Introduction: An Unfinished Business of Film Theory and Philosophy[1]

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Eric Rohmer, in one of his classes at the Sorbonne where he taught courses on film, remarked that writers on film (he was speaking specifically about the European context, including the Soviet one) are particularly susceptible to the philosophical currents of their times. He notes that writers on the other arts are susceptible too, but those who write on film are, "somewhat more than the others, I don't really know why, permeated by the philosophical thought and vocabulary of their times even if they have no real philosophical training" (Rohmer). He was, of course, thinking firstly of himself and his own contemporaries, in particular of André Bazin whose notion of "ontology" was the subject of these lectures, but also of the generation of theorists after his own at "*Cahiers du cinéma*" who would court and lean on the likes of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser, for their arguments.

On the other hand, as the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* point out, most professional philosophers rarely engaged with cinema in a sustained manner through most of the past century even in courses on Aesthetics (Livingstone and Plantinga x). This started to change in Anglophone academia around the 1980s, most prominently through Noël Carroll's body of work. (Stanley Cavell's work preceded his, and Cavell did play a degree of institutional role in the disciplinary formation of Film Studies in the United States, but it is perhaps safe to say his attempts to give film a place in the broader philosophical curriculum were slow to bear fruit institutionally.)

We might take this strange affinity of the history of cinematic discourse for philosophy and, alongside that, professional philosophy's suspicion of cinema for a long stretch of film history to be a paradox. But in both its aspects, this paradox might bear testimony to a basic unease provoked by the technology underlying the medium, an unease that might be characterized by Cavell's phrase "ontological restlessness" or Bazin's description of the photograph as both hallucination and fact. Without asking for an affirmation of these characterizations of the photo-filmic image (I am not making a distinction here between analog and digital processes) or of their survival into the standard feature film, I think it would not be a stretch to suggest that a basic fascination with or suspicion of the manner in which these images are produced does, from time to time, touch off some ontological nerve in our apprehension of the world and of our place in it, irrespective of whether we identify as philosophers. At such moments, we might strain for a response that forces us to stake out positions, however amateurishly or unconvincingly, on some of the most basic philosophical questions. Nonetheless, however amateurish and unconvincing our attempts, this sort of encounter with the photo-filmic image may also be seen as revealing the democratic vocation of philosophy.

If philosophy has been central to the history of film theory, and if cinema itself has come to shape philosophical debates on the broader discourse of aesthetics, we might be tempted to assume that the present moment is one in which the combined discursive field of film and philosophy occupies a privileged place within Film Studies. This might further be seen as a symptom of greater interdisciplinarity within the contemporary academy. However, philosophers who work on film, and even film theorists who draw on work in analytical philosophy, have complained

about the fact they find themselves ignored by the larger discipline of Film Studies (Livingstone and Plantinga xix; Turvey 2007, 110). This may well be part of a wider academic phenomenon where interdisciplinarity translates in practice into sub-disciplinarity. Anyone hoping, in the quest of interdisciplinarity, to follow the numerous "turns" in the Humanities—linguistic, cultural, visual, iconic, archival, historiographic, ethical, aesthetic—more and more of them occurring simultaneously, will require the anchoring stillness of a dervish.

The rise of professional philosophy's interest in the cinema, whether continental or analytical, happened to coincide with the "historiographic turn" in Anglophone Film Studies which sought to use the archive as a corrective to the sweeping generalizations of psychoanalytic-Marxist "Theory" (hereafter, just "Theory"), most prominently by turning to the archives of early and pre-classical cinema. Analytical philosophy or approaches inspired by it too have attempted to provide their own set of correctives through systematic attempts at conceptual clarification that sought to relegate the *a priori* ideological commitments of Theory in favor of a ground-up analysis of the medium and its works. However, these two routes to a post-Theory theoretical discourse have largely remained divided in their epistemological commitments. The division is not at all one between theory and non-theory but rather about how to part from Theory. The remainder of the introduction will deal with the question of the role that philosophy has played, or plays, in the reconfiguration of film theoretical discourse. It is, given my academic background, necessarily from the vantage point of someone located within the discipline of Film Studies and its debates rather than within the disciplinary location of Philosophy.

One of the theoretical cornerstones to the historiographic turn in Cinema Studies has been what David Bordwell called the "modernity thesis".[2] Drawing upon the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer from the 1920s and '30s, early-cinema scholars such as Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen argued that early cinema participated in the changes to the human sensorium effected by the pervasive incorporation of modern technology into urban life at the turn of the twentieth century. This occasioned a skeptical response from Bordwell on the grounds that this account does not stand the scrutiny of the currently accepted accounts in cognitive psychology of how the human perception functions and adapts to changes in its environment. We need not go into the details of these two positions to recognize where the legacy of Theory divides them in their overall projects.

Gunning's and Hansen's projects depart from Theory's static conception of the film spectator's subject position as one held in place by the cinematic apparatus and designed to reproduce the dominant ideology of the rational, individual bourgeois subject. But the fact that they do so by recovering a model of film spectatorship built around either a pre- or non-classical film paradigm points to their basic acceptance of Theory's suspicion of classical narrative cinema.[3] This seems to also carry within it at least an implicit understanding that alternatives or departures from classical narrative are somehow disruptive of the ideological *status quo*. As Bordwell argues, one way in which Theory's imperatives managed to survive challenges to it is by migrating to "culturalist" programs of critique (1996).

I would gloss Bordwell's understanding of "culturalist" approaches as those that leaven the broader demystificatory concerns of ideology critique with more contextual arguments, often drawing upon archives and microhistories, that try to be sensitive to a wider range of social frameworks, identities, and practices. However, according to Bordwell, the "culturalist" approaches have in common with Theory more than just an *a priori* commitment to either demystification or ideological disruption. They remain, for him, characterized by a top-down model of inquiry that still takes theoretical positions as privileged points of reference rather than formulating theoretical positions through an inductive method that analyzes films and associated empirical data. Hansen's reliance on the Frankfurt School's conceptions of modernity would be a case in point. At most, the range of theoretical positions that pre-determine the range of theoretical

inquiry may have become wider. And because the theoretical positions are not derived but precede inquiry, even if they are modified by the end, the facts of the case under study are assimilated to the coordinates of those positions through "associational reasoning".

Against the persistence within the broader discipline of film studies with questions of ideology, a cognitivist's conception of the filmmakers and spectators as perceptual problem-solving agents who are concerned with creating and deciphering patterns of expressivity may sound decidedly tame. This is not because the cognitivists or analytical philosophers of film do not find questions of ideology and politics to be important, but because they either argue that their salience must be judged on a case-by-case basis or are skeptical about the extent to which they can be arbitrated through an engagement with films. We can find examples of the latter position in the work of Malcolm Turvey on modernist cinema of the 1920s (2011) as well in his recent book on the films of Jacques Tati (2020).

For Turvey, the history of modernism leaves little to doubt that modernity and its discontents are central to its aesthetic project. However, where a culturalist would seem to argue that these bodies of work are valuable firstly for their acting out of critical stances towards modernity, Turvey takes a more circumspect view. His accounts of the films he studies highlight the contradictions and the complex positions that range from resistance towards to an embrace of different aspects of bourgeois modernity rather than an outright hostility to it. The fact that they engage with modernity, and often critique it, is important not only for their own times but also our own. But to describe their achievements primarily in terms of whether they make their stances effective in their viewers is beside the point for a rigorous study of them.

For example, Turvey's account of Tati's "comedic modernism" argues that the filmmaker succeeded in combining the concerns and practices of the modernist avant-garde with the popular form of the "comedian comedy" in the tradition of Chaplin and Keaton. Tati's body of work constitutes a critical engagement with modernity, an engagement that is nonetheless not invariable in the attitudes it evinces. If his study has been successful, Turvey might argue, it has managed to identify Tati's stylistic strategies, their historical lineage, and their relationship to subject of modernity itself. A key strategy here is Tati's attempt to create a more participatory form of spectatorship. But as to whether Tati has been successful is not pertinent: "I have no idea whether Tati's ingenious devices actually elicit the degree and kind of participation their author hoped for their audiences. This book has been focused on explaining the design of his films, not their outcome" (253).

Turvey is a clarifying figure in the context of exchanges between film theory and analytical philosophy. In 2007, D. N. Rodowick published the essay "Elegy for theory" which would lay the foundation for his two-volume argument that traced the history of the emergence of theory as a discursive category in the twentieth century, its subsequent decline, and explored the prospects for philosophy to take over theory's role on more reflexive grounds. Rodowick's essay was published along with a response from Turvey. Against Rodowick's claim that there was a general move away from theory in the humanities, including film studies, Turvey maintains that film theory has never been in a better place even if the larger discipline largely ignores it. According to him, Noël Carroll's work in the 1980s and of others who have taken the procedures of analytical philosophy seriously has made film theory "much more dialectical, rigorous, and clear, ridding itself of much of the "fashionable nonsense" and dogma of psychoanalytical-semiotic film theory" (2007 116).

For Turvey, it is not a matter of film theorists becoming philosophers but modeling their procedures of argument on those of the natural sciences and analytical philosophy in order to make generalizations whose applicability to a large number of instances can be verified empirically. Therefore, (analytical) philosophy-as-model rather than philosophy-as-disciplinary-practice is what he sees as playing a "propaedeutic" role for film theory. Philosophers by training who write on film, such as Carroll himself, may or may not subscribe to the distinction, but what Turvey states is that film scholars generally do not have the training to intervene in philosophical debates

with larger stakes, such as those in political and moral philosophy presumably, than those that can be referred to the films and their contexts themselves. If we invoke the position of one or the other philosopher on these matters and make that a cornerstone for our arguments, we gravitate towards cultish rather than rigorous argumentation. This does raise the question of how film scholars read the work of professional philosophers who write on film. If a philosopher such as Robert Pippin writes on "the importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for political philosophy" (2010), do we treat it as a work of political philosophy or of film studies?

The most pertinent point of disagreement between Rodowick and Turvey is regarding the former's understanding of philosophy as requiring an examination of our epistemological and ethical commitments in our engagement with the world, and of films as calling for such a philosophical response. Turvey finds that such commitments and theory "underdetermine" each other, in the sense that the same epistemological or ethical commitment can result in very different theoretical positions. I think Rodowick and Turvey are at cross purposes here because Rodowick, as far as I can tell, does not speak of the *determination* of theory by epistemological and ethical commitments or vice versa but rather in terms of arriving at arguments *in the process* of such reflection, taking films as points of departure and so clarifying, or maybe even modifying, hitherto un- or under-analyzed commitments.

Philosophy in this sense would be expressive rather than strictly analytical, an articulation of subjectivity's and the world's mutual delimitation, not merely the constraining of subjectivity in favor of formal logical procedures. Another way of putting it may be that, yes, we are problem-solving when attempting to grasp a film, but the problems run deeper than merely being able to follow what unfolds on the screen. Some of those problems we may not even become aware of unless we examine our response to a film. This is why we gravitate towards engaging with some films rather than others beyond the constraints of what is available to us. If Turvey has written on Tati and his construction of a film style that calls for participatory spectatorship, it cannot be that he wants us to remain unmoved by the evidence he presents for it, to not feel the power of that kind of spectatorship, or to not see the importance of such spectatorship in the context of techno-logical modernity.

The question that remains is how expressive philosophical statements are to be evaluated. They do not generally yield the sort of value-free generalizations that count as theory for Carroll, Bordwell, or Turvey. I indirectly examine this question in my contribution to this issue through an examination of Cavell's practice of philosophical criticism so I won't take it up here. However, it must be conceded that philosophical criticisms from an analytical standpoint do point to the real paucity of the kind of reflection Rodowick calls for. Many scholars, for example, gravitate to talismanic proper nouns of expressive philosophy, often but not only from Europe, that theorize and vaunt the ideological significance of experiences of disruption, disidentification, impasse, loss of selfhood, and other analogous structures of experience signaled by terms such as *différance*, *differend*, the sublime, *rhizome*, *jouissance*, *dissensus* etc. However, it can be argued that these epistemological/ethical commitments have not been subjected to sufficient reflection. To assert their significance, we would have to give the claims of selfhood and other "Enlightenment/ bourgeois values" a fair chance in our arguments rather than work from an almost *a priori* assumption of their dubiousness, as well as test the limits of the vaunted structures.

This then is what I see as the unfinished business of the encounter between film theory and philosophy, in particular analytical philosophy: analytical philosophy's imperative for conceptual clarity in film theoretical discourse contends with the claims of an expressive philosophical practice to greater space for an examination of our epistemological, ethical, and ideological commitments. Not too implicitly at stake in this contention is the remit of the Humanities itself. It may be that the philosophical study of film comes to occupy a more central role in cinema studies and so make these stakes explicit for the wider study of cinema, as Rodowick has tried to do. But it could also remain one more island in an archipelago of sub-disciplines, itself divided.

The contributions to this issue are not meant to take up this unfinished business, but I have attempted to provide a frame through which readers may find ways to reflect on points of contacts between contributions that come from very different traditions. They are all instances of philosophical engagements with cinema, as the special issue title has it, rather than part of any single program for the philosophical study of film. All the same, I hope we can glimpse opportunities where they may be put in dialogue with these larger stakes of the philosophical method. For example, Nikolas Pappas's article on *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) is a fascinating examination of the analogies between Ancient Greek tragedy and science-fiction even if a necessary condition for the existence of the one is the absence of the other. Pappas writes, "I suspect that science fiction is one of the things you do with the impulse to create tragedy if the mythic past is no longer available as the impossible other time in which to discover the present."

Is Pappas's juxtaposition of Greek mythology and the science fiction film on the evidence of the overall argument he makes, something that would qualify as valid theorization of the two genres? Or is this one of those sweeping historical statements that gets smuggled in with the rider "I suspect"? Even if it is the latter, is it not an invitation to think about the different narrative options available in relation to different temporal orientations in the world? Similarly, Pappas's reading of the closing scene of the film as hovering over a significant ambiguity creates a situation where there isn't enough "evidence" to read it one way or the other. If this is true, are we authorized to reflect further on this particular ambiguity, or are we obliged to stop at saying we can't be sure which of the two readings is more justified? Further, what would be the value of the sort of "ahistorical" reading that this article offers against the pressures of empirical programs of research? I do not mean to impose such large methodological stakes on a single contribution here except as a provocation inspired by a desire to assert the intuitive value of the sort of reading it offers. But raising these or similar questions of other scholarship here or elsewhere would be one way of arguing for the larger stakes of the philosophical study of film.

Since most of the articles here carry their own abstracts, I will not attempt to indicate their topics or arguments here. The issue begins with essays that take on specific films. It does this as a way of departing from the usual priority that philosophical discourse of cinema gives to larger questions of the medium or the discipline as such. This is not to assign greater value to one or another kind of philosophical engagement with the cinema but merely to question if we perhaps instinctively do so anyway.

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Notes

1 This introduction has not been written in any wider editorial capacity but merely to provide an orientation to the topic and contents of this special issue.

2 For accounts of debates around "the modernity thesis", see Singer (2001; 2009) and Turvey (2011 163–181).

3 However, at least in the case of Gunning, this commitment is muted and not strongly articulated. His book-length study of the films of Fritz Lang has him engage with an *auteurist* body of narrative films.

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