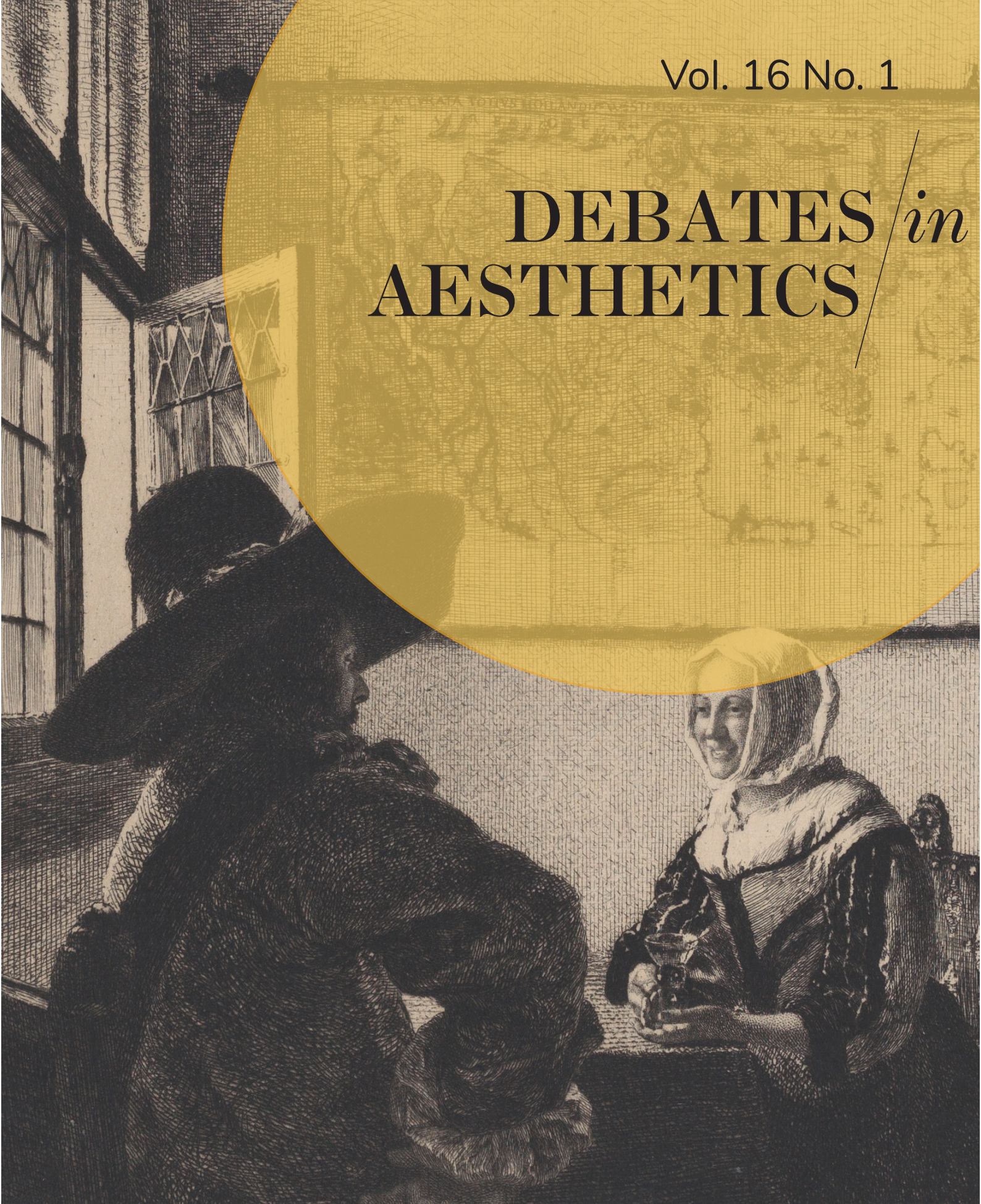


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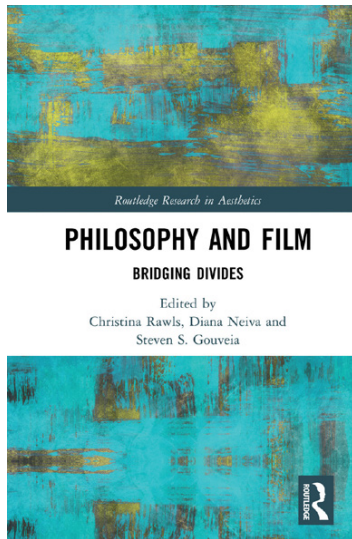
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## Philosophy and Film *Bridging Divides*

Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva, Steven S. Gouveia (eds)  
Routledge  
2019, 400pp  
£96.00 (hb) £29 (ebook)

Britt Harrison

Autonomous and occasionally antagonistic methodological traditions are constitutive of the history and contemporary practice of those working at the intersection of philosophy and film. In David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's 1996 collected volume, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, the editors simultaneously championed the burgeoning philosophical field of cognitive film theory whilst enjoining the more continentally orientated film 'Theorists' to a showdown; all in the name of progress. Carroll proposed what he called 'methodologically robust pluralism' (1996, 63): a shared enterprise in which theories about film would be compared, evaluated, where possible consolidated, and where necessary eliminated. In motivating this engagement, Carroll criticised Theorists whose work owed much to the substance and preoccupations of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and others, dismissing their prose stylings as 'arcane peregrinations', condemning their suspicions of science as 'feckless', and evaluating their interpretations of films as the products of a 'standard-issue sausage machine churning out readings that look and smell the same' (Bordwell & Carroll 1996, 37, 43, 59). Unsurprisingly, the theoretical battle was unjoined.

More than twenty-years later, cognitive film theorists carry on apace, eagerly engaging with analytic philosophers of mind, cognitive scientists and psychologists. Those working in the more continental tradition continue their own allegiances to some, though not necessarily all, of Theory's Marxist, psychoanalytic, semiotic, feminist, and cultural studies' touchstones and tropes. Future historians will, perhaps, recognise the creation and consolidation of so-called 'film-philosophy' as an exercise in re-booting and re-branding the continental/Theoretical tradition in the wake of the cognitivist challenge. Now, with Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva, and Steve S. Gouveia's collected volume, we have a fresh attempt to bridge the methodological divide. This time the impetus comes from the film-philosophical side of the continental divide and most of the current methodological modes are on display. The material explored with is no less diverse, and includes *The Sopranos*, *Superman*, *David Holzman's Diary*, *Detention*, *Irreversible*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *The Third Man*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, *Under the Skin*, *8 ½*, *Ulysses Gaze*, *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Memento*, *Get Out*, *Black Panther*, *Forgiveness*, *Local Angel*, *The Game of Thrones*, *Somewhere in Time*, and more.

Of all the twenty chapters in Rawls et al, only Robert Sinnerbrink's 'Film and Ethics' might reasonably be described as acknowledging, and seeking to bridge, the methodological gap between film-philosophy and analytic philosophy of film, pace Sinnerbrink's own taxonomy of contemporary approaches. Sinnerbrink's contribution continues his own ongoing methodological trajectory out from film-philosophy in search of a more analytic-orientated academic audience, as evidenced in his 2015 monograph *Cinematic Ethics*. In 'Film and Ethics' here, Sinnerbrink rehearses some of his familiar observations about the disenfranchisement of film and philosophy, seeing in a revitalised moral engagement with film the opportunity for the desired re-enfranchisement. He also offers a number of fresh historical and methodological insights, not least the bold acknowledgement, perhaps even confession, that, "[f]ilm theory was politics pursued by other means" (2019, 188). None of the other authors, however, reflect on the nature, history, or values involved in the different approaches, assumptions, and ambitions at work in the various traditions. The authors simply manifest their own preferred default methodology and no attempt is made to synthesise approaches or debate

their relative merits. Uniquely, Malcolm Turvey's contribution questions the value of his own apparent methodological *modus operandi*. After a paradigmatic display of how-to-do contemporary analytic philosophy – dissecting the pros and cons of Robert Hopkins' and Murray Smith's mutually exclusive uses of Wollheim's notion of twofoldness – Turvey reflects on what is actually achieved through this testing, winnowing, and 'improving' of seemingly relevant theories. Rather than embrace the kind of quasi-scientific theoretical processes championed by the analytic tradition (and Carroll in 1996), Turvey arrives at an aporetic view of the progress achieved in understanding the question: what do we see in a film? Instead of attempting to build bridges between distinct methodological traditions, Turvey digs into the bedrock of his own. His example works as an *agent provocateur*, daring readers to do the same.

Roughly a third of the remaining papers are analytic in approach, another third are examples of film-philosophy borne of the more Theoretical tradition, and the remainder plough less-easily categorised furrows, drawing on the ideas of Husserl, Montaigne, and Stanley Cavell. The result is not so much a display of the *authorial* bridge-building as the opportunity for readers to island-hop amongst the archipelago of mono-focussed methodologies employed by today's film-philosophers and philosophers in/of/through/with film. Although Thomas E. Wartenberg's 'Preface' acknowledges there has been insufficient cross-fertilisation between the broadly conceived analytic and continental traditions, this volume provides the reader with the opportunity to appreciate why this might be so, and why change is unlikely. The differences between the orientations are laid bare, for example, in the use (or absence) of argument, critical interlocutors, and objections; the commitment (or aversion) to system-building, neologisms, and the strained grammar of Theory-infused prose; and the extent to which the reader is presumed already to be (or helped to become) *au fait* with the terminology, concepts, and films under discussion.

Whilst the search for common ground on which to build the foundations of any putative bridges is shown to be fraught with incompatible priorities, principles, and practices, Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo does encourage her readers to engage with the rich resources of film writing available online and outside academia, and there is nothing to stop

philosophers of all stripes converging on this neutral territory. The co-existence pluralism that Carroll sought to move beyond shows no sign of abating. Instead, we are treated to the irony of Carroll's contribution (on the interdependence of erotetic narration and criterial prefocusing) sitting amidst articles that laud, exploit, and extend the work of Deleuze and Foucault. The latter includes Steen Ledet Christiansen's Deleuzian-inspired morph-image as a way of appreciating the four forms of post-cinema; Susana Viegas' exploration of the connection between the arrow of linear time (Chronos) and circular time (Aiôn); Christopher Falzon's re-conception of what an experimental film might be; and Oana Șerban argument for the biopolitical potential of art. The take-home message could not be clearer: the methodology wars are over, and nobody won.

The editors' 'bridging divides' ambition does, however, aim at a second target: the possibility that film might be, or be able to do, philosophy. The second part of the volume, 'The Film as Philosophy Debate', offers articles directly addressing this subject by Paisley Livingston, Tom McClelland, Diana Neiva, and David Davies. Whilst there are direct, and indirect, contributions to this debate scattered throughout the five other parts of the book – 'The Nature of Film', 'The Philosophical Value of Film', 'Cinematic Experience', 'Interpreting Cinematic Works', and 'Further Debates' – it is the quantity and quality of articles on this topic that is the volume's strength. The film-as-philosophy section opens with Livingston's re-examination of the possibility of the so-called 'bold thesis' that film or cinema is philosophy. Still unconvinced that films can philosophize in ways that deliver results of *high* epistemic value through *high* or 'strong' cinematic means, Livingston challenges Rafe McGregor's (2014) and Andrew Kania's (2009) claims to the contrary using *Memento*. He finishes with a tantalizing gesture towards the importance of *implicature* as a possible solution to the debate's key dilemma: either you lecture the audience (directly or through a *porte parole* character) in which case, where is the cinematic specificity?; or the very presence of philosophical content becomes suspect. Echoing the metaphilosophical leanings of Turvey, Livingston proposes that "careful attention to specific cases is more likely to be illuminating than theoretical polemics" (2019, 89).

McClelland's paper proposes a 'best tool principle' according to which it is sometimes the case that a filmic rather than a prose-based thought

experiment (TE) is the better tool for the job. Examples would be illuminating here. For McClelland, a TE, in either media, earns its philosophical stripes if it helps us “find our way around a philosophical issue” or provides insights into “our own patterns of thought.” (2019, 112) For many this is too low a bar to count as having genuine philosophical value. Indeed, for Nieva, the importance of resolving the ‘what is philosophy?’ question is the crucial step in this debate. She helpfully comes down off the fence with her own normative answers arguing that Bruce Russell and Murray Smith’s rejection of, or at least resistance to, the idea of film as philosophy, turns on conceptions of philosophy that are “too revisionist” and “too narrow” whilst Stephen Mulhall’s is “too inclusive” (2019, 127, 130). Davies helpfully re-presents his reading of the key issues before marrying resources on affect, from cognitivist Amy Coplan, with Merleau-Pontian ideas on embodied agency in support of a Sinnerbrink-friendly notion of cinematic thinking. Also of substantial interest is Jônadas Techio’s rescue-reading of Cavellian skepticism, seeing it as a Wittgensteinian device from which to see the world viewed in, and on, film; not as something apart from us, but as helping to return us to the ordinary. And whilst Emersonian perfectionism is not mentioned, its presence hovers over Roberto Mordacci’s fascinating look at Fellini’s *8 ½* in illuminating parallel with Montaigne’s *Essais*.

Despite their distinct and, at times, tension-generating justifications, all the contributors who investigate film-as-philosophy are unanimous: films can and do philosophise, and in non-trivial ways. That said, a number of perennial issues remain unanswered or, at least, in need of further clarification: (i) can Plato’s worries that art corrupts, epistemically and morally, actually be addressed, rather than simply side-stepped? (ii) when are claims that films philosophize, or think, elliptical for the claim that *film-makers* philosophize or think, and when not? and (iii) what films might or should we watch if we are to benefit from the supposed substantive results of cinematic philosophising, and why, exactly? Is there a canon to be had? Finally, there is a noticeable absence of copy-editing, and a disappointingly brief editors’ introduction. It would have been intriguing to see the editors reflect on the very idea of the viability and value of their bridge-building ambitions. To what extent do the silos of academic specialisation entail the mono-methodological limitations exhibited here? Perhaps this question will only be answered when today’s readership



becomes tomorrow's authors, and today's readership has had the benefit of just such a broader diet of philosophical, and film-philosophical orientations. Until then, this is a provocative and diverse collection that has something for everyone, rather like the range of films its authors explore.

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