosophy itself. Whether this is true of all films, or whether only some films do philosophy, or, whether some films do bad philosophy, is all part of our current research. Of course, this begs the question of what cinema is (and, of course, what philosophy is), but these fundamental questions are also the concern of film-philosophy.

For instance, film-philosophy is closely related to questions of morality and ethics. Films can be illustrations of moral issues and can themselves be moral problems. Some films present moral problems while others are morally problematic. I would say that all films are embroiled in an ethics that defines what we think of as morality. Ethics, in this sense, is normative: it is the system within which moral value finds its meaning. Sure, film is watched by many people, but so is television and many still read books – all these things form the ethical world within which moral decisions can be made. Perhaps I should say 'ethical worlds' – there is more than one ethical world, and that is why what is deemed wrong in one place or time, may be seen as right in others.

In institutional terms, film-philosophy is crucial as a concept that identifies a specific area of academic and scholarly activity. Thus film-philosophy as a term and *Film-Philosophy* as a journal, annual conference, and network of scholars, is absolutely central in legitimising and supporting research in this area. Of course, I would want to highlight here the importance of Film Studies and film theory as areas that have been used in the past to legitimise taking cinema seriously and perhaps

that might be another slogan for film-philosophy: 'Taking Cinema Seriously' – in fact Daniel Shaw's book on film and philosophy takes this as its subtitle.

Arguments as to when film-philosophy may have started can stretch back to the early decades of the twentieth century. In the post-war era, which saw the rise of Film Studies as a discipline, American philosopher Stanley Cavell was perhaps the very first to do something that we might explicitly call film-philosophy as we now know it, in his *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971). And that may be because it has the word 'ontology' in the title or because Cavell has always been part of a philosophy department. Cavell is indebted to Wittgenstein – who straddles the continental and analytic sides in such a way that clearly makes nonsense of the distinction in the first place – and it is to Wittgenstein, via Cavell, that we owe film-philosophy's interest in scepticism. Conversely, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's work of film-philosophy has become more associated with film theory, perhaps because when his *Cinema* books appeared in the 1980s there was no such term as 'film-philosophy', and they were taken up by film theorists. Whatever the case, Deleuze and Cavell are among the first to explicitly claim that films can do or be philosophy.

We might say, then, that Film-philosophy is the past and future of film theory. Film-philosophy is also the way in which normal, non-academic film viewers think about film – people don't think about apparatus theory or the male gaze – they ask: 'Do I like this character?', 'How do I feel when I watch this film?', 'What is real or true about this film?', 'Is what this character is doing right or wrong?', 'Am I enjoying this?', 'Does this film make sense?', 'What have I learned from this film?', 'Should I change my life in some way because of this film?' – these are fundamental questions of film-philosophy and of philosophy as such.

Clearly, there is a certain appetite for whatever it is that we call 'film-philosophy'. As David Martin-Jones points out in his section introduction below, film-philosophy – as an academic field rather than the journal or the conference – is now a term in (fairly) common parlance, sometimes with the hyphen and sometimes without. We have always felt that the term allows a certain development of what has traditionally been called 'film theory' which looks beyond the important turn to history of the 1980s and 1990s. While some have come from philosophy departments, many did not and had drifted into 'theory' and 'film' at the tail-end of the 'theory wars' of the 1980s through structuralism, post-structuralism and the liberationist critiques promised by Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. While this places us within what some might call the 'Continental Philosophy'

Introduction: What is Film-Philosophy?

camp, I think that much of our work moves against the simplistic dichotomy of the 'Analytic' on one side and the 'Continental' on the other. It is perhaps fitting then that in our next phase, we begin with a Special Section on Film-Philosophy and a World of Cinemas as we look beyond the Eurocentrism of Western philosophical traditions towards a wider world of both philosophies and cinemas.