Introduction: Heidegger and the Phenomenology of Film

Robert Sinnerbrink, Macquarie University

The idea for this special dossier arose after an “author meets critics” book panel on Shawn Loht’s *Phenomenology of Film: A Heideggerian Account of the Film Experience* (2017) organised by Robert Sinnerbrink for the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy (ASCP) Conference in December 2021. This event, held online amid COVID lockdowns in Melbourne and Sydney, brought together film theorists and philosophers to engage with Loht’s innovative and ground-breaking contribution to film-philosophy: the first detailed and developed phenomenological study of film experience drawing on Martin Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time* (1927/1996). The novelty of Loht’s approach was to focus on the hitherto neglected path of Heideggerian phenomenology, a marginalised perspective given the dominance of the embodied approach inaugurated by Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye* (1992). Sobchack’s influential Merleau-Pontian version of phenomenology and of the “film body” was subsequently cross-bred with affect theory and theories of embodied subjectivity to yield the diverse range of film-phenomenology perspectives defining contemporary debates in film theory and film-philosophy (Marks, 2000, 2002; Sobchack, 2004, 2009; Barker, 2009; Chamarette, 2012, 2015; Ferencz-Flatz & Hanich, 2016; Sinnerbrink, 2022, pp. 117–139).

As Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich remark, providing a coherent overview of film phenomenology requires surveying a large and sprawling field, “the contours of which seem to be as vague as the
foggy landscapes in an Antonioni or Angelopoulos film” (Ferencz-Flatz & Hanich, 2016, p. 1). One key challenge is defining what we mean by phenomenology: if the definition is overly broad (referring to any approach that focuses on subjective experience), then the term becomes so inclusive that even structuralist approaches can count as having a phenomenological dimension. If the definition is too narrow (as in Edmund Husserl’s foundational descriptive science dedicated to articulating universal structures of consciousness via the method of the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* [bracketing] and detached eidetic contemplation of essences [*Wesensanchauung*]), then almost no film theory would count as phenomenological in a strict sense (Ferencz-Flatz & Hanich, 2016, p. 1). Film-philosophers have therefore tended to claim that film phenomenology refers to a pluralistic set of theoretical approaches, foregrounding subjective embodied experience, and that it is essentially descriptive, focusing on detailed or thick description, interpretation, and analysis of relevant aspects of cinematic experience. At the same time, if film phenomenology is to mean more than merely cataloguing one’s personal impressions of a film, then it ought to aim at shared structures or common features of our embodied engagement with cinema, providing a descriptively rich analysis of features of subjective phenomena that can provide the basis for further (explanatory or contextualising) theorisation. This suggests the need for more thorough and sustained reflection on the shared methodological parameters and characteristics of diverse modes of phenomenological inquiry into our experience of cinema. Whatever its theoretical provenance, film phenomenology has always emphasised the importance of a descriptive account of the situated experiences of embodied spectators always already embedded within a meaningful social and historical world. It also focuses on corporeal, affective, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of film experience from a “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” point of view and does so with an acknowledgement of the role of social and historical situatedness or active cultural embeddedness within a pre-interpreted world.

Contemporary film phenomenology is defined by diverse (and sometimes inconsistent) strands of modern thought: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, Heidegger; (Deleuzian) affect theory; theories of corporeality, embodied spectatorship; aesthetics of touch (hapticity); gender and queer theories, intersectional approaches, new materialisms and so on (Marks, 2000, 2002; Barker, 2009; Laine, 2011; Rutherford, 2011; Chamarette, 2012, 2015; Walton, 2016). Whatever one’s theoretical or practical commitments, however, it is worth noting that applying a pre-existing theory or assumed concepts to an example or case study is not the same as
practising phenomenology in the fullest sense. Phenomenology, of whatever variety, always maintains a commitment to thick description of subjective experience along with some kind of theoretical bracketing or suspension of presupposed theoretical concepts or frameworks to deal descriptively with such phenomena, while remaining mindful of the partial and contextual (i.e., hermeneutic) conditions of possibility defining any kind of phenomenological investigation. At the same time, it is possible to articulate original theoretical elaboration of concepts accounting for cinematic experience in ways that are more than merely descriptive, and which enable us to not only capture and comprehend but to critically reflect upon and transform our “natural attitude” towards cinematic spectatorship.

It is in this context that Loht’s *Phenomenology of Film* makes an important contribution. It offers a (novel) Heideggerian phenomenological approach to theorising film experience via close engagement with diverse film examples, offering new ways of theorising film experience in a non-dualistic manner via Heidegger’s holistic existential analysis of our shared being-in-the-world (compared with more conventional accounts of spectatorship that often remain committed to a residual subject–object dualism). Despite these potentialities, Heideggerian film phenomenology has remained largely ignored, along with the relationship between Heidegger and film theory more generally (see Price, 2008; Sinnerbrink, 2014). Apart from work inspired by the films of Terrence Malick, whose early and mid-career films attracted the label “Heideggerian” and spawned a range of responses focusing on the question of a “Heideggerian cinema” (Furstenau & MacAvoy, 2003; Price, 2008; Rhym, 2012; Loht, 2013, 2015; Mosely, 2018; Magrini, 2019; Quaranta, 2020; Sinnerbrink, 2006, 2014; Woessner, 2011), most phenomenological approaches to film eschewed Heidegger in favour of Merleau-Ponty, focusing on embodiment and affect rather than being-in-the-world and mood. Moreover, the recent emphasis on (embodied) subjectivity, varieties of affect, and return of identity politics with a more pronounced emphasis on diversity, gender identity, race, and decoloniality, meant that Heideggerian – along with other classical phenomenological – perspectives receded further into the background, despite their resources for theorising embodied spectatorship, aesthetic engagement, and film worlds.

This neglect has been hastened by the recent controversy, reignited by the publication of the *Black Notebooks 1931–1941* (see Farin & Malpas, 2016), concerning Heidegger’s apparent antisemitism and whether it impacts upon his philosophical thinking. Such controversies largely preceded the publication of Loht’s book, although they remain important
and relevant in the context of contemporary Heidegger reception both in philosophy and in cultural theory (including film and media studies). Although other historical figures in the history of phenomenology (like Jean-Pierre Meunier, Emmanuel Levinas, Simone Weil, and Jean-Paul Sartre) have attracted occasional attention from film theorists and philosophers of film, Heidegger’s potential for a phenomenological approach to cinema remained similarly unexplored, despite promising forays in this direction, until the publication of Loht’s book. This neglect of Heidegger, as one of the most important phenomenological thinkers of the 20th century, in relation to film phenomenology is itself thought-provoking, suggesting a rather narrow or selective appropriation of phenomenological approaches in relation to cinematic experience (Sinnerbrink, 2014). It is this potential for an explicitly Heideggerian film phenomenology, focusing on Being and Time, that Loht’s book both reveals and realises, forging a path for thinking through film that remains to be explored, including the possibilities opened by engaging with the later Heidegger’s thought in relation to cinema (see Safit, 2014; Sinnerbrink, 2014; de Roo, 2021).

**Novelty**

The novelty of Loht’s study resides in his focus on Heidegger’s phenomenological account of our shared being-in-the-world, famously articulated in Heidegger’s Being and Time. The latter offers a resolutely anti-Cartesian phenomenological and hermeneutic analysis of the basic existential structures of Dasein (“being-there”): our finite, temporal, contingent, practically engaged existence in a shared world context with others. Loht brings the riches of Heidegger’s analytic of Dasein to the film experience, arguing that we can understand our engagement with cinema in a non-Cartesian, non-dualistic manner thanks to Heidegger’s existential analysis of the basic ontological structures shaping our meaningful engagement with the world. This emphasis on engagement with a world that is holistic and embodied, where we are always already embedded within shared contexts of meaning, provides a rich framework for understanding film experience. Moving beyond contemporary concerns with the body and affect, as well as beyond overly “subjectivising” versions of first-person, personalised phenomenology, Loht shows how Heidegger’s account of the existential structures of Dasein are fostered by the cinematic experience, as well as drawing attention to the importance of world – the filmworld – as a key feature of cinematic experience that requires more explicit phenomenological analysis and philosophical comprehension. Our experience of film is also an engagement with a film world, embedded in our shared being-in-the-world, in ways that overcome
the subject–object divide still deeply entrenched in representationalist theories of film spectatorship. *Phenomenology of Film* thus offers a phenomenologically rich way of describing, analysing, and understanding the way film experience resonates with essential existential features of our everyday being-in-the-world. At the same time, as some of our authors note, it is important to emphasise and explain how film viewing nonetheless remains distinct from ordinary, everyday ways of being, of engaging with shared contexts of meaning and practical comportment with others in the world. In any event, Loht develops his phenomenologically rich account of experiencing filmworlds in ways that are illuminating and enriching, contributing to the growing literature on filmworlds as an important alternative way of thinking directed towards understanding our experience of cinema in non-representationalist, phenomenologically grounded ways.

**Dossier Summary**

We were fortunate to have excellent contributors to our original “author meets critics” session on Loht’s book and were joined by new contributors as the project developed. Our authors include experts on phenomenology and film, Heidegger and phenomenology, mood and affect, ethics and aesthetics, feminism and ecocriticism, and film-philosophy. They include seasoned scholars and early career researchers, all of whom are concerned to explore and reflect upon the relationship between film and phenomenology. The articles assembled in this dossier approach Loht’s book from a variety of perspectives, but all share the same commitment to exploring Loht’s Heideggerian phenomenological approach to film experience in critical terms, thereby contributing to the question of how to pursue film phenomenology more generally. Our hope is that these contributions will stimulate further engagement with Heideggerian approaches and expand the possibilities of film phenomenology into the future.

Ludo de Roo’s opening piece explores Loht’s Heideggerian film phenomenology by focusing on the concept of “filmworlds” – a neglected theme in contemporary film-philosophy – and analysing the related phenomenon of cinematic “immersion” (and its relation to “absorption”, with which it is often conflated). After mapping Loht’s appropriation of the phenomenological account of being-in-the-world that is extended/enfolded into film experience, de Roo opens the critical dialogue with Loht by asking questions about the compatibility of Loht’s account of Dasein’s comportmental engagement with its world-context and the immersive/absorptive dimensions of film experience. De Roo’s contribution here is to underline the need to theorise filmworlds
in more depth and detail, emphasising the various phenomenological modes of engagement with such worlds as well as their distinction from the more practically oriented, “average everyday” forms of being-in-the-world. De Roo’s questions and reflections open a dialogue with Loht that other authors contribute to and expand upon, acknowledging but also questioning how a Heideggerian film phenomenology might open new approaches to understanding film experience but also point to the limits of contemporary forms of film phenomenology.

Chiara Quaranta turns to the aesthetics of mood with a focus on the phenomenon of boredom in cinema. She examines Loht’s Heideggerian phenomenological ontology of the film experience, exploring the relationship between cinematic moods and understanding. Like de Roo, she underlines the significance of moods and their relationship with Loht’s account of cinematic worlds as important contributions to contemporary film phenomenology. Adapting Loht’s analyses, and drawing on Heidegger’s phenomenology of moods, she brings her own phenomenological approach to the mood of boredom in cinema, but also those of love and grief, showing how they enable experiences of temporality, finitude and solitude, and the filmic disclosure of meaning. She offers a fine examination of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* (2021), approaching it from a phenomenological perspective, showing how it is a film “wherein boredom is consistently awakened through aesthetic strategies of dead-time, silence, slowness and repetition”. At the same time, she offers apposite critical reflections on the limits of a Heideggerian film phenomenology, drawing attention to the importance of an embodied approach to spectatorship, the need for more explicit ethical orientation, and opening our horizons of cinematic engagement to be more attuned to the world of others.

Martin Rossouw’s response to Loht’s work takes up the important methodological question of what it means to practise film-philosophy. Loht’s Heideggerian film phenomenology, he argues, in adopting a very broad understanding of philosophy, risks being “too embracive” in its approach to the question of how film might contribute to philosophical understanding. Turning to Loht’s adoption of elements of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Rossouw queries whether Loht’s reliance on the latter results in an overly “reflexive” account of the way film can be understood as philosophical; he questions relevant philosophical readings of films – such as those of Terrence Malick – that are taken to be philosophical insofar as they can be viewed and understood via the concepts of reflection and self-reflection, questioning whether these are appropriate in the case of Malick’s work. Finally, Rossouw suggests that one way in which these tendencies might be corrected is via more
attention to the disclosive role of philosophical voiceover – a signature feature of Malick’s work – as offering a more appropriate phenomenological instance of reflexivity as well as encouraging spectator practices of listening: in short, how it may offer a more “Heideggerian” way of understanding the film experience.

Annie Sandrussi raises questions about the implications of Loht’s phenomenological approach, asking whether his use of Heidegger’s notion of “formal indication” (as a way of formally conceptualising phenomenological experience) is adequate to capture the diversity of spectator experiences of cinema and heterogenous character of filmic disclosures. Starting from the claim that the film-viewer relation provides the ground of filmic disclosure, Sandrussi questions whether Loht’s approach is concrete enough to capture the diversity of “lived experience” and whether it is able to do justice to the role of embodiment in filmic engagement. Heidegger’s apparent neglect of embodiment in Being and Time, for Sandrussi, thus raises questions concerning the adequacy of Loht’s “Dasein-centric” phenomenological approach to address spectator diversity and the importance of embodiment for contemporary phenomenological approaches to spectatorship. These questions again point to the theorectico-practical challenges raised by Loht’s Heideggerian phenomenology of film experience when brought into dialogue with contemporary debates and concerns in film phenomenology and film-philosophy more generally.

John Rhym’s response also acknowledges the significance of Loht’s development of a Heideggerian film phenomenology but also challenges such an approach as illustrative of a more general challenge raised by the adoption of Heidegger’s “ontic-ontological schema” as applied to theorising film experience. After outlining the twofold role of this schema in Heidegger’s Being and Time, Rhym discusses the main difficulty arising from this approach, namely the subordination of ontic phenomena to their ontological ground or structure, which when applied to various specific ontic domains, such as film, results in a loss of specificity necessary for a genuinely phenomenological engagement. In criticising analytic-cognitivist accounts of film spectatorship for neglecting the ontological basis of film experience, according to Rhym, Loht applies this Heideggerian ontic-ontological schema in ways that undermine his claims concerning the nature of the film medium as “uniquely disclosive”. Rhym’s detailed and meticulous critique raises important questions for any (Heideggerian) phenomenological inquiry into film experience and how it is to be theorised.

Finally, Jason Wirth offers a rich philosophical “rumination” on Loht’s Heideggerian film phenomenology, exploring the ways in which it
contributes to the “film as philosophy” debate, not as a mere vehicle for applied philosophy but rather as an invitation to philosophical rumination (in a Nietzschean sense). Focusing his reflections on Malick’s *Days of Heaven*, Wirth shows how the film invites such rumination by 1) combining both critical (philosophical) and personal (existential) reflection, 2) allowing this philosophical encounter to prompt an engagement with our “abyssal ground” of existence (what Heidegger calls “earth”) and 3) drawing on this experience of more radical realisation to open new ways of thinking with an affirmative transformative ethical dimension. Wirth’s thoughtful engagement with Loht’s phenomenological approach – in particular his interpretation of Malick’s *Days of Heaven* – both deepens our understanding of a Heideggerian approach to cinema and complements Loht’s film-philosophical understanding of the complementary relationship between philosophy and cinema. His concluding reflections on the idea of film-philosophical rumination as exploring world and earth through cinematic engagement resonates with Malick’s presentation of spiritual, metaphysical, and ethical reflection via cinematic means.

In his generous and considered author’s response, Shawn Loht addresses the criticisms raised by Rhym, Rossouw, de Roo, and Sandrussi, and reflects on the ways Quaranta and Wirth elaborate his phenomenological approach to film. He defends his use of the ontic-ontological distinction as applied to film experience, explicates the relationship between being-in-the-world and being-in-the-film-world, and responds to questions about the facticity and identity of the putative film viewer. He both acknowledges potential difficulties in his Heideggerian approach, while also elaborating and defending it, suggesting in conclusion how it might be developed further in the future.

**Future Directions**

Loht’s *Phenomenology of Film* offers an original and productive contribution to contemporary film phenomenology. It shows how a Heideggerian approach to phenomenological inquiry provides a rich basis for theorising otherwise neglected aspects of film experience (such as the disclosive role of moods and importance of film worlds) but also helps us to understand the ontological dimensions of cinematic disclosure while offering new ways of treating cinema phenomenologically as a way of thinking and experiencing the world. The articles assembled in this dossier explore as well as challenge and question Loht’s approach, but all are united in acknowledging his important contribution to contemporary film phenomenology. Some of the questions raised
that invite further reflection and engagement include how film phenomenology might benefit from a more synthetic appropriation of Heidegger’s earlier and later thought; exploring further the importance of mood and filmworlds as essential dimensions of filmic experience and cinematic disclosure; the challenges of conceptualising film experience from phenomenological perspectives while doing justice to its specificity and acknowledging spectator diversity; and the importance of exploring ethical, cultural-historical, and political dimensions of film experience in any phenomenological encounter and mode of inquiry. Our hope is that this dossier not only invites further engagement with Loht’s Heideggerian film phenomenology but provides a productive encounter that will stimulate further inquiry into the untapped possibilities of film phenomenology and enhance its critical contribution to contemporary film-philosophy.

ORCID
Robert Sinnerbrink https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3330-3038

REFERENCES


