

**Robert Sinnerbrink**

*New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images.*

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The most commonly occurring questions within the contemporary philosophy of film are questions that challenge our approach to the discipline itself. Is the philosophy of film a sub-division of aesthetics or a unique field of study? Can cinema be presented as a form of analytic argumentation or is it primarily a narrative art? Should philosophical films be treated as thought experiments, allegorical examples or as primary source documents? Getting down to the real work of evaluating arguments is too often delayed by detours of rationalization, needlessly expending effort on justifying the process itself as having sufficient merit to our field. It is possible to engage in critical readings of philosophical films without continuously retracing the questions of what narrative is, what cinema is or even what the role of philosophy is in the twenty-first century.

Robert Sinnerbrink's approach presents a comfortable balance between the post-modern concern of 'what is the philosophy of film' and a more direct deconstruction of the pictures themselves. By applying the term 'new wave' to contemporary film theory Sinnerbrink attempts to replace the last century's psychoanalytic, continental approach with a newly configured "analytic-cognitivist paradigm". The romantic aesthetics of cornerstone works such as Bazin's *Ontology of Film* are supplanted here by the rationalist film-philosophies of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. The book advocates a changing of the guard and Cavell and Deleuze are given the status of being figureheads for this ideological shift.

*New Philosophies of Film* is primarily an explanation and assessment of current trends in the discipline, with the author's own argumentative claims only peeking through occasionally. Clearly the author has aligned himself with Cavell, and in defending Cavell's positions he is also working to define his own. Overall, the book seems to be suggesting that Cavell and Deleuze represent a new and more suitably broad approach to film-philosophy that includes narrative, aesthetic imagery, context, pedagogy, and metaphorical argumentation as necessary conditions. In addition to this, Sinnerbrink wants to enhance the element of communication between the mediums of cinema and philosophy. This means more than simply increasing the dialogue between experts in these two fields of study or creating new spaces for greater interdisciplinary crossover. The real goal of his project is to "allow film to communicate with philosophy in more aesthetically receptive ways... open up new ways of thinking with film, and thus help ameliorate philosophy's traditional disenfranchisement with art." (7)

The book is structured very formally and with attention to process. Each chapter begins with an outline of what points will be made and how historically relevant examples (from both philosophers and filmmakers) will fit into those points. Within each section, many film references are utilized, sometimes even going so far as to describe the characters and restate the basic story lines. This approach comes to its pinnacle in the final section of the text, which is a

detailed discussion of three films Sinnerbrink has selected as representing important examples of his film-philosophy.

David Lynch's *Inland Empire*, Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist*, and Terrence Malick's *The New World* are the features chosen for an in-depth evaluation. Sinnerbrink suggests that there is a sort of ethical purpose in his selection of non-mainstream, marginal art films. For these three examples, however, he does not explain what that ethical purpose is or how these specific choices are supported by that purpose. David Lynch's films have always been a favorite for philosophical discussion. The exploration of *Inland Empire* contextualizes this terribly complex film as a thoughtful critique of the Hollywood industrial system. While this may be an important part of Lynch's intended statement, it is not clear why the question of Hollywood's disassociation from the European cinematic tradition would be an issue for contemporary philosophy.

The deconstruction of Von Trier's *Antichrist* provides a better example. Here the conversation manages to include elements of Aristotelian categorization, Freudian guilt and general questions concerning human responses to horror. Although this may not be the best archetype to utilize for a conversation about the genre of horror (the question of whether the film is a work of horror or something more along the lines of a classic tragedy is covered), it does allow Sinnerbrink to take some critical shots at Noël Carroll while also bringing the philosophies of Cynthia Freeland and Carl Plantinga to the conversation. The film serves as an excellent example of the book's claims that viewers can be 'shocked to thought' and that exposure to such powerful imagery can serve as a unifying experience, aligning the audience against the growing nihilism and isolating subjectivity of the world.

The third and final case study here is of Terrence Malick's *The New World*. In a book that owes as much to Stanley Cavell as this one does, selecting a work by Malick (who studied under Cavell at Harvard) is an interesting move. This choice raises some important questions. Do the qualifications or the intentions of a filmmaker change the status of the work? Are Malick's films more worthy of attention in this context merely because he can be labeled as a philosopher in the traditional, scholastic sense? These aesthetic issues are raised earlier in the book during a brief debate concerning Paisley Livingston's intentionalist account. The author builds a strong argument against Livingston's position that such films are little more than illustrations of pre-existing philosophical ideas and that therefore they do not really contribute to the growth of philosophical knowledge. After all, plenty of contemporary philosophy is guilty of the same offense—presenting new ways of illustrating pre-existing ideas. It is in a section of chapter six, titled *Scenes from a Marriage: On the Idea of Film as Philosophy*, that Sinnerbrink reveals his most direct argumentation.

*The New World* itself is treated as a paradigm of the symbiotic unfurling of art and philosophical thought, symmetrically and subtly intertwined. Sinnerbrink writes, "the film enacts a kind of cinematic thinking that invites philosophical and aesthetic responses, while articulating a kind of thinking that resists translation into a ready-made thesis, position or argument." (181) The problem with this claim is that while it does express the romantic enticement of thought provoking cinema, it does not give any hint as to what particular philosophical thoughts might be provoked by this particular film. Without specifying what the

audience is being asked to think about, all that is really being stated is that this film ‘makes you think’, which may be true but does not explain why special attention is being given to this picture.

This is not a shortcoming of *New Philosophies of Film*, it is its central idea exemplified. The process this book presents is not about analyzing the content or meaning of the images, or even of the stories themselves. Sinnerbrink’s idea is actually to take a deeper look at our engagement with films as both works of art and as experiences to reflect upon. Philosophy ought to be a social activity, not a private academic pursuit. If this is the case, then exposing groups of people to common images and narratives which aim to promote skeptical thoughts, aesthetic experiences or critical curiosity can only be a positive contribution to the way we practice philosophy.

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