Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures
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Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures
An Anthology

Edited by
Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi
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In the eighteenth century, only the wealthiest and most privileged persons could have had a theater in their own homes. But today in virtue of television, video cassette recorders, and DVD players, most citizens of the industrialized world have something very like a theater—and often two or more—in their households. These “theaters,” of course, do not feature live dramas, but rather motion pictures—pictures stored on some sort of template like film and shown in a way that imparts the impression of movement. And from that impression, moving images are born, vistas are opened, and stories are told.

Though many of us today might yearn for the delicate and quaintly imaginative stagecraft of an antique era, surely Vattel—the creator of spectacles for the Bourbon court—would envy the magic-making capacities of the contemporary motion picture artist. The display of fireworks and explosions, and the armies of clones and whatever on view nightly in our living rooms and dens would have staggered Vattel’s comprehension. Perhaps his master would have given his kingdom for one of our TVs. The development of the motion picture has been an awesome step in the democratization of culture, providing the many with access to spectacles of the type that heretofore were the normal fare of the exceptionally few or of the many only on special occasions.

Motion pictures have become a fixture of everyday life in the modern world. They have been integrated into a wide variety of cultural processes involving education and the communication of information, and they have spawned their own practices—of art-making, entertainment, and documentary recording—with their own traditions. It would be surprising if a social enterprise as substantial as the motion picture did not attract philosophical attention. Thus predictably, the philosophical literature pertaining to it, especially in recent years, has grown exponentially. This anthology, in part, is an acknowledgment of that trend.

But what does philosophical attention to the motion picture comprise? In contrast to empirical research, philosophy is the discipline that is primarily preoccupied with the “logic” or conceptual frameworks of our practices. So a philosophical perspective on the motion picture involves attending to the conceptual frameworks of our motion picture practices. This includes: (1) the analysis of the concepts and categories that organize our practices (for example, asking what is film or what is a documentary?); (2) the clarification of the relations between those organizing concepts and categories (for example, can what falls under the category of film also fall under the category of art, or is there some reason that precludes the former from being an instance of the latter?); (3) the resolution of the conceptual paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions that the relevant practices appear to provoke (for example, how is it possible for us to fear fiction films?); (4) the elucidation of the forms of reasoning—the modes of connecting concepts—appropriate to our practices (for example, what techniques of interpretation are suitable or valid with respect to classic Hollywood movies?); and (5) the discovery of the metaphysical presuppositions and entailments of the conceptual frameworks of the relevant practices (for example, what kind of narrators, ontologically speaking, do fiction films presuppose?)
General Introduction

Pursuing these lines of inquiry composes the largest part of the philosophy of the moving picture. However, as the articles in this anthology frequently attest, there is also a part of the enterprise that, like the philosophy of mind, segues with cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. For the philosophy of motion pictures involves thinking about things like attention, emotion, recognition, inference, and so forth and, therefore, needs to be at least informed by scientific psychology, a feature of the philosophy of the motion pictures evinced amply in many of the essays in this volume.

Given the ever-growing importance of motion pictures to our culture, such questions about the logic and/or conceptual frameworks of our motion picture practices have come increasingly to the fore. The purpose of this anthology is to air a selection of some of the most pertinent recent writing on these philosophical topics.

With the exception of S. K. Langer’s “A Note on the Film,” the writing in this volume has all been published since 1970 by philosophers who have grown up in the epoch of the motion picture. That is, they were born after the invention and popularization of the motion picture, and, as a result, movies have been an unexceptional feature of their cultural landscape. For the philosophers born before World War II, a visit to the movie theater was an ordinary pleasure, while for those born after World War II, in addition to a trip to the cinema, the repertoire of film history has also been continuously available on TV and then video cassettes and DVDs. Because of their ever-expanding familiarity with motion pictures, more philosophers are asking more questions about moving pictures than ever before, and they are posing their inquiries with heightened sophistication, precision, and refinement. Thus, the last three and a half decades have benefited from an unparalleled philosophical scrutiny of a diversity of cases showcased in this collection.

But though the philosophy of the motion picture is flourishing, particularly at present, it would be an error to think that it is only a concern of recent vintage. For the philosophy of the motion picture arrived on the scene very soon after those inaugural moving pictures – namely, films – became ensconced as a significant cultural force. Early on, film was enmeshed in an intense philosophical debate. Because of its photographic provenance, many argued that film could not be an artform. For, it was assumed, photography was nothing but the mechanical reproduction of whatever stood before the camera lens. Just as a mirror reflection of a table full of decoratively arranged viands is not an artwork, no matter how much it might resemble some still life, so it was argued, neither is a photograph – whether still or moving – an artwork. It is merely a slavish recording with no art to it. As mechanical processes, photography and cinematography allegedly afford no space for expression, imaginative elaboration, and/or creativity and, therefore, are artless.

Though early film theorists, like Rudolf Arnheim, vigorously disputed the case against film art, the prejudice has lingered into the present and been advanced in a philosophically adept fashion by Roger Scruton. Since the issue of whether film can be art was historically the first philosophical challenge leveled at the motion picture, we begin this anthology in honor of it – leading off the first section with Scruton’s brief against the possibility of film art and then following that with Dominic McIver Lopes’s case in favor of an art of motion pictures.

The debate over whether films or motion pictures can be art hinges on certain presuppositions about what kind of thing a film is. Those who deny it art status presume that it is essentially photographic, and, furthermore, presuppose that photography, by definition, is mechanical in a way that is categorically inhospitable to art making. But is this true? What is film? To what category does it belong? In Part II, a gamut of answers to this question is interrogated by various philosophers. Suggestions canvassed include not only that film is essentially a photographic instrument, but also that it is a language, that it is a form of dream, and finally that it is a moving picture or image.

As indicated, the first moving pictures were the products of photographic film. Many of these images were documentary in nature, such as the famous actualités of the Lumière Brothers. Moreover, inasmuch as the film camera was designed to be – first and foremost – a recording device, there has long been an association between film and documentation to the extent that one of the most enduring genres of the moving image has been the documentary or nonfiction film. Part III of this anthology takes up the question of the nature of such filmmaking, with two philosophers setting out contrasting conceptions of the nonfiction film.

Though the nonfiction film represents one of the oldest traditions of motion picture making, it is probably not the sort of endeavor that first comes
to mind when people think of cinema. In all likelihood, at the mention of movies the majority of us start thinking about narrative fictions, surely the most popular type of motion pictures to date. So in Part IV of this volume, we turn to the issue of the narration of fiction films and the special problems and complexities that contemporary philosophers imagine it to involve.

Motion pictures are intimately bound up with the emotions. When it comes to fiction films, one might be tempted to call them E-motion pictures. Films not only move; they move us (emotionally). Many film genres take their very labels from the emotions they are typically designed to engender, such as horror films, suspense films and tear-jerkers. Part V of this text is focused on the relation of motion pictures to the emotions. It opens with a discussion of the way in which movies engage the garden-variety emotions and then goes on to grapple with certain apparent anomalies pertaining to our emotional responses to fiction – namely, how is it possible to be moved by cinematic fictions, since we know the events they depict do not exist? How can we, for example, recoil in fear at the notion of Slime when we know that there is no such thing?

Much of our affective engagement with filmed fictions centers upon our relations with characters. But what is the nature of that emotional relation? In the fifth section, several philosophers explore different conceptions of it, including identification, empathy, and simulation.

We not only respond to films emotionally in the moment. We also talk about them afterwards with each other and analyze and assess them. Film criticism – pursued by professional critics and ordinary viewers alike – is a part of the practice of cinema along with filmmaking and film viewing. Just as philosophers reflect upon the conceptual frameworks that organize the latter activities, they also examine the concepts and modes of thinking – the categories and procedures – that facilitate the practice of film criticism. Sometimes called metacriticism, the philosophy of film criticism epistemically weighs the appropriateness of alternative interpretive protocols and attempts to reconstruct rationally the categories that inform the conduct of criticism. In Part VI, George M. Wilson rejects a dominant style of contemporary academic film interpretation and offers a series of more nuanced critical concepts in its stead. Then in subsequent essays, different philosophers attempt to distill the saving remnant of and to defend for critical discipline respectively the organizing concept of cinematic authorship and the very idea of a national cinema.

If only because of the connection between motion pictures and the emotions, movies inevitably come in contact with morality. How do films stand in relation to right and wrong? Are some motion pictures morally salutary, and, if so, how? Can some films contribute to the cultivation of virtue? But aren’t other films morally pernicious and even harmful – such as pornographic films? Yet how is it possible for a film to be harmful and what should we do about it? Can we censor such films? And how are we to respond to motion pictures that appear to be artistically accomplished but also evil? In what way do moral factors and artistic ones come into play in an all-things-considered judgment of a film? These are the sorts of issues that vex Part VII of this anthology.

The final section, Part VIII, is preoccupied with the relation of motion pictures to knowledge in general and to philosophical knowledge in particular. Obviously not all films add to our fund of knowledge and perhaps even fewer can lay claim to the title of philosophy. But might it be the case that at least some motion pictures can satisfy the criteria required to count as genuine knowledge, philosophical or otherwise? Skeptics argue “no,” for genuine knowledge claims, they assert, demand to be backed by evidence and, especially in the case of philosophy, by argument. Yet fiction films are bereft of evidence and argument; so even if they convey truths, those truths do not amount to knowledge, since they have not been justified by means of evidence and argument.

Nevertheless, this species of skepticism is liable to attack from at least two different directions. On the one hand, it may be countered that the view of knowledge, and particularly the view of philosophical knowledge, countenanced by the skeptic is too narrow. Or, alternatively, it may be demonstrated that narrative fictions possess structural resources that enable them to mount what may be reasonably described as arguments. Both strategies are deployed against the skeptic in the closing section of this volume.

Perhaps needless to say, the topics selected for discussion herein are but a sampling of the issues that intrigue and engage contemporary philosophers of the moving image. Another anthology might propose an entirely different agenda, emphasizing, for example, the relation of motion pictures to the preoccupations of political philosophy.
General Introduction

We would never suggest that the itinerary through the field offered between these covers is the only way of introducing beginning students to the philosophy of the motion picture. It is a fairly representative overview of the kind of work produced by so-called analytic philosophers of film. But one might enter the conversation by a different route. What is important is simply to begin somewhere. So we invite you to start here and now.

N.C.

Note

1 For a fuller account of this view of philosophy, see the introduction to Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000).
PART I

Film as Art