

ENTREVISTA





David Sorfa is editor of the journal *Film-Philosophy* (<http://www.film-philosophy.com>). He is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh and former Head of Film Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. David studied for his undergraduate and Master's degrees at the University of Cape Town and completed his Ph.D. at the University of Kent. He has written on Michael Haneke, Jan Švankmajer, and Czech cinema, as well as a broad range of other film subjects. He has particular interests in film-philosophy, phenomenology, Jacques Derrida's work, and film adaptation. He thinks that Freud is still worth reading. E-mail: david.sorfa@ed.ac.uk
David Sorfa was interviewed by Carla Milani Damião on 26th January, 2015.

Film-Philosophy seems to be a new study area, and when we say "new", we should think about when, where, and who first defined the specificity of this area. My first question, hence, is about this: what could better define the new area?

Film-Philosophy as a term – including the hyphen – was really coined by Daniel Frampton, who registered www.film-philosophy.com in 1996. Daniel created an email list – referred to sometimes as the Film-Philosophy Salon – for which he began to solicit and post extended reviews of books relating to cinema and philosophy. Daniel, who has a penchant for neologism, went on to publish the book *Filmosophy* in 2006, with Wallflower Press, and then he asked about 10 contributors to the Film-Philosophy list to take over as an editorial collective. At that point I became editor and we decided to publish peer-reviewed articles.

We describe ourselves as "an open access peer-reviewed academic journal dedicated to the engagement between film studies and philosophy", and this strikes me as good a summary of what film-philosophy as subject discipline might be, as any. While most of the Board works in Film Studies departments, we do have a few philosophers there as well. We tend to favour continental approaches, but we are also open to analytic philosophy. The latter, of course, has a long tradition of dealing with aesthetics, which is a central concern for film-philosophy.

However, film-philosophy supports the strong argument that cinema can *do* philosophy in a way that is unique to the medium. Therefore, film is not only capable of presenting extended thought experiments or illustrating philosophical concepts, but it is philosophy itself. Whether this is true of all films, only some films do philosophy, or some films do bad philosophy, that is a part of our current research. Of course, this begs the question of what cinema is (and, of course, what philosophy is!), but these fundamental questions are also the concern of film-philosophy.

We also know, as a matter of fact, that some philosophers considered films in their work, without constituting a specific interest. In this sense, how important is the academic activity related to it, such as research work, publications, conferences, and study groups?

In institutional terms, film-philosophy is crucial as a term that identifies a specific area of academic and scholarly activity. Thus, film-philosophy as a term and *Film-Philosophy* as a journal, annual conference, and network of scholars is absolutely central in legitimising research in this area. Of course, I would want to highlight here the importance of Film Studies and Film Theory as subject areas that have been used in the past to legitimise taking cinema seriously (perhaps that might be another slogan for film-philosophy: "Taking Cinema Seriously" – in fact, Dan Shaw's book on film and philosophy takes this as its subtitle). In a sense, film theory has always been film-philosophy, but I am happy to consider film-philosophy as a branch of film theory. For now.

The previous questions may lead us to the Post-Graduate Course in Film-Philosophy at the School of Literature, Language, and Culture and the College of Humanities and Social Science of the University of Edinburgh, that you organise. Is this course a result of long academic interest by students and researchers in this university?

I joined the University of Edinburgh in 2013 and, while Film Studies is here a small, mainly postgraduate department, there are many other scholars in departments such as Philosophy, Anthropology, English Literature, History – even Mathematics and Biology! – who are very supportive of our focus on film-philosophy that, due to its nature, encourages interdisciplinary. I think one of the reasons for my move to Edinburgh was the university's clear support for the field and we aim to make the university a world centre for developing film-philosophy as a discipline.

The course has a focus on philosophy in a wide and generous sense, including continental philosophy, mainly related to French philosophers, such as Deleuze and Sartre, and the stream of phenomenology and existentialism. Did you face any resistance among colleagues in analytic philosophy or, on the contrary, did you feel that this opposition is merely political, and both broad designations have become closer recently through some common interests, such as film?

Analytic colleagues have been extremely supportive! I think that we all – whether we define ourselves as continental, analytic, or whatever – are engaged in saying and writing things that are both interesting and logical. There is no need for any contradiction between these two things! I personally think that we have to bridge this often false dichotomy

between the so-called continental and analytic traditions in philosophy – my colleague at Edinburgh, Daniel Yacavone, has been doing an exemplary work in this regard – see his recent book *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 2014). Edward Branigan, at the University of California Santa Barbara, and Warren Buckland, at Oxford Brookes University, are particularly good at working at the intersection between these approaches.



In the description of the post-graduation Film-Philosophy, there are various topics that can say a lot about the area's definition. The next questions are based on these topics:

- a) **"The turn to philosophy in film theory: philosophy through film and film as philosophy" is probably the topic which deals mostly with a definition of the area. It seems that there lies beneath this new definition, an older one, what Film Theory is. How could you define this field and how may philosophy be seen both as different from it and close to it? Furthermore, why is Deleuze associated with Film Theory and Cavell with Film Philosophy?**

What an interesting question! As I said earlier, I think that, perhaps, Film Theory has always been Film-Philosophy (think of the number of early film theorists who were philosophers, psychologists, or, at least, extremely interested in philosophy: Henri Bergson, Hugo Münsterberg, Siegfried Kracauer, and many others). Although, of course, I stand by the hard won battles of Film Theory and I am happy to see film-philosophy as a subdiscipline within that perhaps broader academic category.

Maybe, Stanley Cavell has been the very first one to do something that we may explicitly name as film-philosophy in his *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1971), and this may be so because it has the word "ontology" in the subtitle or because Cavell has always been employed in a philosophy department. Cavell is indebted to Wittgenstein – who straddles the continental and analytic sides in such a way that clearly makes nonsense of the distinction in the first place – and it is to Wittgenstein, via Cavell, that we owe film-philosophy's interest in scepticism.

Gilles Deleuze is, I think, associated with Film Theory because when his *Cinema* books appeared there was no such term as "film-philosophy"! It is perhaps Deleuze who first explicitly claims that films can do or be philosophy – although I think Cavell does this as well.

b) Is film different from Aesthetics or would film be a part of Aesthetics (as perception and reception of artwork) and Philosophy of Art (as artwork)?

The philosophy of film is part of aesthetics, and I love Monroe Beardsley's *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1958), which begins with a fantastic paragraph: "There would be no problem of aesthetics [...] if no one ever talked about works of art. So long as we enjoy a movie, a story, or a song, in silence – except perhaps for occasional grunts or groans, murmurs of annoyance or satisfaction – there is no call for philosophy. But as soon as we utter a statement about the work, various sorts of question can arise." There is another definition of Film-Philosophy: as soon as we talk about a film, we are doing film-philosophy!

c) How do film and morality relate to each other? By using film as an illustration for a moral issue? By creating in film a moral issue? Further, may a movie itself be discussed as a moral issue?

Film does and is all of those things. I think it is a tendency of a certain sort of philosophy to wish encompassing everything under a simple and universal category. There are many sorts of moral issues and many sorts of movies. Some movies show moral issues while others are morally problematic. However, if we must use broader terms, I would claim that all movies are embroiled in an ethics that defines what we think of as morality. Ethics, in this sense, is normative: it is the system within which some moral value finds its meaning. Surely, a movie is watched by many people, but this also occurs with television and plenty of people still read books – all these things form the ethical world within which moral decisions may be made. Perhaps, I should say "ethical worlds" – there are more than one, and that is why what is wrong in one place or time might be right in others.

Thus, I may say that movies are particularly good at illustrating moral issues.

If literature and film can be seen as a means for ethical and philosophical thinking, are there philosophers who use film for thought? Are there filmmakers who raise real philosophical questions? Furthermore, are we philosophers in a mere position of aesthetic reception, talking about movies in a certain way, that could be tantamount to opinion?

Literature and film are closely connected art forms. While there are differences, I think that the similarities are far more important and interesting. That is one of the reasons I am particularly interested in adaptations from novels into movies.

I am not sure whether filmmakers "raise" philosophical questions. I am with Roland Barthes here: I would rather think of filmmakers as safely dead (unless they agree with me, of course!), so, I tend to speak about movies instead of filmmakers, doing things.

While we admonish our students to eschew opinion and provide only interpretation, and such an interpretation depends on evidence and logical argument, I think that opinion is, in fact, the prime mover here. What did come first: opinion or interpretation? Opinion! In my opinion (I have banned my students from using this phrase this way, I use it here to annoy them – in jest, of course).

Do Žižek, Derrida, Rancière, and some others, do film–philosophy? If they do not, how do you think of their way of analysing movies?

Žižek is a laugh and I love his *Sublime Object of Ideology*. His enthusiasm is fantastic, however, his thinking can be sloppy... but still brilliant. I always come away from reading his work with a list of movies I need to see. That is film-philosophy in my book!

Rancière is coming into his own in Anglophone film-philosophy. He is allowed on board.

Jacques Derrida is the next big thing in Film-Philosophy. You heard it here first. There is to date only one serious film book using Derrida: Peter Brunette and David Wills's *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (1989). A terrible title, but a brilliant book. I am currently working on a book about Derrida and Film-Philosophy and I know a couple of other authors are doing so as well.

What are the key questions of Film–Philosophy and how may film be seen as philosophy?

Film-Philosophy is the past and the future of Film Theory. Film-Philosophy is also the way how ordinary, non-academic, film viewers think of a movie – people do not think of apparatus theory or the male gaze – they ask: “Do I like this character?”, “How do I feel when I watch this movie?”, “What is real or true about this movie?”, “What this character is doing is right or wrong?”, “Am I enjoying this?”, “Does this movie make sense?” – these are key questions of Film-Philosophy and philosophy as such.

In conclusion, I would like to ask you about Michael Hanneke, who is a very experienced filmmaker, and he has also studied philosophy. How do you see, in his case, the affinity between philosophy and film in his movies? He says that filmmakers should allow a film audience to think for itself. This can be seen as philosophy of film, a critique about how a filmmaker should deal with his audience. On the other hand, it seems that he would like the audience to be closer to a film–philosophy perspective. How do you think the audience reacts: first, to what he says (his critique or philosophy of film); second, to his movies? Do people react as expected?

The movies by Michael Haneke explicitly pose philosophical, ethical, and moral questions: What responsibilities do we have as consumers of popular culture? What is our relation to

the past? To what extent are we guilty as members of society rather than as individuals? What is our relation to death? To what extent are we free to choose our roles and to what extent are we forced to follow patterns not of our own choosing? These questions are, I may say, mainly within the field of existential ethics and many authors have written about Haneke this way, particularly Catherine Wheatley in her book *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (2009).

My own interest in Haneke is somewhat different at the moment and I am interested in the way how his movies use and complicate metaphors. In fact, the philosophy of metaphor is a fascinating topic that excited post-war analytics such as Max Black. He argued that metaphor has been seen by philosophy as its absolute other – philosophy is defined by its clarity and straightforwardness, therefore, anything that is metaphorical is *de jure* excluded from being philosophical. This is an extension of Plato's well know ambivalence about art and artists as a whole. Black, however, goes on to show that philosophy is grounded in metaphor and, thus, either there is no philosophy or philosophy is something else and must give up its quixotic dream of objectivity.

So, coming back to Haneke, who uses metaphorical images throughout his movies, think of the water, blood, and bodily fluids that suffuse his movies (Francesca Hardy, at the University of Aberdeen, has been conducting an interesting work on this pattern in Haneke). I tend to push these metaphors into the realm of the sacrificial and ritualistic (I am a Freudian pseudo-anthropologist at heart). There is, however, some debate as to whether film may be metaphorical in a strict sense. I am not going to introduce this argument here, but it may lead to an interesting claim that if it is true that film cannot "do" metaphor, then, technically, film must be more philosophical than traditional philosophy itself – perhaps you can notice my Derridean readings here...

Therefore, I think that there are multiple philosophical approaches to film-philosophy regarding Michael Haneke's work. Once again, I try and resist the biographical figure of Haneke, whose personal thoughts and philosophy I know nothing about, thus, I prefer not to speak about them.