Béla Szabados and **Christina Stojanova**, eds.
Wittgenstein at the Movies: Cinematic Investigations.
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This book is a collection of essays from both philosophers and film studies scholars, each centered on some aspect of the intersection between Wittgenstein and film. As such, its appeal is potentially wider than that of typical philosophy books. All but one of the essays treat Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993) or Péter Forgács' *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992). There is a good deal of room for work on Wittgenstein and film; it is one small corner of philosophy that has not yet become overcrowded. In what follows I will focus on the most exciting parts of this collection. The quality of the chapters is often quite high and always provocative.

Szabados and Stojanova's introduction sets the stage wonderfully for the variety that is to follow. They highlight what they call the 'deliberately ambiguous' title of the book. Wittgenstein himself loved going to the movies. So is there is some useful connection to be made between his philosophy and his watching and thinking about movies? This question can also be generalized. Szabados and Stojanova thus ask both 'What can cinema do for philosophy?' and 'What can philosophy do for film?' (xiii). The films by Jarman and Forgács might be seen as case studies, data from which one might begin to answer these questions. But maybe there is also something particular about Wittgenstein's philosophy and his way of doing it that makes *film* an appropriate medium for undertaking something similar.

It is worth noting this collection's laudable open attitude. For instance, one recurring theme of the chapters is the relationship between the personal and the philosophical—elsewhere, this theme might have been seen as out of bounds. However, it is appropriate for a book in part about Wittgenstein to espouse such an approach, not because he was such a striking idiosyncratic figure, but in fact for reasons internal to his philosophy.

Béla Szabados and Andrew Lugg's 'Meaning through Pictures: Péter Forgács and Ludwig Wittgenstein' presents *Wittgenstein Tractatus* as an instance of Wittgenstein's work being 'pondered, worked through, developed, [and] improved upon' (91). Thus the film is not simply to be seen as illustrating Wittgenstein's ideas, but rather as an autonomous work (99). In fact, they make clear that if one were to judge the film on the grounds of a comparison to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the film would not fare well. Forgács gets Wittgenstein wrong at points, and the film is even at points closer to Wittgenstein's later work (112). So Szabados and Lugg challenge the assumption that the relationship between film and philosophy is straightforward, that film must be philosophically secondary to the written word.

What is it that Forgács is doing in the film then? In it and in the *Tractatus* pictures play a predominant role. At the very least, Wittgenstein makes an association between pictures and meaning, though what this association is supposed ultimately to come to is up to dispute. Szabados and Lugg make a plausible case that the film helps support the view that it is possible to read pictures in various ways, that the application and context for the pictures are all important for us (100). This can be seen as a response to a (dominant?) reading of the *Tractatus* that supposes that pictures work as they do independently of application and context. This is striking because this is exactly the kind of activity that occurs regularly within academic philosophy: one philosopher takes issue with some aspect of a dominant view, giving evidence that it isn't quite right. What is unique here is that the evidence comes from film instead of a stretch of prose. The effect, Szabados and Lugg seem to be claiming, is the same. Why not say the film is doing philosophy then?

In much of the rest of their essay, Szabados and Lugg are concerned to say something about how the various 'layers of meaning' of the film make sense to us. The found images are in one sense absent a context, and in another sense not. For instance a Star of David has significance, especially given the apparent age of the footage, because of social context, background, and appearances. However, questions remain: what is happening to these people here, what exactly are their relationships—more context is desirable for better understanding. So we see a kind of 'underdetermination' of meaning is possible (101). What is the ultimate significance of this possibility?

There is a brief treatment specifically of *Wittgenstein Tractatus* in William C. Wees' '"How It *Was* Then": Home Movies as History in Péter Forgács's *Meanwhile Somewhere…*'. (Most of the chapter focuses on *Meanwhile Somewhere…* [1994].) This discussion is important for highlighting other layers of meaning, namely, the significant formal features of the work. Thus, editing, compounded images, juxtapositions, soundtrack, and so forth, all provide 'contextualization'. This is much like Wittgenstein's writing: its formal structure contextualizes its parts (to a greater degree, in some ways, than more 'traditional' forms of writing). Sufficient contextualization helps us understand both the film and the philosophy text.

Wees finds the home movies of *Wittgenstein Tractatus* to be 'unanchored in specific times and places…[and] without historical, political, or cultural contextualization' (88). Thus we are able to construct merely 'provisional contexts'; our reading of the film is 'guess work and always subject to revision' (88). However, this is not an all out nihilism. Possible readings are constrained somewhat by the film's 'structuring devices'. The elasticity that remains leads Wees to compare the work to poetry.

Christina Stojanova also makes this comparison, in her 'Beyond Text and Image: Péter Forgács and his *Wittgenstein Tractatus*'. In an effort to help to counter this ambiguity she enlists the aid of philosophy. She imports work by Benjamin, Deleuze, Wittgenstein, and others in order to help make sense of one's experiences while viewing *Wittgenstein Tractatus*. For Stojanova, viewers are 'challenged to make their own choices

in the battle for meaning between Wittgensteinian rigorous *Logos*, and the unyielding and messy physical Realilty of human tragedies, dramas, and comedies, implied in the home-movies fragments' (134). Philosophers' writings can help one make these choices.

Forgács's accomplishment seems to be to have produced ambiguity that is forced upon the viewer. 'The *Tractatus* film…transcends Forgács's experiments with text and image bracketing by creating a mesmerizing palimpsest of meanings not only far greater but also different from the sum of its components, and produces multiple spectatorial positions and interpretations' (123). Forgács somehow 'transcends the limits of both image and language' (134), by *not* remaining silent about that which cannot be spoken of, by making plain 'the deepest ambiguity' between the personal and the impersonal (where meaning ought to live).

Jarman's *Wittgenstein* appears like a filmed play, especially because of its black backdrops and minimal use of set pieces. What pieces there are and the appearances of the actors become naturally highlighted for the viewer. In 'The World Hued: Jarman and Wittgenstein on Color', Steven Burns convincingly explores the possible significances of these uses of color and how we come to understand them. For example, he examines the scenes set in Wittgenstein's seminar. The students 'wear an assortment of bright sporting gear' and the folding chairs are painted 'a very bright yellow' (40). These colors 'do their work first of all for us, the viewers, who receive them as extra data about the subjects of the film' (41). We see them explicitly as loaded with significance.

Even further, Burns draws useful comparisons between Jarman's use of color and Wittgenstein's writings on the topic. He makes the case that for Wittgenstein, color might be used as a test for the differences in his general philosophical outlook as things stood in his so-called 'early', 'middle' and 'late' periods. For both Jarman and Wittgenstein, thinking about color (and how we make use of it) reveals the individual to be closer to others than one might think—the individual is not metaphysically isolated and doomed to misunderstanding.

Daniel Steuer's 'Sketches of Landscapes: Wittgenstein after *Wittgenstein*' in some ways illustrates themes both in Jarman's (and Forgács's) film and in many of the chapters in this book. Part 7 of his essay essentially becomes a performance. In it are quotations, jokes, dialogues—and it's all somewhat jarring to the reader upon first encounter. What has happened? The reader is forced to try to make sense of what Steuer has given us. But is this not much like what the viewer must do when watching the amalgam of scenes, real and unreal, from the supposed life of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the film?

So it seems that Steuer has given us a way of challenging the apparent distinction between illustrating and doing philosophy. For he—like both films discussed in this book—can be said to be doing both (as is, I believe, Wittgenstein himself). This is important for what we consider to be possible characterizations of the relationship(s) between film and philosophy.

Steuer offers some conclusions about the task of 'trying to make sense of things'. 'The play between background (assumptions) and foreground (judgments) is a movement between concrete, and discontinuous frames—moves we make—and an indeterminate background, or rather: a background that a) is never fully present, and b) contains essential indeterminacy' (71-2). Understanding the film is a metaphor for—or perhaps better, instance of—understanding generally. Ultimately there is an essential indeterminacy, arbitrariness in meaning, ungroundedness. Returning to Wittgenstein, Steuer offers consideration of 'the complete language-game of "hoping"' as an example (72). Such an account might run 'thousands of pages, and still remain incomplete' (72). Steuer suggests then that 'all Wittgenstein can do is set up paradigmatic pointers' (72). Indeed, this is in fact all any of us can do. However, is this insufficient? Steuer believes so, but matters aren't so clear in Wittgenstein's work itself. Wittgenstein's concern with the purity of logic is at issue here, but eventually he is reassured by the sufficiency of the everyday (see, e.g., *Philosophical Investigations*, §§90-91).

There is more organization to this collection than might first be apparent. The best essays take Wittgensteinian inspiration to perform what I would call an 'investigation of meaning'. Thus they attend to particulars and trace roots of actual meanings to say something about the impact and importance of Wittgenstein's work, about these films that are related in some way to his work, and about philosophy and film generally. All this comes from our shared perspective: it is important that Wittgenstein lends no authority to the discussions, i.e., that we are in the same position as he is for sorting out meanings. One recurrent theme is a kind of skepticism about meaning itself. Though my view is that there's no useful sense in which Wittgenstein could be called a skeptic about meaning—we have no reason to say that there's any kind of *general* 'something lacking' when it comes to what/how we mean what we do by our words and actions—these essays could be seen as various responses to this concern. What is unique and valuable is the integration of films into the discussions.

Craig Fox
California University of Pennsylvania