# Inaugurating Philosophy of Film *Without Theory*

*Authors*

CRAIG FOX

&

BRITT HARRISON

*Affiliations*

CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

**Abstract:** Philosophy of film *without theory* is a methodology that aims to motivate and legitimise the current and future development of a range of a-, non-, and anti-theoretical ways of working at the intersection of film and philosophy. We contrast philosophy of film *without theory* with the main traditions of theoretically orientated philosophy of film, as well as philosophically inflected film Theory and film-philosophy. We also draw attention to the range of philosophical practices and pursuits that distinguish philosophy (in general) *without theory* and contemporary

philosophy (in general) with its near ubiquitous theoretical presumption. The paper finishes with a brief introduction to the various contributions to this Special Issue of *Aesthetic Investigations* on Philosophy of Film *without theory*.

Philosophy of film *without theory* is a newly articulated, open-ended methodology that aims to legitimise a-, non- and anti-theoretical methods and ways of working at the intersection of film and philosophy. One might reasonably assume from the main title of leading film scholars David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's 1996 volume, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, that the very idea of working in a-, non-, anti-theoretical ways has been underway for nearly three decades.[1] Not so. For Bordwell and Carroll's title did not herald any stepping away from, or moving beyond, theoretically orientated philosophical engagement with film. Rather, the editors' stated aim for their volume was to justify *piecemeal theorising*. Bordwell and Carroll were not eschewing the very idea of theory-creation or the pursuit of theoretical explanations, they were asserting that there was a new, and quite different, alternative to the practice of 'doing Theory' found in the Continental philosophy-inspired activities then hegemonic in various areas of film academia.

In their Introduction to *Post-Theory*, Bordwell and Carroll announced, 'What is coming after Theory is not another Theory but theor*ies* and the activity of *theorising*.'[2] In other words, 'Post-Theory' is not a matter of philosophising *without theory*, it is a collection of alternatively conceived *theoretical* approaches. In contrast to Theory (with a capital 'T') these theoretical (lower case 't') approaches were, and continue to be, informed by many of the dominant commitments guiding anglophone analytic philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century; specifically commitments to Quine's vision of philosophy as 'continuous with science'.[3] In 'Prospects for Film Theory', Carroll's own contribution to his co-edited volume, he enjoined the more Continentally orientated film Theorists to a theoretical showdown in the name of progress.[4] He proposed an interactive 'methodologically robust pluralism': a shared enterprise in which competing theories about film would be evaluated and revised along the lines of standard scientific practice, i.e., where possible theories would be consolidated, where necessary eliminated.[5] In promoting the need for this joint effort, Carroll criticised those 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'.[6] Unsurprisingly, the theoretical battle went unjoined; what rapidly became identified as cognitive film theory remained alone on its own side of the Continental divide.

A quarter of a century later, the theory vs. Theory wars are over – and nobody won. Bordwell and Carroll, together with many of their cognitivist-inclined theorising colleagues, including Greg Currie and Carl Plantinga, continue to engage with, and in the spirit of, those naturalising philosophers of mind, empirical researchers, and cognitive scientists, whose cognitivism often assumes propositional and/or representational theories of the mind/brain.[7] The various strands of Theory and the preoccupations of those who 'do Theory' – be they Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, etc. – have continued their own intellectual evolution, albeit many eschewing the capital 'T'. One of us suggests elsewhere that one way of understanding the orientations and methodological preoccupations of so-called 'film-philosophy' is to see it as a re-booting and re-branding of film Theory, in the wake of Bordwell and Carroll's 1996 onslaught.[8]

Whilst one can recognise comparable tensions and developments in the philosophy of literature, there is a crucial difference between film and literature. The practices, activities, institutions, readers, writers, listeners, viewers, critics, genre(s), etc., that constitute literature have existed, in various forms, for two and a half millennia, whilst those pertaining to film are barely a century old. By comparison, the contexts, world views, and possible methodological orientations available to viewers, critics, makers and philosophers of film are, and have inevitably been, much more circumscribed. Indeed, where serious reflection on literature has been informed by (and regularly reacted to and helped to shape) almost the entire extant history of ideas of humankind, film-making and the serious engagement with its productions have been informed almost entirely by the particularities and peculiarities of our intellectual history and philosophy for a fraction of that time.

Specifically, philosophical engagement with, and reflection on, film is limited to three main traditions whose adherents and/or legatees continue today. These three, all unabashedly theoretical, traditions are:

(1) *classical film theory* - driven by the goal of justifying the very possibility that a new technical invention could give rise to works worthy of being considered art. This began in the second decade of the twentieth century. Some of the classical film theorists' preoccupations, particularly the relation between value and medium-specificity, are currently being revived and reinvigorated by a number of contemporary philosophers of film.[9]

(2) *Theory or Grand Theory* – driven by, and incorporating, Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, post-modern, structuralist, post-structuralist, semiological and other, sometimes, so-called 'Continental' orientations whose academic interdependencies, evolution, and initial ascendency coincided – in the 1960s and 70s – with the decline of classical film theory and the increasing arrogation and consolidation of film and television into the intellectual fabric of

Theory-orientated communities. The classical film theorists' mission had (on their own terms) been made redundant through the unassailable empirical evidence of cinematic masterpieces: a film could be a work of art. For those 'doing Theory', however, the notion of a *work* – and thus the very possibility that some works might be art – is subservient to, and less informative than, the notion of a *text*, and the ubiquity of texts. Interest in (interrogating) texts for their ideological implications and revelations overtakes aesthetic or epistemological attention. Also, within, or emerging from, this tradition are a number of responses to 1996's *Post Theory* challenges. These include not only 'film-philosophy', but the theoretical application of the work of other philosophers (e.g., Heidegger) or recent philosophical traditions (e.g., phenomenology) to film.

(3) *cognitive or piecemeal film theory* – driven by the perceived importance of acknowledging and incorporating the increasingly naturalising methods and deliverances of philosophy of mind and cognitive science. This tradition was underway by the mid-1990s and is ongoing.

This preliminary sketch of the three broad traditions that have created, shaped and directed scholarly and philosophical encounters with film demands much more finessing than there is space for here.[10] Suffice it to say, of course, that not all analytic anglophone philosophers of the last half-century period are card-carrying Quineans and not all those who champion cognitive film theory actually do it or do it all the time.[11] Unsurprisingly, a number of theoreticians aligned with a specific tradition are developing interests in the work of one or more of the other traditions, and there are also a number of non-conformists, such as Stanley Cavell, whose writings on film cannot be obviously situated within any of the three alternative traditions.[12] Thus there is little value, today, in rehearsing those scholarly tensions that have fuelled the analytic-Continental divide. That said, the 2019 collected volume, *Philosophy and Film: Bridging Divides* offers twenty papers premised on the idea that the divide not only continues but is somehow exhaustive, and thereby invites or requires bridging.[13] Only two individual contributors, Malcolm Turvey and Robert Sinnerbrink, reflect on either the substance or value of either their own, or others', methods and methodologies. The result is a volume in which it is not the authors but the readers who might (in the future) bridge divides, thanks to the opportunity to island-hop amongst the archipelago of contributions from authors who (apart from Turvey and Sinnerbrink) remain siloed in their own recognisable theoretical traditions.[14] As if to confirm this, Thomas Wartenberg's brief Preface declares that between 'analytic and continental philosophers of film . . . there has not been sufficient cross-fertilisation'.[15] The very idea of doing philosophy of film *without theory* is, therefore, orthogonal to all three of these theoretical traditions and their associated meta-philosophical orientations.

As a preliminary to characterising the methodological ambitions and approaches of philosophy *without theory*, we offer a characterisation of philoso-

phy *with* theory, or indeed philosophy as theory. Theoretical philosophy – as a methodology rather than a subject matter, or subject area division – includes some, though not necessarily all, of the following: the search for and justification of law-like regularities; generalisations and/or universalisable claims that seek to unify or totalise; the postulation and exploitation of unobservable theoretical posits (both physical and metaphysical); concept creation; the pursuit of a-historical, a-temporal, context-free, non-situated facts; the use of mathematical and algorithmic techniques and expressions; the reduction of person-level characteristics, features and abilities to the sub-personal level; the assumption that resistance to physicalism entails a commitment to supernaturalism; prioritising the third-personal point of view often to the exclusion of all others; presuming the possibility and authority of the view from nowhere; and more.[16]

Whilst many of these theoretical activities are standard components of today's scientific practice, the suitability of such methods for philosophical investigations remains a contentious meta-philosophical question. For those who embrace the third tradition above – the Quinean path of taking philosophy to be continuous with science – this is, of course, not a problem. For those who are more cautious about the implications of collapsing the distinction between, or value of, science and philosophy – or science and the humanities *tout court* – embracing such theoretical methods and methodologies risks being *scientistic*.[17] Scientism is the activity of applying scientific principles and practices beyond the realm of their legitimate use. Scientistic misapplication of scientific methods and criteria to the activity of philosophising risks imperilling philosophical investigations into, and understanding of, the non-reducible aspects of ourselves and our human world. This is not to say that science *per se*, as an empirical investigation into the world is somehow a flawed enterprise: only that is a distinct one, with its own methodological underpinnings, ambitions and achievements.

By contrast, philosophy *without theory*, as a methodology, holds that the following methods are legitimate philosophical practices: 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; 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, etc. Philosophy of film, in embracing philosophy *without theory*, also includes the importance of focussing on, and paying close attention to, individual films.

As a matter of historical record, we chose to characterise this methodology we champion as philosophy of film *without theory*, rather than use the more familiar *a-, non-, or anti-theoretical* terminology for three reasons: (i) to draw attention to the thoroughgoingly theoretical nature of the three seemingly distinct traditions of philosophy of film and film studies, to date, whilst

simultaneously offering an opportunity and rubric with which to break from them; (ii) to avoid current and future confusion with Bordwell and Carroll's idea and book, *Post-Theory*; and (iii) to create a novel, succinct, and hopefully memorable name for the first conference in this new area, which we hosted at the University of York, in January 2019, and which has led, in the first instance, to this Special Issue.[18]

The full justification of the *without theory* methodology would be an exercise in meta-philosophy deserving of a monograph of its own. Its roots are in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, for whom philosophy is neither an empirical science nor an *a priori* science, since philosophy is not a science. On this appreciation of what philosophy is *per se*, it is not a quest for new knowledge, but for understanding.[19] Its methods include those in the *without theory* catalogue listed above; its goal is conceptual clarification and the dissolution of philosophical problems, the result of which might then contribute *inter alia* to scientific inquiry. In pursuing understanding, rather than scientific knowledge, the philosopher's goals include making sense of our world and ourselves, albeit not in scientific ways. As Wittgenstein puts it, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, 'And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear, and description alone must take its place.'[20] If the philosophical goal is to enrich our understanding and appreciation of films, film-making, and film-viewing then examining them more closely, in ways that can eschew theorising, is crucial.[21]

In 2001, Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey edited their ground-breaking collection *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts*, in which the very possibility of such a Wittgensteinian, a- or non-theoretical conception of philosophy of art was articulated and celebrated. And, of course, Stanley Cavell was probably the first philosopher, nearly half-a-century ago now, to marry his unique brand of Wittgensteinianism with an unquenchable enthusiasm for movies, thereby bringing their union to its unique fruition. Apart from Allen and Turvey's own intellectual film-related trajectories, and the work of various Cavellian scholars, almost no-one has pursued methods in the philosophy of film that are in sympathy to those of Wittgenstein.[22] Whilst we trust this Special Issue is a (further) sign that this is beginning to change, it is by no means necessary to be 'a Wittgensteinian' or to 'do Wittgensteinian philosophy of film', whatever that might mean, in order to be amenable to the methodological expansion we are encouraging. To be clear, the various methods and ways of doing philosophy of film *without theory* demonstrated in this Special Issue are just a few examples of the options, opportunities, and investigations one might develop and pursue under this open-ended rubric. From our perspective, if there are to be any constraints here, they would simply come from the particular films under examination

Briefly, the articles in this Special Issue include Craig Fox's own paper in which he asks why Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective* – nominally

a film about a police investigation – might incorporate a scene of extended reading from a dictionary. When placed alongside Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics* Fox shows that both the film and the philosophical text can be said to give suggestions for making sense of each other, and also for training the viewer and reader aesthetically to make sense of things more generally. Britt Harrison offers two different ways of engaging with Terrence Malick's *The New World*: one Heideggerian, one Cinematic Humanist. If the first is theoretical, as she argues it is, then does that entail the second, more Wittgensteinian, encounter, is no less theoretically committed? Jônadas Techio discerns in Cavell's diagnosis of modern skepticism a fragile balance between intimacy and separateness that is constitutive of our human condition. This inescapable dynamic that sustains our human relatedness is explored through the ordinary and extraordinary detail of Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring*. Katheryn Doran uses her detailed consideration of Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* to argue that standard ways of articulating the so-called 'Imposition Objection' – which claims that it is the viewer rather than the film that does or, as Thomas Wartenberg puts it, 'screens' philosophy – risk nourishing the force of the challenge, rather than diffusing it. She resists the assumption that an argument-based written philosophical text is paradigmatic of what it is to do philosophy. Kristin Hrehor sets theory aside to consider the resources and insights to be developed through a comparative investigation of two superficially distinct films of the 1970s: Brian de Palma's *Carrie* and Toshiya Fujita's *Lady Snowblood*. In their structural echoes, she finds specific and non-ideological ways of thinking about mother-daughter relations. Michael Forest argues that John Ford's *Stagecoach* provides an entirely apposite fulfilment of Ralph Waldo Emerson's clarion call for a new American scholar. Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, its achievement comes to pass in a medium, a nascent tradition, and a genre, that Emerson could never have imagined. Mikel Burley's close examination of Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanours* expands the familiar repertoire of readings of the film, simultaneously arguing for the value of such plurality. In so doing he articulates an appreciation of the film as dramatising a non-consequentialist notion of justice. Shai Tubali develops a three-way exploration of Robert Zemeckis's *Contact*, Denis Villenueve's *Arrival* and Albert Camus' understanding of the absurdity of the human condition. By paying close attention to the detail of the films and the protagonists' dramatic journeys he presents a possible way of making sense of the visions they offer, embracing their resonances and tensions. Colin Heber Percy proposes we can appreciate the sacred as having a cinematic quality, bringing this suggestion to life through his engagement with Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*. Using medieval, Heideggerian and Ancient Greek insights he explores what it is to see and be seen, and considers the extent to which this offers a revised notion of theory in terms of *theoria*. Rob van Gerwen's contribution investigates the extent to which the shared gazes of on-screen, actors, models and people can facilitate the Woll-

heimian distinction between the viewer's sense of being inside or outside a picture. He explores these issues through Bresson's *L'Argent* and, amongst others, the work of, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Finally, Andrew Klevan brings Ordinary Language Philosophy and film together for a long-awaited theory-free encounter. Building on his opening key-note presentation at the Philosophy of Film *Without Theory* Conference in 2019, he argues that the methods, priorities and ambitions of so-called OLP offer a powerful, but to date radically underused, set of resources for film studies and ways of engaging with individual films. We thank all the contributors here (and at our inaugural conference) for their commitment to exploring just some of the opportunities inherent in philosophy of film *without theory*. We especially thank editor Rob van Gerwen for his invitation to co-edit this Special Issue; it has been a delight and an education. Whilst this new tradition is yet nascent, we trust that it will continue – at least as long as there are films people want to discuss.

britt.harrison@york.ac.uk and fox@calu.edu

## NOTES

[1] Bordwell and Carroll 1996.

[2] Bordwell and Carroll 1996, xiv, original emphasis.

[3] Quine 1969, 126.

[4] Carroll 1996, 37-68.

[5] Carroll 1996, 63.

[6] Carroll 1996, 37, 59 and 43.

[7] See the 'History and Purpose' section of the Society of Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image website (under FAQs) for the society's *raison d'être* to examine 'how the theories and findings of empirical science can shed light on the art and craft of film, television, and other audiovisual media. More specifically, it supposes that the field cognitive and brain science, which has burgeoned since the 1960s, can illuminate many aspects of the workings of motion pictures. It is with the purpose of fostering this line of research that a group of scholars came together, starting in the mid 1990s.' Available at: https://scsmi-online.org/faq [Accessed 5.6.20].

[8] Harrison (forthcoming).

[9] See Gaut 2010 for Berys Gaut's acknowledgement of his Bazinian roots and his announced interest in sharing many of the concerns of classical theorists. Gaut takes recent challenges to the artistic status of digital media (including non-photographic moving pictures and video games) as echoing the challenges faced by classical theorists in the face of the original *analogue* film materials and media.

[10] See Sinnerbrink 2019 for a four-way distinction between cognitivist film theory, Cavellian approaches, Deleuzian perspectives, and phenomenological and post-phenomenological ways of engaging with film. We take it that the Deleuzian, as well as the phenomenological and post-phenomenological approaches can be subsumed under our second tradition, these being recent evolutions within this theoretical (Theoretical) approach. See also Greg Currie's methodological dualism between 'Philosophy of Literature and Film' (PLF) and 'Theory of Literature of Film' (TLF) in his Currie 2016. On Currie's account, PLF, (one and the same as cognitive film theory) acknowledges and values an interest in naturalising and scientifically informed philosophical pursuits 'often friendly to Darwinian ideas'(Currie 2016, 642); whilst TLF embraces various semiotic, psychoanalytic, ideological, and other theoretical priorities pur-

sued in academic communities that are involved in film, media, language, literature and cultural studies. The former is typically practised in anglophone, analytic, philosophical contexts; the latter has come to dominate more (intellectually) Continental environments including non-philosophical humanities departments in anglophone countries. Borders between these are, as Currie acknowledges, 'porous'(Currie 2016, 642).

[11]See Carroll 2011 for what is perhaps an example of philosophy of film *without theory* from one of the founders of cognitive film theory.

[12]See also Carroll, Di Summa, and Loht 2019 for a 9-chapter section on 'Approaches and Schools'.

[13]Rawls, Neiva, and Gouveia 2019.

[14]Ironically, a contribution from Noël Carroll sits alongside work exemplifying aspects of the tradition that was on the receiving end of his blistering 1996 attack.

[15]See Wartenberg in Rawls, Neiva, and Gouveia 2019, ix.

[16]Philosophy departments increasingly divide their activities and faculty into those concerned with 'theoretical' or 'practical' philosophy or the 'history of philosophy', as if these were all somehow distinct. Moreover, the pursuit and articulation of theories and the theoretical is not just the preserve of the first; it is typically embraced by both theoretical and practical philosophy as well as being discerned in the third.

[17]Kenny 2009, 2.

[18]See https://philosophyoffilmwithouttheory.com/ for full details of the conference speakers and papers and details of the contributors to Fox and Harrison (forthcoming).

[19]See Hacker 2001 and Hacker 2009.

[20]Wittgenstein 2009, Sec 109.

[21]This need not rule out parallel, even competing, efforts towards achieving this goal. We are just focusing on this one, of course.

[22]See Turvey 2001 for critical engagement with 'Cavell's Wittgenstein'.

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