

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2018 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857551654, DOI 10.7413/18258630030

## PHILOSOPHY OF FILM

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(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Filosofia del cinema*; Fr. *Philosophie du cinéma*; Germ. *Filmphilosophie*; Span. *Filosofía del cine*. Cinema and its products have been a core topic of discussion for theorists and intellectuals since the very birth of the film medium itself. Eventually, this has led to the emergence of an autonomous research field weaving together philosophy, aesthetics, history of cinema, and film studies. The expression *philosophy of film*, an elusive label open to multiple interpretations, has recently become standard in the literature. While being widespread in the English-speaking countries ever since the 1990s (just consider that the English magazine "Film-Philosophy" was founded in 1997) it is today very popular in Italy as well.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

From a theoretical point of view, the impossibility of finding a single inclusive theory of cinema as a whole has led to a proliferation of different theoretical trends throughout the whole 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, a need has arisen for philosophy to rethink its approach towards cinema in accordance with the on-going technical and narrative transformations the film medium has experienced in recent past. Particularly interesting in this regard is the chance to combine and intermingle different disciplines and languages together.

A most common tendency nowadays is to understand the domain of "film philosophy" as a philosophical practice that employs the vision and analysis of individual films to illustrate particular concepts. According to this perspective, cinema represents an almost inexhaustible reservoir of examples that can be used to enlighten specific philosophical questions (Curi 2006). The first work to have initiated this kind of approach is the volume *Pursuits of happiness* (1981) by Stanley Cavell, an American philosopher with an analytical background, himself a scholar of Emerson and Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Cavell's book offers a philosophical overview of seven Hollywood comedies produced from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, pointing out some narrative analogies aimed at describing a "new type" of human being. Cavell

insists on the importance of cinema as America's most widespread cultural legacy. It is noteworthy that it presents cinema alongside philosophy at a time when this was still considered almost outrageous. The outcomes of this perspective – which is today very successful thanks to the popularity of films compared to other literary or philosophical works – are particularly fruitful. Not only does this approach rightly emphasize the need for a more careful and attentive consideration of cinema, but it also proves relevant from an educational point of view. However, by focusing only on one single element of the complex cinematographic mechanism – the individual film product – mostly considered in its content, this approach runs the risk of being overly simplistic. By reducing cinema to its "philosophical character", it unjustly confers a primacy on philosophy, while devaluing cinema as a mere instrumental tool.

A further interpretation of the notion of "film philosophy" comes from the Anglo-American analytical tradition, a domain which has recently experienced the emergence of a much-heated debate involving cinema. The Anglo-American perspective takes argumentative clarity as its starting-point and makes frequent appeal to the cognitive sciences. Its aim is to clarify the conceptual assumptions which underlie our discourses on cinema, arguing against continental philosophers' alleged lack of rigor and consistency. Throughout the years, analytic scholars have shifted the focus of their investigation from purely aesthetic concerns – like those triggering the first theories of cinema (questions like: "Is cinema a form of art?") – to ontological concerns such as "What is a film?", or "What is its mode of existence?". This ontological debate has led to a variety of different theoretical stances, with scholars ranging from essentialist positions (Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie) to relativistic approaches (Thomas Wartenberg). Despite individual differences, all these accounts regard film as a particular entity or object whose essence can be subject to theoretical investigation and description, as in the case of the ontology of music or material objects in general. Aside from the question of film's ontological status, analytic philosophers have also explored issues such as cinema's representational capacity (Berys Gaut), the role played by imagination (George Wilson) and the nature of the emotions triggered in the viewer. The topic of the emotions engendered by film is known in the literature as the "paradox of fiction": how is it possible that we experience real emotions in front of images of things we know to be fake? As is well known, this paradox was firstly enounced by Kendall Walton in the 1970s (even earlier by Colin Radford, in the case of literary works) and was later re-introduced in the debate by Carroll's book *The philosophy of horror, or the paradoxes of the heart* (1990).

A different approach to film philosophy is promoted by the many continental authors who consider cinema a place of actual thought-production. Their approach draws back to the two texts written in the 1980s by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, *Image-movement* (1983) and *Imagine-time* (1985), both based on the assumption that there is a strong relationship between film practice, image creation and philosophy, meant specifically as concept creation. Deleuze's idea is that philosophy cannot be considered either as an *a posteriori* kind of enquiry or as a mere form of communication. Rather, it must be conceived of as an invention practice aimed at creating new original concepts and ways of saying. Interestingly, cinema generates products that are philosophical in their capacity to respond creatively to the same crucial questions of philosophy. This however does not mean, according to Deleuze, that there is an identity between cinema and philosophy, since each of the two practices is characterized by the use of different and irreducible means.

Deleuze's account has proven very influential for a great number of contemporary theoreticians (see Pisters 2012). Philosopher Jacques Rancière (2001), for instance, although at times critical with Deleuze, is strongly inspired by his approach. Rancière's philosophy of cinema is part of his broader project to rethink aesthetics in accordance with politics, meant as a practice capable of re-shaping our sense of community. Alain Badiou's philosophical perspective is also very sympathetic to Deleuze's approach. In particular, Badiou applies his former Plato-inspired interpretation of "event" to the cinematographic image.

When it comes to understanding cinema and its products, several authors with different backgrounds have also shown a strong philosophical, yet not always explicitly Deleuzian, attitude. Among the many, Marie-José Mondzain (2011) has for example questioned the destiny of images in contemporary society, Slavoj Žižek (2004) has combined psychoanalytic approach and political theory to interpret cinema as the place where the "symptoms" of contemporary culture emerge. Finally, Georges Didi-Huberman (2003) has analyzed the nature of pictorial, cinematographic and photographic images.

A feminist approach to film studies is also very popular today especially in Anglo-Saxon countries, where it is generally associated with the broader domain of post-colonialist studies. Focusing on the contribution of the female gaze in film production and appreciation, this approach employs concepts borrowed from psychoanalysis (see, at the origin of the debate, Mulvey 1975). It is noteworthy that current debates involve the participation of a great number of women philosophers with very different backgrounds and perspectives (see, among the others, de Lauretis, 1989. In this regard, see also *The Routledge companion to cinema and gender*, 2017). Their works address some of the most significant issues of our time, such as the role played by cinema in the context of new media and the effects of new technologies on images' production and reception (note that these topics are also at the core of the work of some Italian theorists such as Montani [2014], and Casetti [2015]). The viewer's gaze is also central to the phenomenological perspective originating mainly from Vivian Sobchack's seminal book (1992). Sobchack applies Merleau-Ponty's perceptual model of "embodied thought" to cinema, a model which is currently gaining much attention from the neurosciences as well (see Gallese, Guerra 2015).

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

D. Angelucci, *Philosophy of Film*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/PhilosophyOfFilm.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630030.

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D. Angelucci, *Philosophy of Film*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 1, Milano, Mimesis, 2018.