



Book Review

The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film,
edited by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga

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The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film, edited by Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga. London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 684 pp.

Over the last decade, many books have been published on the relations between film and philosophy. The publications undoubtedly respond to a growing interest in the subject and to an increasing number of courses taught in Universities around the globe on various aspects relating film to philosophy (philosophy *of* film, film *as* philosophy, philosophy *in* film, etc.). This companion confirms this tendency as well as the status of the field as an established and accepted area of inquiry.

The book consists of sixty short essays (of around 12 pages each) that aim to cover as many as possible of the various issues relevant to the broad area of Philosophy *and* Film — a conjunction that, according to the editors, ‘should be understood as embracing both the philosophical study of cinema and the investigations of film’s philosophical dimensions, implications, and pedagogical value.’ The volume clearly aims at interdisciplinarity; although most of the authors are philosophers, there are many ascribed to departments of Film or Communication Studies. Also, the book includes essays on various intellectual traditions that have greatly influenced theorising about film: Psychoanalyses, Semiology, Phenomenology and Cognitive Theory. Admittedly, Cognitive Theory is the predominant and most favoured approach; however, other views are extensively discussed and not only to be refuted but to offer a broad understanding of the historical and intellectual framework in which film theorising has been developed.

The companion is organized in four parts: *Issues and Concepts*, *Authors and Trends*, *Genres and other types* and *Film as Philosophy*. All of them are comprised of clear, well written essays of excellent quality.

The first part is devoted, as its title indicates, to *Issues and Concepts*. Although it is not entirely clear what the criteria of inclusion for this section are (no editor’s rationale for the content is mentioned in the preface and there are no introductory chapters for each section), it contains twenty six articles on various topics that could fall into five sub-categories: (1) the nature of cinema and its central

constituting elements (essays on ontology, definition of cinema, medium, depiction, music, sound, narration, narrative closure, digital cinema), (2) the status of film as art and other categories and concepts relevant for evaluation and criticism (essays on film as art, genre, style, formalism, realism, interpretation, acting, spectatorship and authorship), (3) Emotions and affect in film (essays on emotion and affect, empathy and character engagement), (4) Ethics and social concerns (essays on ethics, censorship, race, violence, gender) and (5) others (essay on Consciousness).

The essays are not thematically but alphabetically organized. This might not be considered a problem given that we are talking about a handbook which is not expected to be read continuously from the beginning to the end. However, one of the aims of the book is to function as a textbook and, as such, one would expect it to facilitate or guide the task of planning a course and sorting out its content. The alphabetical organization certainly does not help in this respect.

Most of the essays in this section consist of informative surveys of different positions on the topics discussed, very frequently contrasting different theoretical paradigms to approach the topic (Psychoanalysis, Cultural Studies, Cognitive Theory, etc.) and pointing out the most frequent objections against them. Some of these essays also defend original positive views that either have been advanced by the author elsewhere at more length (e.g. Carroll's essay on Style, Ponech's on Definition of Cinema, Plantinga's on Emotion and Affect, Wilson on Interpretation among others), have been adapted to the specific topic of cinema (e.g. Hopkins on Depiction) or have been originally put forward in this volume (e.g. Meskin on Authorship or Laetz and Lopes' great contribution on Genre).

The second part *Authors and Trends* includes essays devoted to individual authors (both classic film theorists, such as Metz, Arnheim, Mitry, Eisenstein, Benjamin, Morin, Münsterberg and Deleuze, and contemporary authors such as Cavell, Bordwell and Carroll) and intellectual traditions that have influenced film theorising (Psychoanalysis, Semiotics and Semiology, Phenomenology and Cognitive Theory). As in the previous section, the essays on Part II are also alphabetically organized. Although the effect of the organization on this section is less problematic than on the former, it is still unconvincing. It might have been useful from the point of view of a lecturer planning a course (or a student trying to understand the material) to find the essays on each intellectual trend followed by the essay/s on the relevant author/s associated to that tradition e.g. Cognitive

Theory and Bordwell or Carroll, Semiology and Metz, etc. Another problem of this section is the absence of essays on very influential authors such as Bazin, Barthes and perhaps also Žižek as well as on trends such as Marxism and Structuralism. Admittedly, no handbook can be exhaustive and, to be fair, the views on the above-mentioned authors are not completely absent from the book. In the case of Bazin, for example, he is mentioned in the essays on ontology, medium, film as art, and realism, among others. Barthes ideas are explained notably in the essays on Authorship and Semiotics; and Žižek's, in turn, are only mentioned in the essay on Psychoanalysis. However, one reason why the absence of essays on these authors strikes the reader is precisely because the section includes specific essays devoted to other authors such as Bertolt Brecht and Wittgenstein, whose ideas, as Malcom Turvey himself admits in his article on Wittgenstein, 'ha[ve] had little influence on the study of film.' Apart from these problems however, this section constitutes a great advantage of this book over other alternative literature on Film and Philosophy. For, in providing a succinct but comprehensive survey of the different intellectual approaches to film theorising, it offers a historical and intellectual background of the area.

Genres and Other Types is the title of Part III. It contains interesting and informative articles on well-established genres such as documentary, horror, pornography and one single essay for tragedy and comedy. At first, it seems puzzling to find two *master* genres dealt with in just one entry; however, part of its content justifies the choice as it compares both genres and vindicates comedy as an equally valuable genre as tragedy. More disappointing however, is the absence of essays on important cinematic genres such as *Science Fiction*, *Melodrama* and *Western*. The inclusion of essays on 'Avant-Gard' and 'Dogme 95' in this section, in turn, seem to correspond to the *other types* part of the section title, as they seem to fit better under the rubric of *styles* of film rather than *genres* (at least following the theories defended in the essays on *style* and *genre* contained in this volume).

The final section, *Film as Philosophy*, features essays on three film directors whose work has traditionally been considered philosophical (Bergman, Malick and Tarkovski), four essays on various philosophical issues as they have been illustrated by certain films ('Why be moral?', 'Skepticism,' 'Personal Identity,' 'Practical wisdom and the good ground of *Gettysburg*') and three more essays on films that raise questions about various philosophical problems (*Five Obstructions*, Leth & Von Trier, 2003, *Gattaca*, Niccol, 1998 and *Memento* Nolan,

2000). These ten essays are preceded by another article on *Film as Philosophy* by Thomas Wartenberg, the only article in the companion that actually reflects on the possible ways of understanding the relations between Film and Philosophy. This essay works also as an introduction to the rest of the section and, in a way, also justifies it. One of Wartenberg's theses in this essay is that films whose contents illustrate philosophical theories can be considered *as doing philosophy*. This thesis is not uncontroversial, but its endorsement justifies the inclusion of some of the remaining essays in this section: those on films that raise philosophical questions and those on philosophical issues as they are illustrated in certain films. One could object to the choice of films and directors (why Malick and not Rohmer? Why *Gattaca* and not *The Servant*?) but surely, some selection had to be made and no one would have left everybody completely satisfied. More important is that the essays are illuminating, and that some of them provide original analyses of authors and films — a notable example is Livingston's essay on Bergman which denies the influence of Existentialism on the films of the Swedish director.

However, to the eyes of this reviewer, this fourth section of the book is clearly the weakest, not in terms of the quality of the individual essays, but in terms of homogeneity of contents and overall intellectual contribution of the section as a whole. There seem to be too many exercises of identification of philosophical ideas in films and not so much discussion on the very issue of the possibility of doing philosophy through films.

All in all, the companion provides a great comprehensive overview of the most important topics of discussion within the broad area of Film and Philosophy. As such, it is a splendid one-stop place for readers to learn the main concepts, trends and issues in the area. It is unlikely that the book can work as a textbook, or as a principal text for a course. However, one would expect it to be an important supporting resource for those interested not only in the area of Film and Philosophy, but in philosophical aesthetics and the study of film more generally.

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