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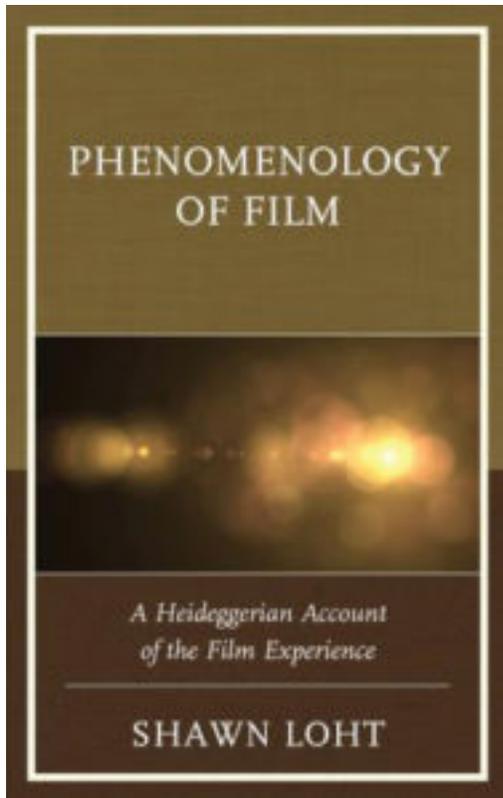
The Ontological Truth of Film-as-Philosophy: *Phenomenology of Film: A Heideggerian Account of the Film Experience*, by Shawn Loht

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Whereas the majority of film-philosophy essays incorporating the thinking of Martin Heidegger are limited to reading specific films from one or another Heideggerian perspective, Shawn Loht's *Phenomenology of Film: A Heideggerian Account of the Film Experience* is far more ambitious. The author incorporates Heidegger's philosophy as a conceptual lens through which to argue a complex philosophy/phenomenology of film, and succeeds admirably in offering readers a unique and original "phenomenological" reading of *film-as-philosophy*.

Loht breaks ties with traditional analytic readings, which adopt the "philosophy *offilm*" (*x* as object of study). Through an analysis of *Being and Time*, three of the main *existential* modes or ways of *Being-in-the-world* are related to the film-viewing experience, because Loht argues that the human's *Being-in-the-world* is attuned within the context of the "film-world." Loht provides an analysis of what Heidegger terms "understanding," "discourse," and "attunement," which indicates that we are of a specific and fundamental "mindset" or *mood*, which can be altered through various experiences, and *film-as-philosophy* represents such a *mood-altering* force. Loht's understanding of attunement or *mood*, from a Heideggerian perspective, is crucial to the transformative experience of film-viewing, because when our attunement changes, the ways we understand, interpret, and discourse about the world and others is altered. From an ontological perspective – and it is phenomenology that reveals ontological issues – film induces a change in our *mood*, and so a new form of attunement overtakes us when we are immersed in the film's unfolding. However, as related to *mood*, we do not simply watch films as passive spectators, rather we are transformed (attuned) into *participants* in the events the film depicts, and these

events comprise the “world” of the film and its characters, or the overarching system of meanings and significations giving structure and potential meaning to human life.

To make the connection between his analysis of the three “existentials” (modes of *Being-in*), and our participation in the film experience, Loht links Heidegger’s philosophy of art to the understanding of *Dasein* (the word Heidegger uses for the human being) and its modes of *Being-in-the-world*. Furthermore, he claims that *film-as-art* breaks open a context for the phenomenon of “truth-happening”– linked inextricably to the opening of a world. This indicates, in less obscure terms, that when we are attuned in the filmic experience, drawn into the context or world the film opens, certain truths reveal themselves to us, albeit always in terms of partial and incomplete revelations. This Heidegger calls an occurrence of *aletheia*, from the ancient Greek notion of “truth” as revelation or “un-concealment.” This understanding of truth as “revelation” is inseparable from and indeed inspires the attunement of the film-viewer – or the participant-*as*-preserver of the *truth-of-film* – as she is drawn into the revelation of the *world-of-film* and gleans new insight into both the film’s truth and importantly, *how* that truth potentially relates to her life. Loht ties Heidegger’s ontology of art to the ontology of film, and following Heidegger, contends that films hold the power to open *historical* worlds and generally film’s truth is expressive of cultural and historical milieus and epochs, which for Heidegger, is expressive of our historical relation to the manner in which we respond to Being’s manifestation in specific historical moments. For example, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941) opens a world of America for the *spectator-participant*, expressing “some of the undercurrents of freedom, capitalism, success and failure, and birth and death definitive for American identity,” and film has the power to reveal a far more all-encompassing form of truth that extends beyond simply “portraying a fictional biography of one man” (p. 94), for there is a universal aspect to film-truth that is ontologically related to the human condition. In addition to Loht’s concern with our relationship to the film’s characters, he is also interested in the “emotive dispositions” that emerge from the *mood* of the worlds that are opened by the film, which are never solipsistic contexts we inhabit or internalize, rather they are worlds populated by the presence of other human beings (*Daseins*), and Loht’s claim is that when attuned we comport ourselves to those that inhabit the world of film, “whose fates are also existentially significant” for us, and these film characters along with the worlds they inhabit are substantially and existentially real for us, and as Loht argues, we “comport ourselves toward them just as we would actually existing *Daseins*.” (p. 53)



Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941)

Loht makes the important connection between the modes of *Being-in* discussed earlier and Heidegger's later ontology of art, which opens the possibility for an authentic "communal existence" precisely because of the human being's participation in works of art and the truth they reveal. How does Loht understand the human being in relation to Heidegger's philosophy? In response, turning to the late essay, "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger refers to the human being (Dasein) as "*ex-sistence*" and contends that this references the "projective" or *finite transcendent* character of human existence, which is really our potential for "standing-out" from present moments in anticipation of *becoming other*, in and through projecting ourselves into the future for approaching possibilities in a way that transcends our current and present mode or way of *Being-in-the-world*. In an existential sense, human *subject-hood* indicates that *we are what we are not, and are not what we are*, because we harbor the potential to become something *other*, and it is our relationship to film that contributes uniquely to both our *self-overcoming* and *self-becoming*. Indeed, the transformative experience of film, as expressed by Loht, in Heideggerian terms, is possible in the first instance because the viewer, as "Being-there" (Dasein), becomes a participant in the *film-world* through her *disclosing projection* into the film, and according to Loht, the *spectator-participant* is transported outside herself and world to another as of yet unfulfilled reality with unique and unforeseen possibilities for her life and potential appropriation. The phenomenon that Loht terms "Dasein's disclosing projection" relates directly to the Heideggerian reference to Dasein as *ek-sistence* as explained above.

It is important to understand Loht's vision of philosophy, which he conceives as the ultimate way to *think the truth of Being*. To clarify, when referencing the "truth of Being," per Heideggerian language, Loht is referring to those *essential* or *existential* aspects of our lives that hold the potential for making it meaningful, e.g., phenomenology is concerned specifically with the types of *essential* issues or themes related to the human condition that inspires film

to *philosophize*, e.g., ontological issues such as death or mortality, profuse and inexplicable suffering, and the persistent burden of inexorable guilt. In addition, drawing from Heidegger, Loht stresses that philosophy must be attuned in advance to the *mystery in all things*, i.e., the manner in which all that we inquire into holds the *original* propensity for evading our philosophical grasp through the inevitable move into concealment. This is how philosophy, according to Loht, guided by phenomenology, should approach film in order to preserve and shelter its often over-looked ontological status. For example, the depths of a film's meaning is never graspable in its totality, expressible in terms that resist further interpretive or hermeneutic exploration. Our renewed attempts to reveal and learn more about the secrets and meanings that film conceals are grounded in the antecedent understanding (or ontological truism) that the more we seek to understand film, to wrest its mysteries from concealment, the more mysterious the film becomes. In relation to this point, films "such as *Citizen Kane* clearly do not become 'used up' after viewing; if anything they require repeated viewing in order for their staying power to perpetuate," for viewing a film "and safeguarding its truthful disclosure," which also includes respecting, preserving, and sheltering its concealed and mysterious elements, "is an end in itself." (p. 94)

Loht's phenomenological account of Heideggerian *art-and philosophy* contributes to the ongoing scholarship of thinkers such as Stephen Mulhall and Robert Sinnerbrink, e.g., although it is argued that film operates as philosophy, Loht gives us the "phenomenological conditions underlying the notion of film-as-philosophy" (p. 116), and those basic conditions, which are ontological in nature are traceable to film's power to transport the spectator into the "space of the film" in terms of "Being-there," which is "predicated on a presencing, a projective placing of oneself into an existing space," i.e., the context or space of the world opened by the film, wherein our Being in connection with the Being of others becomes an issue of concern (p. 127). Loht's analysis addresses ongoing *film-as-philosophy* debates, which includes the crucial issue of whether or not film itself – as an artistic medium and legitimate work of art – *philosophizes*. *Film-philosophy* differs from film theory and what might generally be understood as "philosophy of film," in that philosophy of film questions film theory by adopting a philosophical approach and is focused on such issues as the *aesthetics of film*. Conversely, *film-as-philosophy* embraces two claims, which Loht defends. First, film or cinema "illustrates" philosophical concepts or themes, and second, and most importantly, film *is* philosophy. Film *philosophizes* in that it engages and draws us into the sway of the context of "living" and unfolding philosophical issues of which we become an integral part, inspiring our thought in new ways, transforming our understanding of the world and others. In other words, as Loht's phenomenology of film would have it, the cinematic experience attunes our entire *Being-in-the-world*.



Days of Heaven (Terrence Malick, 1978)

The final sections of the book present filmic analyses, which are significant because they incorporate Loht's *film-as-philosophy* approach to breathe ontological life into films such as Michael Haneke's *Code inconnu* (*Code Unknown*, 2000) and *Das weiße Band* (*The White Ribbon*, 2009), and Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Malick, we note, studied systematic philosophy at an advanced level, and Loht provides valuable insight into this issue. Not only was Malick interested in Heideggerian phenomenology, he also translated Heidegger's essay, "On the Essence of Ground" into English. Because of Malick's exposure to philosophical and Heideggerian themes, his films are rich in phenomenological depth. However, Loht stresses caution when seeking to attribute Heideggerian themes to Malick's films, for although Malick studied Heidegger, "we need to treat the Malick-Heidegger connection as a question rather than a given," for the "application of Heidegger is just a little bit too easy and simplistic in helping to reckon with Malick's work." (p. 150) In a somewhat surprising move, only because this film does not appear to possess the *gravitas* of these other aforementioned art-house cinematic works, Loht examines David Gordon Green's *Joe* (USA, 2013) from a Heideggerian perspective. For Loht, this film is crucial because many of phenomenological themes from his book can be understood through its analysis. Much like the other films that the author analyses, the chief reason why *Joe* lends itself to phenomenological analysis – and indeed, lives at an ontological level – is that it fosters the occurrence of *aletheia*, which is the film's ability to open and create a *filmic-world*, where the transformative power of images and themes are revealed in a way that draws in the *spectator-participant* and attunes them in a new and unique manner. In an attempt to concretize the phenomenological analysis, I will briefly discuss Loht's reading of this film to show *how* it accomplishes this ontological transformation to the spectator.

Loht claims *Joe* is an instance of an "ordinary" film with philosophical significance, in one way it expresses a sense of solicitous *care* when faced with the existential plight of others, in a way where the issues are universalized, for our immersion in the film demonstrates that we all

cohabit the finite space of the human condition and hence all share the collective propensity for suffering. According to Loht, this film reveals the world of the characters, which becomes the potential new world for the spectators, one that is basically portrayed as a “run-down rural town without a robust economy or cultural life” (p. 194), and considering the downtrodden status of the characters and the burden of the problems they trundle around, the general mode of attunement or *mood* of the film is that of “death, decline, and decay” (p. 195). This attunement is one manifestation of the spectator’s experience of the *truth* of the filmic-world, which occurs only because of the *projective nature* of the human being, i.e., the film has coaxed us out of our world and drawn us into a new world. Loht affirms that this experience lends itself to interpretation, for what is occurring in the presence of the film’s revelation of truth is the “activation of the understanding,” and so as related to our earlier discussion, there is at once a change to the mindset (*mood*) and a new understanding and articulation thereof emerging from the participatory experience of the film. For example, as we are attuned to the main character, who is troubled, harboring deep-seated regrets, we don’t merely observe his struggle, rather we *assume* it and take it up, and a sense of solicitous *care* is elicited and overtakes us as *existential* insight is revealed into his inner conflict. For as Loht argues, we comport ourselves toward Joe in such a way that we incrementally “disclose his pain, we uncover it” through the immediate experience and interpretation of the film. We benefit from the insight gleaned into this character’s pain, because our attunement is “rooted in an ultimately existential feature of Dasein,” and this relates directly to the phenomenology of film, the ability to reveal and interpret truth, to wrest it from concealment, to make partially “present what is not immediately present, and to articulate the discourse latent therein” (p. 197) as it might relate to the eventual appropriation of our unique possibilities that are shaped and informed by those revealed by the film.

In line with a Heideggerian view of art, film does not merely “re-produce” an imitative two-dimensional reality for the spectator on the flat plane of the screen in the theater or projection-room. Rather, by merging creatively and artistically “image, character, place, and time” (p. 194) film creates an ontological context of involvement. And, as related to the phenomenological themes Loht has presented, we encounter in film “character” as *attunement*, “place” as *existential space* of a world, and “time” as the original *temporal* unfolding of the events comprising the world, which much like the viewer’s world, possesses ontological depth and is given structure by the modes of *existential Being-in* discussed above. This is why Loht claims, in relation to Heidegger, the attunement of film is always deeper than a mere psychological or fleeting emotional transformation, because we are brought into contact with the very ontological structures that first open the possibility for any form of meaning to arise, which indicates these structures provide an experience of reality that is antecedent to and always more primordial than experiences of both a psychological and emotional nature. The film-world becomes, in moments of attuned participation, not only a world added-on to the viewer’s, rather it is indistinguishable from the world because it *becomes* the new reality inhabited by the viewer. The *essence*, or ontological ground, of the film experience occurs not only through the phenomenon of *recognizability*, but more accurately, through an experience that is fundamentally grounded in *relatability*. This ontological function of film, while certainly relating to the apparatus of cinema – e.g. the ability of cinema to project a moving and living reality in sound, images, and light – is however, irreducible to it, because for both Heidegger and Loht the *essence* of art, and of course, film, defies reduction to a “thing”, a mere mechanical, technological “object.”

Phenomenology of Film is written in a clear and direct style and is accessible to readers who might be unfamiliar with the highly technical philosophy of Heidegger. It will greatly appeal to film theorists and film-philosophers, students and scholars of philosophy, and educators incorporating the *philosophy-through-film* approach in their classrooms. Loht's scholarship admirably contributes new thoughts to, and indeed invigorates, the field of *film-as-philosophy*. Loht effectively confronts Heidegger's phenomenological ontology in order convincingly and successfully to think *with* and then *beyond* Heidegger, offering us an original and illuminating study into the phenomenological-ontological aspects of *film-as-philosophy*.

Shawn Loht. *Phenomenology of Film: A Heideggerian Account of the Film Experience* (London: Lexington Books, 2017).