

Craig Fox and Britt Harrison (Eds.) (2023). *Philosophy of Film Without Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 308 pp.

“Theory blinds” (p. 5). This aphorism not only becomes the foundational arch-point of Craig Fox and Britt Harrison’s novel work, but it also outsources itself from the very point of genesis that influences the authors in question here, namely Ludwig Wittgenstein. It was Wittgenstein’s assertions about the limitations of (scientific) theory, and its application onto philosophical inquiry, found in his *Tractatus Logic-Philosophicus* (1921), that now fuel the critical revaluations of Fox and Harrison concerning the philosophisation of film *without theory*. It seems like a bizarre perspective – looking away from imposing theoretical approaches while philosophising the arts – more because contemporary research seems to abound with over-reliance on grand theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis or cultural criticism; but Fox and Harrison propose an intriguing argument that aims at diversifying the spectrum of ideologies, recurrent in literature and films, by delimiting the scope of theory. Fox and Harrison argue for a mode of theory-free thinking that addresses the polysemic nature of humanities-related discourse(s). Against the plethora of systems of constraining methodologies, the authors argue for an ever-widening approach that incorporates a range of critical styles and methods, including (but not exclusively limited to):

fine-grained description and discernment; disentangling confusions; reactive and/or reflective critical inquiry, the exploration of conceptual connections; conceptual clarification and synthesis; logical geography; the provision of perspicuous presentations and surveyable overviews; systematic and non-systematic engagement with individual or particular works, subjects, objects, ideas, events and/or situations; and an appreciation that the view is always from somewhere and at some time, and so on. (p. 4)

Several of these styles are liberating in the pursuit of the *philosophisation* of film, as they allow for the open-endedness of “non-, anti-, and/or a-theoretical approaches” (p. 1) to regulate much of the critiquing process. A riveting engagement with these new methods is reflected in the 17 contributions to this five-part volume which thus becomes a multifaceted enquiry into the possibilities of the perpetual fragmentation, and concurrent evolution, of theory-less approaches as fuelled by insights from a range of thinkers and scholars, including Aristotle, St. Augustine, Iris Murdoch, Roland Barthes, Giles Deleuze, Berys Gaut and Noël Carroll, amongst others. However, the essays are written with a reflective consciousness and, therefore, the individual ideas of these thinkers, while


providing a necessary backdrop, do not govern the authors' overarching arguments and interpretations. In the vein of what Colin Burnett (2013) terms "individuality through reference" (p. 5) to understand the paradigms of transnational influence, invoking these philosophers is advanced with the intention of either unraveling new dimensions of meaning-making or of expanding upon present knowledge.

For instance, Rob van Gerwen employs Barthes's idea of "punctum" as established in his 1980 retrospective treatise on photography, *Camera Lucida*. According to Barthes, a photograph is loaded with subjectivity; it stimulates different emotions in different people, and those emotions, the perspectives of looking, can be completely opposite/contrary to the photographer's. This subjective element of a photograph is shaped by the punctum which stands in a counterposition to what Barthes calls the "studium" (the general or historio-cultural context of a photograph). The punctum, by definition, is a very specific detail or element within a photograph that may invoke certain private meanings for the viewer regardless of the cultural or political limitations of the photograph's geography. In effect, the punctum is transcendental. However, Barthes's punctum was limited to the domains of photographic art, and so van Gerwen's article, as the editors also point out in their introduction, "finesses Roland Barthes' notion of punctum" (p. 10) and ambitiously attempts to extend its structural meanings to briefly illuminate not only two significant scenes in Claude Lanzmann's documentary, *Shoah* (1985), but also how such *punctum* scenes can underscore the reality of our personal existence. His rhetorical question, "are there real-life analogues to *punctum* scenes in films?" (p. 217), is a provocative statement, as it echoes Aristotelian philosophies of life and poetry. Through pursuing this retrospective analysis, van Gerwen transforms the otherwise limited meanings of the punctum and demonstrates its trans-arts applicability. Van Gerwen's work is nevertheless only a component of a broader landscape of compelling and interesting theory-free approaches. From Katheryn Doran's investigation of cinematic ambiguity to James Conant's piecemeal revisiting of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), or Carla Carmona's attempts to cross-reference Wittgenstein with Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988) and to locate the points of entry for the amalgamation of art and philosophy – each article reveals a new, invigorating perspective through which to approach cinema without the overshadowing of theory.

Several of these essays demonstrate an intriguing correlation between literature and cinema, showing not only the potentialities of both forms to communicate ideas pertaining to philosophy, existence, metaphysics and humanity in general, but also how both inform the discourses

encapsulated within each other. “Literature” can also include forms of literary criticism and this becomes most evident in the volume’s section that discusses the art-philosophy of Stanley Cavell. Of particular interest is Craig Fox’s article on Kamran Shirdel’s satirical documentary, *The Night It Rained* (1967), and Fox’s emphasis on the usefulness of one of Cavell’s more influential texts, “Music Discomposed”, to discern what he understands as the similarities between the philosophical aspirations of the two texts. Fox underlines how both Shirdel’s film and Cavell’s writing end up questioning a similar idea: the powerlessness of the artist/critic to influence or, at the very least, to direct audiences’ interpretations. Both Shirdel and Cavell come to understand their artistic responsibilities as authors of texts, not as authors of audience reception – Fox’s work highlights just that and, in doing so, also improves upon our appreciation for both works.

In essence, *Philosophy of Film Without Theory* provides fascinating evidence for interrogative and experimental enquiries into film and filmmaking without running the risk of getting engulfed in a theoretical quagmire. Most of the articles contained in the volume blur the lines between popular and theoretical criticism. The boundless styles of these articles are inspiring and liberating: keeping the avenues of thought open-ended and possessing an empowering capacity to both enthrall and encourage not just academics, but potentially anyone who rejoices in the gifts of cinemas, to write about their favourite films/artists and to reconnect them to larger hermeneutic circles related to ways of looking at ourselves. Moreover, this attempt to invite theory-free investigations into films could become a suitable addition into *freer* pedagogical practices in the study of arts-related discourses. Theory-free enquiries could become a favoured way amongst undergraduate students to undertake fresh philosophical considerations of films, literature, or culture. Craig Fox and Britt Harrison initiate one of the first attempts to clearly express ways to bypass theory, and yet be able to make substantial and valuable contributions to the development of film studies (and arts in general).

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