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A Phenomenological Aesthetic of Cinematic 'Worlds'

Christopher S. Yates

Abstract

Contemporary film aesthetics is beset by difficulties arising from the medium itself and the bewildering itinerary of film theory. Inspired by Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical vision in "On the Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), my essay seeks to overcome this paralysis by grounding the aesthetic value of cinematic art in its ability to "disclose the world" through a convergence of artist and viewer intentionalities. Stanley Cavell has gone far by exploring a corresponding "natural relation" between philosophy and cinema, but his work assumes an ontological discourse without an appropriate phenomenological method. I contend that Mikel Dufrenne's phenomenology of aesthetic experience provides the formal structure necessary for speaking of film's ontological possibilities. Terrence Malick's cinematic and narrative uses of point-of-view illustrate one such experience of world-disclosure.

Key Words

aesthetics, consciousness, establishing shot, film, hermeneutics, intentionality, Martin Heidegger, Mikel Dufrenne, ontology, phenomenology, point-of-view, reduction, Stanley Cavell, Terrence Malick, uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*) world

1. Introduction

As film has ascended to a prominent, public position in the arts over the last 100 years and the scope of aesthetics has found a diverse bearing on matters of inquiry, meaning and human existence, film and philosophy find themselves in a position of necessary, albeit uncertain, communication. The result is that we remain faced with a fundamental question: In what can the aesthetic value of film consist?

At least two hesitations threaten to forestall any attempt to train the rigors of aesthetic discourse on this peculiar moving canvas. First, the manner in which we encounter these "works of art" is already encumbered with a big-budget paradigm of consumer entertainment. We speak of "Hollywood" as though it is this multifaceted, instrumentalist 'other' generating stories, celebrities, values and escapes. Is it not naïve to speak of truth, beauty and meaning in the context of an artistic paradigm that is decidedly defined by commercial pursuits? Second, there is the mercurial and indefinite nature of film theory, studies and critique. With the establishment of the Cinema Studies Department at New York University in the 1970s, the first program of its kind, film seemed to attain to the level of a fine art, meriting a corresponding academic discipline. >From there, the way toward a film aesthetic took many detours: cognitive film theory, realism, simulacrum and thought theories and finally, in the work of Stanley Cavell, the approach to film *as* philosophy.^[1] "Despite this flurry of interest," argues Thomas Wartenberg, "there has been only minimal sustained reflection on the theoretical issues

surrounding the use of film to discuss philosophical topics."^[2] Indeed, as the Winter 2006 edition of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* roundly evidences, the integrity of attributing "philosophical content" to this medium is far from certain.^[3] Is it not possible that, implicit in such debates, there stands the more fundamental need to answer for film's aesthetic credibility? What, after all, is film as art? How is filmic discourse to be read?

Taken together, these hesitations would seem to suggest that any baptism of the film medium by the waters of aesthetics is in the very least a precarious blessing. And yet there are films which, in their cinematic quality and meaning, do invite or perhaps compel philosophical engagement. Are there not still more resources within the discipline of philosophy and the field of aesthetics which may reposition and improve the plausibility of such engagement? Although I agree with Paisley Livingston's recent assertion that films "can provide vivid and emotionally engaging illustrations of philosophical issues,"^[4] my present concern is less with the idea of film *as* philosophy as with elaborating a philosophical conception of the cinematic event. In this way I am likewise attentive to the Deleuzian interest in the generative "apparatus" of cinema,^[5] but maintain a concern for delimiting the very experience of givenness attained through the peculiarities of this medium. Bearing this trajectory in mind, I propose that between Martin Heidegger's hermeneutical vision for the "work" of art and Stanley Cavell's ontology of film there is, in phenomenology, a formal structure for addressing the experience of cinematic art as a convergence of two horizons of intentionality.^[6] The result, I argue, is a disclosure of "world" on which the aesthetic value of film may rest.

2. The Work of Art as World Disclosure

Midway through his 1935 lectures on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger set before his audience a Van Gogh painting of the commonest of common things: a pair of peasant shoes. What is at work in the work? he asked. How might one look beyond the mere "equipmental" quality of the shoes in order to grasp their *essential Being*?^[7] Implicit in these questions was the aim of closing the interpretive distance between the beholder and the experience of art revealing itself as truth.

In and through the shoes, noted Heidegger, a world is revealed. Where, typically, the "thingly substructure" of the work is the most "immediate actuality" encountered by the beholder, Heidegger sets the aesthetic mode in a posture of watchfulness so that the beholder might discern something of an underlying essence from within the work. He avers that the modern inclination to map conceptual frameworks and thingly assumptions onto an aesthetic crossroads of beholding subject and representational object in effect "shackles reflection."^[8] By ushering us into the *experience* of the work, and the *world* embodied in the work, however, Heidegger holds that artistic creation allows a thing to "emerge as a thing that has been brought forth" and there exist as an open region within the existential "thrownness" of all beings.^[9] This transformation recalls the movement from "'anxiety'" to "'concern'" in *Being and Time*; upon finding itself not-at-home (uncanny,

Unheimlichkeit) in the world of commonly accepted objects and meanings, Dasein recalls its capacity to bestow meaning and enacts this transcendence through and among the relevance of factual things. This resurgence of concern, or care, delivers one's human reality from merely public norms and allows objects to present themselves in terms of more personalized significance.^[10] In the aesthetic event, then, far from inviting the spectator out of his or her world into a place of expressive retreat, art assumes the burden of the spectator's philosophical situation in-the-world and seeks to give the spectator the world of his or her being.^[11] The beholder is released *from* the momentary feeling of dis-ease or complicity, and *toward* the 'whole' range of possibilities and ends specified according to his or her worldhood.

Consider, along such lines, the ability of films to capture a sense of being-in-the-world, and a corresponding summons to renewed 'concern' by photographing the ordinary, uncanny elements of existence. Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) opens with images of a Chicago steel mill: junk-pickers kicking through debris, coal shoveled into a furnace, the pouring of molten iron. Then there are waves of golden Great Plains wheat, a silhouetted scarecrow and signalmen flags carrying their message from hill to hill. The result is a seamless visual experience where the subtlety of specific things is drawn out to indicate the nature of the world and the life of our protagonists.

Heidegger's essay, says John Carvalho, "establishes the ontology of art as a prescient insight into reality. . ."^[12] How, then, might this hermeneutics of world-disclosure answer the question: In what can the aesthetic value of a film consist? Can a work of cinematic art shape the gaze of the viewer so that he or she sees and experiences the world afresh? Answering this already implies a deployment of aesthetic judgments, beyond questions of beauty and taste, to the ubiquitous acts of consciousness which shape an aesthetic experience. But is a resulting ontological aesthetic here plausible? To answer these questions I will discuss Stanley Cavell's recent work in film philosophy, and then describe how a phenomenology of aesthetic experience might provide a methodological basis that is otherwise lacking in Cavell.

3. Toward a Structure of Converging Intentionalities

More than philosophical talk about the nature of art or certain art works, aesthetics, says J.M. Bernstein, "explores the discursive expression of the logic of experience, the necessities of experience for meaning, which the making and judging of artworks reveal (because they crystallize them)".^[13] This "experience," which Heidegger has radicalized for us according to the disclosure of *worldhood* and truth, might, in the case of film, consist in the convergence of two horizons of intentionality. There is the assemblage of the filmmaker's intentionalities concerning narrative, cinematography, music, pacing and so on, and there are the intentionalities of a given viewer who comes to engage the world storied upon the screen. If we take "intentionality" in its phenomenological sense concerning the manner in which consciousness is inherently directed towards an object - that is, it is consciousness *of* something by means of intending acts which

make it possible for objects to be intuited and/or how objects appear within the temporal flow of experience - it would seem that the constitution of the filmic world is achieved jointly by the artist and the artist's viewer.

Stanley Cavell, perhaps more than any other contemporary thinker, has gone to great lengths to celebrate the philosophical weight of this peculiar filmic experience. In his pioneering work, *The World Viewed* (1971), he presents an ontology of film based on the idea that, by screening reality, movies shape human perception of the ordinary in a way that inspires acknowledgment. By defining film as a "succession of automatic world projections," Cavell holds that the reality in film is not merely "present" to the viewer on the screen, but is dynamic and automatically reproduces the world externally to the viewer. If a tree branch is viewed on a movie screen, he argues, it is in the world and the world is in the viewed branch - in "that thing now, in the frame of nature."^[14] The categories of succession and projection are meant to include the stylistic decisions directors make regarding the cutting from one view to another (montage) and the possibility of continuous projection (which would use depth of focus and camera position changes to suggest succession, i.e., continuity).^[15]

Cavell's ontological focus is reminiscent of Heidegger's. Film's attention to silence, mythology and scope attune the viewer's attention to the "uncanny" nature of the ordinary world. We thus long for a "natural relation" to film, and so "haunt" the world of film and the "moral philosophy internal to the stories that movies are forever telling."^[16] But Cavell arrives at an ontological landscape for film, so to speak, without paying sufficient attention to the aesthetic and phenomenological paths necessary for getting there. That he speaks of the relationship of the viewer to the work of art as one of "haunting" is, moreover, indicative of the fact that Cavell's "necessary" relation between philosophy and film still lingers in the interpretive distance between subjective viewers and objective works.^[17] We wish for the transcendence embodied in the screened world, but are left drifting above the world of being that is bracketed outside of the theater.

If accounting for the convergence of two horizons of intentionality in cinema and the disclosure of "worlds" that this obtains, is one central aim of a film aesthetic, then the ground between Heidegger's radical interpretation of visual art and Cavell's ambitious philosophy of film should be mapped according to a deliberate phenomenology of aesthetic experience. For this reason I now turn to Mikel Dufrenne and the transcendence that may occur in the convergence of aesthetic intentionalities.

Three methodological points demonstrated by Dufrenne in his mid-twentieth century *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1953, 1973) should help secure the notion of "world" as central to an experiential or ontological film aesthetic. First, there is his parallelism between phenomenological reduction and aesthetic experience. *Reduction*, following Husserl, involves "the mental operation of placing transcendent, transphenomenal aspects of experience - especially the ontic trait of empirical reality or existence - in 'brackets'." The

"efficacy" of these aspects in fixing the contours of conscious experience is thus suspended in the brackets. That is, we set aside for the moment the assumption that the world is knowable as a categorical whole of individual objects in order to then consider the plane of experience from which this view originates. In the *aesthetic experience* of art (assuming the work is of dramatic character) the spectator grants such a reduction spontaneously, almost as a reflex, withholding "credence in the content of [the] experience as actually present or taking place."[\[18\]](#)

Second, the aesthetic reduction, while spontaneous, is not static but is already on its way to a species of transcendence between the subjective viewer and the artistic object. Aesthetic perception suspends disbelief in order to effect a reconciliation by means of the "sensuous:" the element in art that is shared by both parties. Art illuminates "the real" by means of *feeling*, and feeling enables a kind of communion between the viewer's consciousness and the work's expressiveness. (Dufrenne elsewhere likens this feeling to "sympathy"). The feeling is of two kinds: "the depth of the expressed world and the depth of the beholder of this world." It is thus not only a culmination of aesthetic experience but a "reciprocity of two depths." Through the "reading of expression" and by "drawing on the resources of his own feeling" the spectator engages with the artist's subjectivity as expressed in the object.[\[19\]](#) This means a reconciliation occurs because the "sensuous element in art is something shared by the spectator and by the aesthetic object." Dufrenne argues that the reconciliation is enabled by the "transcendental" or "*a priori*" dimension of this experience. Here, explains Edward Casey, the "affective quality" of the work not only characterizes the expressed world but also constitutes it, ordering the expressed world according to a cosmological point of reference.[\[20\]](#) The subject likewise possesses the *a priori* constitutive quality which the work awakens, and the two meet in an "existential" unity. The subject and the object undergo a reconciliation by, in effect, recalling their prior unity as person and world.

Finally, where the reconciliation has ontological underpinnings there is also a means of locating truth in the aesthetic experience. Art "can be true -can bear on the real - because both art and reality are themselves only aspects of an all-encompassing being." Art thus "illuminates" the real, and it does so, again, through feeling, which "delivers the real's 'affective essence'" from within the art work itself.[\[21\]](#) Truth is conveyed by the affective quality in the sensuous.[\[22\]](#)

Taken together, Dufrenne has used a transcendental *a priori* to lead us from the phenomenological in aesthetic experience to the ontological, the being of persons affected by truth in the sensuous element of art. And while phenomenological method may initially assume a species of subject-object dichotomy, Dufrenne's use of it overcomes the dichotomy, at least in the momentary experience, because the existential "polar terms" within the object's subjective expression and the viewing subject communicate with each other in the "vital interaction called forth by aesthetic experience."[\[23\]](#) The human factor of the transcendence is not eliminated, but is affirmed as a gateway through which the ontological carries truth.

How do these elucidations inform a centering of the aesthetic experience of cinematic art on the ontological event of world-disclosure? We recall that film is a peculiar species of art with an equally peculiar form of dissemination. There is a convergence of intentionalities between the filmmaker and audience, both of which, if we are to radicalize Dufrenne's points, are structurally joined in the physical bracketing which occurs in the theater environment. Dufrenne's attention to the sensuous element in art gestures toward Cavell's idea of the abiding, albeit momentarily fissured, natural relation between the world of film and the world of the viewer.

The result is a two-fold disclosure of worlds. Entering the theater I go "on leave" from my ordinary world and sit in the darkness before a massive and beautiful world where I am "unseen." Here the film will shape my perception and position me in a screened world in which visual objects and narrative moments carry the determined weight of ultimate concerns.^[24] Following the viewing, my own world gives itself to me in an uncanny way. The theater hallway, the parking lot, the route home, all the projects and things I return to have an other-worldly feel in the short interval after the film is finished but before I have fully left its storied world. A fusion of horizons has occurred. The work of the art has illuminated the real, the world of finitude and subjectivity which artist and viewer must together assume as a point of reference, but which, as Heidegger and Cavell have observed, is too often covered over by our forgetfulness, objectification and unreflective estrangement. (Taken in this way, the title of Terrence Malick's 2005 work, *The New World*, in effect describes the accomplishment, the illuminative recovery, of this filmic disclosure.)

4. Point-of-view and the Disclosure of World

If all of the above has served to describe the formal structure of an aesthetic experience of world-disclosure in film, an example of such a film and such an experience needs mention. Malick's third feature, the 1998 *The Thin Red Line*, focuses upon the lives, deaths and thoughts of a rifle company in combat. Drawing our attention to the worlds within and around his tragically world-bound characters, Malick's unusual cinematic mood is established by a rare stylistic and thematic emphasis on *point-of-view*.

Point of view is the phrase commonly applied to camera shots that assume the height, position and perspective of a given character. *The Thin Red Line's* opening sequence of shots beneath a forest canopy and among a community of tribal islanders immediately aligns the viewer's perspective with that of Witt, the main character. The viewed elements appear to us with a richness of color, texture, form and situatedness in the world. The beauty of the rendered images fills us, as it does the characters, with a mood of wonder and awe, and this mood is elaborated by the use of visual juxtaposition: the coming shots of nature and life in the throes of strife and finitude. Our contemplation, as with that primarily of Witt, will be triggered by the seeming incoherence of the juxtapositions.

Malick likewise breaks with traditional cinematography by favoring point-of-view shots over establishing shots. In most feature films, establishing shots are used to provide an

objective glimpse at the scene of coming action. Malick, however, prefers to make his transitions from shot to shot by revealing the line of action as that which a given character is witnessing and is already immersed in. His intentionality, then, is to provide a subjective emphasis in his shot selection. A soldier opens a locket to look at a picture of his wife. Another soldier wanders around the battlefield, crazed, insanely lamenting his inability to die. A pair of hands are clasped in prayer at night. When the hill-top bunkers are taken, we follow Witt's gaze at the group of young, emaciated, half-mad Japanese soldiers. There is the dead face of a Japanese soldier, his body buried in the dirt. We reckon, with Witt, at the arbitrary fact of our inhabiting a living point-of-view while the view from the face of the dead is now lost.

Throughout this and other Malick films, the emphasis on cinematic point-of-view allows the world, in the language of phenomenology, to give itself to our consciousness. Insofar as his characters are themselves preoccupied with ontological concerns - the reckoning with finitude, the meaning of life, the peculiar significance of things - the result is all the more illustrative. As an artist, Malick is intuitively aware that the work of his art can accomplish a convergence of viewer intentionalities concerning the truth of the world with his own. He thus prepares the way for a fusion of horizons resulting in an aesthetic experience that looks through the screen to a field of existential reflection.

In order to answer the question "in what can the aesthetic value of film consist?" according to the phenomenon of world disclosure, I have sought to bypass the congestion and confusion of recent film theory by drawing upon phenomenology and hermeneutics. With Heidegger and Cavell, I have focused on the *work* of a work of cinematic art and the experience it invites. With Dufrenne, I have explored the theoretical basis for a shared reduction in the aesthetic experience which allows for what I call the convergence of intentionalities. And with Terrence Malick's work, I have begun to illustrate how such a resulting aesthetic value of world-disclosure might be articulated. My goal has been to suggest a particular way the aesthetics of this peculiar medium. Andrey Tarkovsky, speaking from the side of the artist, has stated: "[I]f the vision of the world that has gone into the film turns out to be one that other people recognize as a part of themselves that up till now has never been given expression, what better motivation could there be for one's work." [25] My contention is that by orienting our aesthetic to the phenomenon of world-disclosure, philosophers might achieve a corresponding accomplishment.

Endnotes

[1] It is indicative of this congestion and confusion within film aesthetics that Noël Carroll, in many ways the grandfather of American film theory, has remarked: "Perhaps I once thought that an argument for the primacy of film interpretation could be cobbled together out of considerations like those just cited. But I no longer do." Noël Carroll, *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998, Cambridge Studies in Film) p. 5.

[2] Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Beyond *Mere* Illustration: How

Films Can Be Philosophy," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64/1 (Winter, 2006), 19. Hereafter cited as *JAAC*.

[3] Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Introduction," in *JAAC*, 3.

[4] Paisley Livingston, "The Very Idea of Film as Philosophy," in *JAAC*, 11.

[5] *Ibid.*, Smith and Wartenberg, *JAAC*, 2

[6] "Horizons" denotes, with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the specifically *hermeneutical* character of our experience of the world. This is opposed to a metaphysically conditioned ideal of knowledge and does not take interpretation to be a purely epistemic or noetic event. "Horizon" is akin to "situation," the locus of understanding in terms of our own projects and questions. Being situated in a horizon thus means we have certain interpretive "dispositions" that we carry with us into the meeting with a work of art, which itself, as issuing from a horizon, contains its own dispositions. One goal of a phenomenological approach to cinema is to draw these dispositions and questions into foreground of the aesthetic experience. For a discussion of philosophical hermeneutics and the role of Gadamer, see Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trs. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

[7] Martin Heidegger, (ed.). David Farrell Krell, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, 1977) pp. 159-60.

[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 162.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 196.

[10] See sections 40 and 41 of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962).

[11] We are reminded of Wordsworth's own effort to arouse people from their "torpor" by making "the incidents of common life interesting," and so to bring them home.

[12] John Carvalho, "Two new Anthologies on Continental Aesthetics," (www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/carvalho.html) 5.

[13] J.M. Bernstein, "Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy," in Richard Eldridge (ed.), *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 111.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 200. He remarks: "I was led to consider that what makes the physical medium of film unlike anything else on earth lies in the absence of what it causes to appear to us; that is to say, in the nature of our absence from it; in its fate to reveal reality and fantasy (not by reality as such, but) by projections of reality, projections in which. . . reality is freed to exhibit itself." Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979, 1971) p. 166.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[16] William Rothman, "Cavell on Film, Television, and Opera," in R. Eldridge, *Stanley Cavell*, p. 221.

[17] *Ibid.*, Cavell, p. 160. With respect to a fundamental ontology, Cavell's conception of "haunting" could be set in contrast with Heidegger's understanding of "resoluteness" wherein Dasein as authentic Being-one's-Self "does not detach [itself] from its world nor does it isolate [itself] so that it becomes a free-floating 'I.'" See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trs. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) p. 344/298. Further, it should be noted that Cavell's approach to film ontology by way of ordinary language philosophy and philosophical acknowledgment has nuances and merits that go beyond the scope of this paper. However, the central burden of language, which grounds this philosophical orientation, focuses on the communicative discourse of film and not on its inherently visual medium. Relevant to my critique is the view that, as such, film lends itself more toward a phenomenological rather than linguistic approach.

[18] Mikel Dufrenne, (trs.). Edward Casey, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973) p. xviii.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. xxxi; 483; xxx.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. xxxiii.

[22] Dufrenne explains: "By allowing us to perceive an exemplary object whose whole reality consists in being sensuous, art invites us and trains us to read expression and to discover the atmosphere which is revealed only to feeling. Art makes us undergo the absolute experience of the affective." *Ibid.*, Dufrenne, p. 542.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv.

[24] As filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky puts it, "Through poetic connections feeling is heightened and the spectator is made more active. He becomes a participant in the process of discovering life, unsupported by ready-made deductions from the plot or ineluctable pointers by the author. He has at his disposal only what helps to penetrate to the deeper meaning of the complex phenomena represented in front of him." Andrey Tarkovsky, (trs.) Kitty Hunter-Blair. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1987, 1986) pp. 19-20.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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