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## **Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema**

DANIEL YACAVONE

COLOMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015, xxv + 311 PP. £20.50 (PBK).

Daniel Yacavone maintains that none of the existent approaches to cinema – theoretical, analytic, or phenomenological – succeed in grasping the uniqueness of the art form. He sets out to address this deficiency in *Film Worlds*, advancing a tripartite model of cinematic aesthetics that draws on paradigms established by Nelson Goodman, Mikel Dufrenne, and Martin Heidegger respectively. The monograph consists of an introduction followed by eight chapters divided into four parts, one each on: film worlds, cinematic representation (Goodman), cinematic expression (Dufrenne), and cinematic truth (Heidegger). Part II, comprising an extended analysis of Goodman's *Languages of Art* and *Ways of Worldmaking* as applied to cinema, is the most substantial and satisfying, offering a theory of cinematic representation which is grounded in Goodman's aesthetics and likely to appeal to philosophers working in both the analytic and what I shall for the sake of brevity call "continental" traditions. In consequence, Yacavone's stated aim of replacing existing philosophical and theoretical approaches to narrative film is to at least some extent achieved.

As the title of his book suggests, the concept of a *film world* is crucial to Yacavone's model. He distinguishes cinematic art from the cinematic medium (on the basis that the latter underdetermines the former) in the introduction and then the world-in a film from the world-of a film in Part I. The world-in is the diegetic world of the narrative representation and the world-of the multidimensional aesthetic world of the artwork. Yacavone is primarily interested in the latter and film world and film work are further differentiated (again, on the basis that the latter underdetermines the former), with the film world defined as 'a singular,

holistic, relational, and fundamentally referential reality' that provides audiences with experiences which are simultaneously cognitive, immersive, and sensuous (xiv). The difference between the world-in and world-of is elaborated upon in terms of Christian Metz's distinction between denotation (literal representation by the camera) and connotation (non-literal representation requiring interpretation) such that the following dichotomy is established: denotational, fictional, and representational aspects on the one hand and connotational, aesthetic, and presentational aspects on the other (33-34). The film world is constituted by the world-in, the world-of, and the relations between them.

In Part II, Yacavone matches his conception of film worlds to Goodman's theory of artistic world-making and performs an expert mutual exegesis. First and foremost, he demonstrates that cinematic works of art are paradigmatic examples of Goodman's world-making (and symbol systems) and establishes an account of cinematic representation based on Goodman's aesthetics. Second, he explains Goodman's theories of world-making and reference by using cinematic examples to offer fresh insight into Goodman's oeuvre, and the elucidation of Goodman's five principles of world-making in chapter four is particularly compelling (88-110). Chapter five employs Goodman's theory of exemplification to further illuminate the distinction between the world-in and world-of a film. Where the world-in represents the narrative visually, the world-of presents the work as an intentional object with sensory, affective, and cognitive dimensions. Like the tailor's swatch, therefore, film worlds are instances of "possession plus reference", referring to their representations and possessing self-reflexive 'extranarrative symbolization' (123). The cinematic work of art thus draws attention to both its represented reality and to itself as an aesthetic object.

Remaining true to his core thesis, however, Yacavone holds that his application of Goodman's aesthetics to cinema also underdetermines the art form. He therefore proceeds, in part three, to phenomenological approaches in order to explain the experiential dimension of film, focusing on the relationship between film and emotion. In chapter 6, Yacavone offers an original, albeit incomplete, account of cinematic expression based on the distinction between two types of expression, local and global. Local expression is further differentiated into three discrete but usually overlapping aspects of the world-in: sensory-affective, cognitive-diegetic, and formal-artistic. Local expression contributes to, and is complemented by, the global expression characteristic of the world-of, '*cineaesthetic* expression (cinematic world-feeling)' (213). Global expression is linked to the style of the auteur, which is elucidated in terms of cinematic rhythm and it is in his discussion of rhythm in chapter seven that Yacavone utilises Dufrenne's work on the complex issue of cinematic temporality. Part IV, like Part I, consists of a single chapter and seeks to explain the relationship between film worlds and truth by means of the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Heidegger. Employing terminology from the latter, Yacavone proposes the cinematic experience as an *event* which, like the film world itself, has a multidimensional character: as a temporal and spatial event and as a transformative hermeneutic event in which truth is disclosed (245). He concludes by reiterating his commitment to rediscovering the work of others rather than creating an original theory, but I think he is being too modest as both the application of Goodman's aesthetics to cinema and Yacavone's own theory of cinematic expression make new and valuable contributions to the field.

Yacavone's self-effacement introduces the first of two criticisms I shall make. The most substantial part of the book is, as I have noted, the engagement with Goodman and at the beginning of chapter seven Yacavone describes his approach thus far as 'predominantly

analytic and cognitive' (190). This is extremely misleading as while chapters four and five are indeed concerned with Goodman's (analytic) aesthetics, Yacavone's treatment of his subject is firmly rooted in the continental traditional. One of the features of his approach that will be immediately apparent to philosophers of film is the absence of a sustained argument moving from premises to conclusion. Yacavone admits that his monograph involves an application of various paradigms to cinematic art rather than a defence of those paradigms, but readers on the analytic side of the divide – and perhaps others – will nonetheless require an argument for or defence of his selection of applied paradigms (xx). In other words, while it would be unreasonable to expect Yacavone to deal with objections to Goodman's aesthetics it is not unreasonable to expect him to defend his application of Goodman's aesthetics to cinematic art. Even if one accepts Yacavone's initial conception of film worlds (and I see no reason not to), it is disappointing that he fails to identify and address potential problems with their development in terms of Goodman, e.g. the inadequacy of exemplification as a clarification of cinematic reference. In his endorsement, Professor Dudley Andrew describes the book as a 'prodigious satellite mapping of the terrae incognitae' (back cover). An unsympathetic philosopher of film could, with some justification, claim that Yacavone has done nothing more than map a genealogy of philosophical and theoretical ideas for appropriation in the analysis of cinema as an art form. In this respect, one might say that the work really consists of three parts. The first begins (rather surprisingly, given the numerous problems associated with his work), with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and progresses to Susanne Langer and thence to Goodman; the history then moves from Ernest Cassirer to Langer and Goodman; and then from Langer and Goodman to Jean Mitry and Pier Paolo Pasolini (chapters one to three) before folding back on Goodman in the second part (chapters four and five). The third part embarks on another genealogy, beginning with Mitry and Pasolini, moving through Dufrenne to Andrew Sarris and Gadamer; and then from Gadamer

to Heidegger before folding back on Goodman once again. To make such a criticism of the whole book would be unduly harsh, but chapters two and three are little more than histories of cinematic ideas broadly-construed. More importantly, the absence of both an explicit overarching argument and discussions of objections to the paradigm selections leave Yacavone vulnerable to accusations that the work is merely a mapping of the territory, even if a highly informed and enlightening one. It would be a mistake to characterise *Film Worlds* in this way, as it has much more to offer, but I suspect that the book will be of more interest to readers working in the continental tradition than the analytic.

My second criticism is the breadth – as opposed to depth – of Yacavone’s study. Part IV, like Part I, consists of a single chapter in which he attempts to provide: (i) an exegesis of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, (ii) an exegesis of Heidegger’s hermeneutics, (iii) an explanation of how Heidegger’s hermeneutics illuminates cinematic truth, (iv) a theory of artistic value, and (v) a conclusion to the monograph. Needless to say, the task is impossible and fails on all counts except for the last. My main concern with Yacavone’s breadth is not that he covers too many theories in too little detail (a flaw which applies to the final chapter alone), but that in devoting so much space to the work of others, he leaves insufficient room to develop his most promising contributions. The application of Goodman’s aesthetics to cinematic art is, as I have noted, both comprehensive and convincing, but the most original and interesting part of the work, the discussion of cinematic expression, is regrettably abridged. The relationship between local and global expression is not fully explained: i.e., it is not clear whether cineasthetic expression is dependent upon the local forms of expression or if it complements them independently or – if the latter – how cineasthetic expression differs from formal-artistic expression, which is also to some extent determined by the intention of the auteur. Similarly, the significance of cinematic rhythm is elucidated with respect to

cinematic style, but not cinematic expression, and the relation between rhythm and expression is not fully articulated. The conception of cinematic rhythm itself, which has been proposed as the essence of cinematic art by directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Robert Bresson, is presented by Yacavone as possessing great explanatory power, but does not receive the attention it demands. The failure to develop a fully-fledged theory of cinematic expression becomes all the more disappointing when the chapters on expression are succeeded by the hasty discussion of philosophical hermeneutics. The brief exegeses of Gadamer and Heidegger not only fail to contribute to Yacavone's model of cinematic aesthetics, but detract from it. Cinematic truth is expounded in Heideggerian jargon, e.g. "the being of beings" and "unconcealedness" – terms which will not impress readers unversed in Heidegger's abstruse aesthetics and which are inadequately explained by Yacavone in the few pages devoted to them (249). If Yacavone wanted to explore the relation between film worlds and truth, one wonders why he did not return to Goodman, developing the latter's conception of aesthetics as a branch of epistemology distinct from, but not inferior to, science as a way of understanding the world. Yacavone briefly mentions Goodman's rightness as opposed to truth, but even if Goodman's claims about the epistemological value of art are not fit for purpose the recourse to Heidegger at so late a stage is unfortunate (255).

Despite these reservations, *Film Worlds* undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to philosophical aesthetics on at least two levels: first, to articulate what the cinematic is; and second, to accord cinematic art the recognition it deserves but which has – in the analytic tradition at least – been largely withheld (notable exceptions such as Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, and Berys Gaut aside). In the course of his discussion of film worlds, Yacavone offers a definition of cinema as a necessarily hybrid art form, combining the aesthetic features of painting, theatre, literature, and music with the exclusively (and essentially)

cinematic features of ‘camera movement and editing, and the particularly cinematic coupling of sound (including music) and image’ (188). Yacavone not only shows what is unique about film, but also why – because of the complexity associated with this hybridity – it is a paradigmatic art form, at least as valuable as its constituents. *Film Worlds* falls short in failing to develop its most promising points, but succeeds in revealing the deficiencies of many philosophical and theoretical approaches to cinematic art. As such, the book will make a valuable addition to the libraries of film theorists and philosophers working in the continental tradition as well as to philosophers of film who value engagement with work outside of the analytic tradition.

Rafe McGregor

University of York

rafemc@gmail.com