Bernd Herzogenrath, ed. *Film as Philosophy*

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2 Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Pp. 341. ISBN: 978-1-5179-0051-9

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4 The turn to philosophy within Film Studies is commonly located in the early 1990s, coinciding with the publication of the English translation of Gilles Deleuze's books on cinema (*Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* in 1983 and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* in 1985) and the launching of two journals, *Film-Philosophy* in 1994 and *Film and Philosophy* a year later,[1] at a very specific critical conjuncture. Attacks to the Anglo-American film theory that had dominated Film Studies since its formation as a discipline in its own right in the 1970s – the so-called 'Grand Theory' or '*Screen* Theory' – were responded by the adoption of less opaque forms of theorizing that focused on specific research issues grounded on evidence (cognitive approaches to film studies). Others responded by moving away from theory and taking new directions towards history and the archives, while some others became concerned about the theoretical challenges posed by the new media.[2] Nevertheless, critical thinking at the intersection between film and philosophy has always existed since the early years of the film medium. Not only have philosophers written about cinema but also film commentators, and later Film Studies scholars, have regularly turned to philosophical ideas in the attempt to understand cinema as a distinctive art form and experience. Film and cinema have regularly been connected to various branches of philosophy, ranging from ethics and ontology to aesthetics and phenomenology.[3] More recently, 'film-philosophy,' now a flourishing strand of contemporary film theory and one of the many ways of inquiring about the interaction of film and philosophy, has pursued, as Robert Sinnerbrink has put it, a way of "linking the two in a shared enterprise that seeks to illuminate the one by means of the other."[4]

5 The fast growing development of film-philosophy has been explained as the result of the enormous impact of the writings of film-philosophers such as Stanley Cavell and Gilles

Deleuze on the recent developments of film theory. Some Film Studies scholars have recently taken the cue from Cavell's and Deleuze's central idea that film and philosophy are intimately related as they both generate new possibilities of thought. The title of this book, *Film as Philosophy*, unmistakably reveals this central idea bringing together a collection of essays edited by Bernd Herzogenrath. In the opening paragraph of its introduction, Herzogenrath summarizes it as follows: "Media and thinking are intimately related. Our memory, perception, and cognition are not just a given, as weightless, immaterial processes taking place purely mentally behind the wall of our skull, but also always already rests on a medial basis" (vii). The film-as-philosophy approach conceives films as sites of reflection, rather than mere illustrations of ideas and concepts.[5] As Herzogenrath explains, "Media [and film in particular] generates potentialities of thought, makes things 'thinkable' in different, medium-specific ways" (vii). This central thesis has contested traditional disciplinary boundaries separating film studies and philosophy, conceived as distinctive fields involving heterogeneous practices, and has generated an intense debate over the question of films' capacity to make serious contributions to philosophy.

6 Apart from the explanation of this central thesis, in the introduction to the book, "Film and/as Philosophy: An Elective Affinity?" Herzogenrath also underlines the pertinence of the philosophy-as-film/film-as-philosophy approach – one among the four ways of understanding film philosophy that he identifies – in the light of the recent developments of neuroscience and its ubiquity in the humanities. More specifically, the latest developments of cognitive neuroscience that considers "the brain as embodied, enacted, extended, embedded, and affective" can contribute to shed new light on "the encounters of brains and screens" (ix). Following Deleuze's notion of 'thinking as an encounter,' rather than 'thinking as (re-)cognition,' Herzogenrath proposes looking at film as philosophy, as this approach offers a productive dialogue between film studies and philosophy, and a more balanced relation between these two fields. In Herzogenrath's words: "no longer are the representational techniques of the medium at the center of inquiry but rather its ability to 'think' and to assume an active role in the process of thought, in finding alternative and differentiating point(s) of view (and thoughts)" (xiv).

7 This clarifying elaboration of the central thesis of film as philosophy is followed by short sections devoted to "the key figures in the history of film and/as cinema" whose works can contribute to the relation of film and philosophy. Presented as "a road map" to the book, these sections in the introduction provide a brief advance of the main fifteen chapters that follow, each one of which examines selected figures, some better known than others to Film Studies scholars. The essays are written by fifteen U.S. and international film scholars, some of them trained philosophers and others working in film and media studies departments, who have recently published on film-philosophy in the last few years. The chronological order that organizes the essays, following the writing and publication dates of the works of the film-philosophy thinkers under study, helps the reader establish interesting connections between them, despite the fact that, as Herzogenrath warns, they chart a field of "multiple logics, approaches, and perspectives that are by necessity sometimes incompatible" (xxii). The fundamental objective in them is to discuss how each of the studied thinkers establishes an enriching encounter between the two disciplines by entertaining "elective affinities" between them (xxii).

8 The first seven chapters are devoted to the authors of what has been known as 'classical film theory.' The renewed interest in theses authors has been possible thanks to the

publications of translations and new editions of those early writings. The key concern in all of them is the exploration of how these thinkers have elaborated on the mind-screen interface as part of the contemporary theoretical exploration on the spectator's encounter with what is on the screen[6] or the spectators' film experiences.[7] The contributors trace stimulating genealogies of thought and use specific networks of concepts by placing the work of classic film theorists in their contemporary intellectual context. In this way, further connections are established to recent film-philosophers who focus on the spectators' film experience in line with phenomenology, affect theory and new cognitive approaches to film. Thus, the first chapter is devoted to Henri Bergson (1859-1941), whose work *Matter and Memory*, has been central to Deleuze's film philosophy. In this essay John Ó Maoilearca takes Deleuze's reading of Bergson to task to offer his own. By recovering the Bergsonian notion of 'gesture,' which he examines by looking into Lars von Trier's *The Five Obstructions* (2003), Ó Maoilearca establishes a dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's and Michel Foucault's interpretation of the gestural concept to claim an embodied image as an alternative view in Bergson's philosophy of cinema. In the second essay, Robert Sinnerbrink focuses on Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916), whose publication *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), is considered the first work of film theory. Focusing on key theoretical elements in this work, Sinnerbrink tries to acknowledge Münsterberg's effort to articulate a coherent theory of cinema capable of synthesizing its psychological-cognitive and aesthetic-cultural dimensions. Sinnerbrink places Münsterberg's key concepts in relation to contemporary film philosophy, in particular that of cognitivists and phenomenologists, like Noël Carroll and Carl Plantiga. In the third chapter, Adrian Martin concentrates on the philosophical ideas and possibilities in the work of Béla Balázs (1884-1949), another classical film theorist. Martin draws the trajectory in Balázs's work to focus primarily on the earlier writings of the 1920s and 1930s, which he places in relation to other contemporary classic film theorists, like Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Epstein, Siegfried Kracauer, and the works of Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, but also in relation to recent theoretical readings of Balázs's writing. Some of these theoretical connections are illustrated by referring to the work of specific filmmakers (Oliver Assayas, Roberto Rossellini, and others). This is a particularly dense essay whose appreciation requires a previous knowledge of philosophy and of Balázs's work.

9 In the fourth chapter, Gregory Flaxman rescues from oblivion Antonin Artaud's (1896-1948) engagement with the cinema, a figure better known for his poetry, plays, letters and essays, and the revolutionary Theatre of Cruelty. Flaxman borrows from Spinoza and Leibniz the concept of 'spiritual automaton' to explain Artaud's idea of a 'cinematic automaton' and to argue for the affective reality of the moving image in Artaud's theory of cinema. Much in line with some of the theoretical interests of today's Affect Theory in Film Studies, Flaxman concludes that for Artaud "The automatism of the moving image, delivered directly to perception, actually constitutes a kind of foreign brain, a technoaesthetic brain injected into the organic brain" (82), and that "the moving image affects our sensory perception, inhabits our brains, and even automatizes our thoughts" (83). Christophe Wall-Romana's essay examines the key elements in Jean Epstein's (1897-1953) philosophy of cinema. Epstein was a cinephile, poet, writer, filmmaker as well as philosopher of the cinema and his thought has not only influenced other thinkers of cinema such as Siegfried Kracauer, Edgar Morin, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière but has also received important critical attention in recent years. In his conclusion, Wall-Romana proposes that Epstein's theory of cinema – as an apparatus

capable of generating a new understanding of time, space and causality that extends the limits of our human scope and scale – can be better understood in the imaginings of digital cinema. In the sixth essay, Julia Vassilieva offers novel views of understanding Sergei Eisenstein's (1898-1948) theoretical work on cinema, in light of the recently published texts in Russia, not yet translated into English, as well as her own research on still unpublished written material. Angela Dalle Vacche outlines the intellectual influences in André Bazin's (1918-58) film theory that situate his thought away from Jean Paul Sartre's nihilist existentialism and closer to the humanism of Gabriel Marcel and to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology – the latter being recently recovered by film scholars, such as Vivian Sobchack, to delineate theoretical accounts of embodied film experience.

10 The next eight essays are devoted to more contemporary film-philosophers, while some provide further and extensive cinematic examples that illustrate in a more instructive way how films can be vehicles of philosophical reflection. The exceptions are Alex Ling's article on Alain Badiou, where he provides a brief overview of Badiou's understanding of cinema to eventually discuss its paradoxes, and Noël Carroll's essay on his own theoretical exploration about cinema's capacity for doing philosophy. Although the former can undoubtedly be a helpful tool for novice readers to approach the work of Alain Badiou, hardly any cinematic examples are given to illustrate Badiou's theoretical notions on cinema. The latter, however, sporadically refers to specific films to illustrate arguments in a very clarifying exposition of the theoretical debate over the ability of the moving image to convey original philosophy. Carroll's essay basically expands on the debate over films' contribution to philosophy presented in the book's introduction.

11 In their use of a more detailed examination of cinematic examples the remaining essays can be particularly helpful to film studies scholars not too familiar with this strand of film theory. Bernd Herzogenrath, for example, draws on Gilles Deleuze's film philosophy, particularly on his notion of 'the encounter,' to exemplify how David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) establishes its own terms of making sense by offering specific ways of thinking in/with images. Elizabeth Brofen discusses Stanley Cavell's writings on cinema through a close reading of two films: *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) in relation to the comedy of remarriage, and *Stella Dallas* (1937) in relation to the melodrama of the unknown woman, which Cavell studies in *Pursuit of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (1981) and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1996), respectively. Nicole Brenez's essay on the unknown film philosophy of Raymonde Carasco (1939-2009), explains the correlation between her theoretical and practical work to argue that Carasco's project invents new forms of encountering the world and hence it gives the Deleuzian notion of encounter a very specific sense. Tracing the intellectual influences in Carasco's complex literary and visual works, Brenez attempts to unravel the sense of encounter between philosophy and film by delineating a way of seeing that implies a sensitive and ethical experience. Tom Conley's article on Jacques Rancière's philosophy of cinema refers to several Hollywood Western films that Rancière himself examines in his works on the experience of film and what he called 'a politics of *amateur*.' Since Rancière's work on cinema has become extremely popular in English-speaking readers and American academics, Conley's essay helps us understand this recognition, in particular the wide acceptance of central concepts such as 'cartography' and 'deviation' in Rancière's philosophy of cinema, and his place in a genealogy that includes Deleuze, Barthes, and Bazin, among others. Rancière's attention to how aesthetic detail affects

viewers and impels them to variable actions explains the relationship between the intelligible, the sensible and the political that has lately interested film theorists, and film philosophers in particular. Perhaps one of the most instructive essays on how cinema can convey original philosophy is given by Thomas E. Wartenberg in his examination of Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012) and its contribution to the ethics of assisted suicide or euthanasia. Wartenberg, a senior philosopher, has actively participated in the current debate on the capacities of film to make genuine contributions to philosophy and has been a staunch defender of the 'film as philosophy' thesis, which he has advanced in some of his publications (*Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (2007); *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance and Social Criticism* (1999) and *Fight Club* (2011)). Commonly defined as 'moderate,' [8] Wartenberg's approach to film-as-philosophy rejects global or universalist claims found, for instance, in Cavell's work on cinema. As Wartenberg himself explains in one of his previous publications, he seeks to investigate "the question of film's relationship to philosophy by paying attention both to individual films and specific philosophical techniques."[9] Murray Smith, a well-known scholar for his cognitivist approach to film affect, as well as for his earlier arguments against the capacity of the moving image to make philosophy,[10] writes the final essay of this collection. Smith draws on philosophical naturalism to demonstrate – taking the film *District 9* (2009) as a case study – that films may themselves be sites of reflection on philosophical problems. Film studies scholars, more skillful in textual analysis, will enjoy this detailed account of visual perception and its ability to elicit reflective thought.

12 This is a dense but very instructive volume for both novice and knowledgeable readers interested in the relation of film and philosophy. Although the volume does not attempt to include all the authors working at present in this booming strand of film theory, these essays offer a comprehensive range of theoretical accounts and genealogies that explore the film-philosophy encounter as one that elicits fruitful and open possibilities of thought. However enriching, the task that film-philosophers assign to film scholars is no doubt a difficult one, requiring a capacity for abstraction and theoretical argument as well as the interpretative skills of detailed film criticism. This volume then may work almost as a reference book for students and scholars new to this branch, inviting further readings not only of the essays themselves but also of the original works they discuss and refer to. Better informed readers, on the other hand, may engage more critically with the perspectives and methodologies presented in them. Being closer to the former than to the latter, my own interest in film as philosophy is motivated by the urge to discover new ways of looking at films and understanding film experiences, but always having in mind that film theory, as Edward Branigan following Wittgenstein reminds us, is always historical and that theoretical languages reveal our struggle to make film experience intelligible in different historical contexts.[11] For this reason, it is important to consider how the various perspectives exploring the capacities of films as thought, presented in this book, allow an engagement with contemporary sociopolitical discourses and an interrogation of their significance to the political field, a particularly pressing need in these perplexing times.

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NOTES

1. Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 313.
2. McDonald 2014, 12.
3. Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 311.
4. Sinnerbrink 2014, 207.
5. Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 312.
6. Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 182.
7. Branigan 2014, xxxi-xxxii.
8. Sinnerbrink 2014, 210-211.
9. Wartenberg 2007, 28.
10. Smith 2006.
11. Branigan 2014, xxxiii.