V.F. PERKINS

Why did Film Studies ignore Perkins?

1.

I will start with a question, one that I hope will shed a useful light on both Victor Perkins and the academic discipline of cinema studies: Why for over three decades did American Film Studies ignore both *Film as Film* and Perkins' subsequent work? Some of you may object that things were not that bad, but I can assure you that they were. This semester marks my 44th year of teaching. Until the last ten years, I had almost never heard *Film as Film* mentioned or noticed Perkins' work being used. His writing appeared on no undergraduate syllabi and no doctoral reading lists. What caused such an astonishing neglect? Answering that question will involve looking at both the institution of academic Film Studies and the particular method of Perkins' work.

2.

Isaiah Berlin once observed that what characterises philosophical questions 'is that there seem to be no obvious and generally accepted procedures for answering them' (1984: 11). If, for example, I want to know whether Jim knows you, I can ask him. If, on the other hand, I want to know whether I can ever be certain about what goes on in Jim's mind, I'm not sure

where to begin. To a certain extent, problems about the cinema share this characteristic. If I want to find out how many films Hitchcock made or how many shots in *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) exceed 24 seconds, I know what to do. If, however, I want to define 'film's ontology' or understand the experience of a spectator who, having been involved in a movie's character, suddenly recognises the actress playing her, I'm less certain.

Most of Perkins' career took place as academic Film Studies was experiencing a continental shift that produced a stark contrast between two different ways of answering the cinema's 'philosophical' questions. In fact, these two approaches did not even agree on what the proper questions should be. The shorthand names for these two approaches are *Movie* and *Screen*.

Film as Film appeared in 1972, just as *Screen* was taking off, after its 1971 publication and adoption of *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s 1969 manifesto 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', whose opening sentence, as translator Susan Bennett put it, dictated the new terms: 'Scientific criticism has an obligation to define its field and methods' (Nichols 1976: 23). Armed with the new tools of semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism, the *Screen* approach rapidly displaced *Movie*'s commitment to aesthetic evaluation, now denounced as quaintly reactionary. Overnight, the *Movie* writers had become mouldy figs.

In many ways, the *Screen / Movie* divide resembled the quarrel between analytic and Continental philosophy. *Screen*, however, was a mash-up: while its intellectual origins were obviously Continental, its stated goal aligned it with the analytic tradition, which, as Richard Rorty diagnosed, 'hope[s] to *get something right*' by putting the inquiry 'on the secure path of science' (2007: 123). Rorty, however, pointed out that this commitment requires 'expert cultures' where agreement about questions and methods can be assumed. Rorty's conclusion about philosophy also applies to Film Studies: it 'as a whole is not, and has never been, an expert culture characterized by such long-term, near-universal consensus' (125). In retrospect, the stridency of *Cahiers* and *Screen* appears less malevolent than strategic: intuiting what their 'scientific' approach required, they quickly closed ranks in an attempt to establish an 'expert culture' of Film Studies. Dictating a

consensus where none existed, theorists banished other ways of doing Film Studies – aesthetic evaluation, mise-en-scène analysis, *auteurist* celebrations were now off-limits for serious film scholarship. The effects could immediately be felt in the academic job market. If you weren't engaged in 'Theory', you weren't seen as part of the newly emerging discipline of Film Studies. You couldn't get published, and you couldn't get a job. Couldn't a graduate student use both *Screen* and *Movie*? As Rorty saw about the philosophy split, 'The main reason ambidexterity is rare is that graduate students trying to shape themselves into possible job candidates for teaching positions in philosophy only have time to read so much. They can please only so many potential employers' (2007: 120). He also pointed out the real problem: 'such disputes [between competing approaches] only become dangerous when one side or the other wants to say that the material taught by the other side shouldn't be taught *at all*' (1982: 225). In the U.S., *Screen* theorists didn't seem to think *Film as Film* should be part of the curriculum. *Screen* Theory had become the new scholasticism.

The odd couple of *Screen* and *Movie* resembled the Dostoevsky / Tolstoy dichotomy: like Dostoevsky, *Screen* was melodramatic, broad, and memorable; like Tolstoy, *Movie* was matter-of-fact, subtle, and harder to recall. Why did *Screen* displace *Movie*? In retrospect, the headlong consolidation around *Screen* Theory appears as a classic example of what Rorty called those 'temporary, historically conditioned little frenzies' that affect intellectuals (he cited seventeenth-century skepticism and twentieth-century ordinary language philosophy!!) (1982: 186). Eventually, the fever breaks. In the short run, however, *Screen* swept away its competitors. In a buyer's market enabling even regional American colleges and universities to demand publication, *Screen* Theory's appeal lay in its *portability*. Its 'scientific' model stressed *explanation*, the standard conception of which involves the notion of *generality*. Like Barthes' *S/Z*, Mulvey's 1975 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', almost certainly the most widely cited of any film studies article from the last half-century, offered to explain a whole *class* of works, not just a few novels or movies. Rorty identified both the attraction and danger of this approach: 'The recent popularity of "literary theory" in departments of literature', he observed in 2003, 'is a result of

the fact that you have to produce a book to get tenure. The fastest way to do so is to learn a theory and then apply it to a literary text. Most such books are unprofitable hack work' ([2003] 2010: 199-200).

A good way to think about the *Movie / Screen* contrast lies in a remark Wittgenstein once made to a friend: 'Hegel seems to me to be always saying that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different' (Malcolm 1994: 44). *Screen* was Hegelian, often explicitly so (Alexandre Kojève's 1930s lectures on Hegel, translated into English in 1969, regularly turned up in *Screen* bibliographies). Its writers, eager to show that things which look different are really the same, were willing to ignore particulars. In one of *Screen*'s most influential articles, 1974's 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', Colin MacCabe was candid about neglecting individual cases. Having announced that he would 'attempt to define the structure which typifies the nineteenth-century realist novel and […] show how that structure can be used to describe a great number of films', he laid his cards on the table:

> What to a large extent will be lacking in this article is the specific nature of the film form, but this does not seem to me to invalidate the setting up of certain essential categories from which further discussion must progress (1985: 34).

Movie, on the other hand, had always attended precisely to the kinds of cinematic details that MacCabe considered unimportant. In fact, the journal could have adopted Wittgenstein's ideal motto for his own *Philosophical Investigations*: 'I'll teach you differences' (Malcolm 1994: 44). Think for example of Perkins' description of *The Wizard of Oz*'s (Victor Fleming, 1939) conclusion, designed to dissolve David Bordwell's overly credulous acceptance of the comforting line, 'There's no place like home', and to show that dialogue cannot always be taken at face value (Perkins 1990). If Bordwell had bothered to object to Perkins' fine-grained argument, Perkins might have replied with Wittgenstein's response when accused of a preoccupation with 'superficial differences' – 'I don't know any

other kind'. The *Movie* writers were effectively adopting Helen Vendler's dictum for film study: 'I do not regard as literary criticism', Vendler argued, 'any set of remarks about a poem which would be equally true of its paraphrasable propositional content' (1997: xiii).

Jeff Dolven's distinction between 'transcendent' and 'immanent' explanations perfectly catches the *Screen / Movie* dichotomy:

> Explanations can be immanent, or transcendent; they can occupy the same world as what they explain (as storytelling tends to do), or they can point or stand elsewhere (like astrology, or physics) […] . an explanation can share a style with what it explains, or not. It can sound like, or sound different. The desire to explain is often a desire for difference, in the fear that to sound *like* is to be entangled, compromised, complicit. You might ask for an explanation simply in order to stop the action, as explaining a joke will still the laughter. The rhythm is interrupted […]. *In its refusal of local rhythm*, *explanation is the enemy of style* [emphasis added]. (2017: 165)

Mulvey on narrative cinema and *Cahiers* on *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) offered 'transcendent' explanations. *Movie* seemed more interested in 'local rhythm'.

But while *Screen* offered a portable method that could be used on many movies, the *Movie* approach seemed harder to *use*. After studying Perkins' analysis of *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), would a student know something about the cinema or just one film? Wouldn't that student have to start all over again with the next movie, which would present a different set of problems? If *Screen* offered 'scientific', generalised propositions, the *Movie* writers seemed to have intuited Wittgenstein's rejection of such grand explanations and his advice that 'in order to see more clearly […] we must focus on the details of what goes on; must look at them *from close to*' (1958: §51). Wittgenstein denied that most of our concepts have a generalisable essence: there is no one thing, for example, that *all* games have in common. Thus, it is perfectly OK to use examples to 'explain to someone what a game is', and

'Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining – in default of a better' (§71). In other words, *Movie*'s examples – a particular film by Ray or Sirk – were utterly appropriate means of understanding the cinema, which, like games, has no single essence.

Having repudiated the scientific approach to philosophical problems, Wittgenstein famously proposed that 'We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place' (§109). In his hands, the descriptive method involved *showing*, or better, *exhibiting* examples, which as one writer has suggested, were not intended as a philosophical doctrine, but rather a defense *against* doctrine. These examples – think of *Movie*'s case studies – amounted less to an argument than a means of persuasion. Wittgenstein described the process:

> I wanted to put this picture before your eyes, and your *acceptance* of this picture consists in your being inclined to regard a given case differently; that is, to compare it with *this* series of pictures. I have changed your *way of seeing*. (I once read somewhere that a geometrical figure, with the words 'Look at this', serves as a proof for certain Indian mathematicians.) (1970: 82).

Look at this – the phrase exactly describes *Movie*'s method, and by extension, Perkins' own.

3.

In the U.S., *Screen*'s ascendancy coincided with the emergence of academic Film Studies programs, which found their initial homes in Midwestern and Californian state universities. (Harvard and Yale have only recently developed formal programs; Princeton has still not done so.) Of *Movie*'s principals, Robin Wood was by far the best known in America, probably because he moved away from the journal's aesthetic focus towards questions of ideology and gender. Perkins, more loyal to *Movie*'s original project, publishing less than Wood, and writing for a journal that appeared unpredictably, became less visible. But while Perkins' work was obviously typical

of *Movie*, it was also distinct, and as such, it presented its own difficulties.

For someone like me, whose career in many ways owes itself to *Screen* Theory – my first book derived from its American inflection in Charles Eckert's famous article about *Marked Woman* – Perkins' approach took some getting used to. When I read *Film as Film* for the first time about a dozen years ago, I immediately thought of how Wittgenstein once began a course: 'What we say will be easy', he remarked, 'but to know why we say it will be very difficult' (1979: 77). Perkins, of course, was an elegant writer, and never an obscure one. But after the first two chapters on film theory, I felt lost. The problem involved the challenge identified by two of Wittgenstein's students:

The considerable difficulty in following the lectures arose from the fact that it was hard to see where all this often rather repetitive concrete detailed talk was leading – how the examples were interconnected and how all this bore on the problems which one was accustomed to put to oneself in abstract terms. (Fann 1967: 51)

Screen had trained its followers to work from abstractions. The detailed, nose-to-the-ground, case-by-case method of Wittgenstein and Perkins seemed to come from another country.

In fact, *Film as Film* resembles Wittgenstein's later work, with its critique of essences and its reliance on examples. Here is Wittgenstein:

The idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation, for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him to understand the usage of the general term. When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge […]. As the problem is put, it seems there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word 'knowledge' […] We should reply: 'There is no one such exact usage of the word 'knowledge'; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used (1965: 19-20, 27).

And here is Perkins:

I do not believe that the film (or any other medium) has an essence which we can usefully invoke to justify our criteria (1972: 59).

Wittgenstein attacked what Aristotle called Socrates' most important idea, his insistence on definitions – of knowledge, courage, friendship, virtue. Perkins' target was the orthodox film theorists (Arnheim, Rotha, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Balazs), whose celebration of German Expressionism and Soviet montage rested on an attempt 'to produce a definition of the medium which would coincide with the definition of Art' (1972: 11-12). Perkins also saw that even those theorists' antagonist, André Bazin, had himself assumed a definition of the cinema, photographic representation, that simply amounted to the orthodoxy's complementary antonym.

Perkins remarked that film theorists had ignored the movies' variety, a spectrum from documentary to cartoon. 'We can evolve useful criteria only for specific types of film, not for the cinema', he cautioned. 'The problem arises from the embarrassing richness of the cinema's aptitudes' (1972: 59-60). In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein realised that he had made the same mistake that Perkins had diagnosed in the orthodox film theorists. Repudiating his earlier picture-theory of language, he pointed out the '*countless* kinds' of sentences we actually use:

Giving orders, and obeying them—
Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
Reporting an event—
Speculating about an event—
Forming and testing an hypothesis—
Making up a story, and reading it—
Acting in a play—
Singing rounds—
Guessing riddles—
Making a joke; telling one—
Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (1958: §23).

The *Tractatus* argument had assumed that all words were either like nouns (which 'pictured' the world) or the leftovers ('but', 'which', 'soon', etc.), which could take care of themselves.

Similarly, Perkins saw that a film theory 'becomes coherent only if we identify the cinema's 'essence' with a single aspect of the film' (1972: 39). Eisenstein had found that exposition in juxtaposition, Bazin in photographic automatism. Perkins made clear that his ideas applied only to the photographic fiction film, neither documentary nor cartoon – nor the kind of Brechtian 'subversive' movie celebrated by *Screen*. 'The degree to which *Les Carabiniers* is to be valued', Perkins acknowledged, 'will have to be argued in terms other than those proposed here' (1972: 190).

After *Film as Film*'s opening chapters, Perkins devoted himself to close observations of scenes whose synthesis of 'clarity' and 'credibility' make them 'at the same time significant and convincing' (1972: 69). Arguing against importing something from outside to impose significance (as with *Potemkin*'s 'rising' stone lions), he celebrated deploying the expressive potential of material already before the camera. He liked *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*'s (Vincente Minelli, 1956) kitchen scene, where Minnelli used Eddie's 'precarious physical position on the stool' as he reaches for a cup and saucer (a job previously left to his mother) and the harsh rattle of the china to convey the boy's fragile emotional state (78). 'The spectator can understand the action of the scene', Perkins noted approvingly, 'without becoming aware of the device as relevant comment. It does not *demand* interpretation' (77). 'What is pretension', Perkins asked, 'other than an unwarranted claim to significance, meaning insecurely attached to matter?' (132) The real achievement involves the contrary, a style that serves the subject matter rather than the filmmaker's own ambition.

Described in this way, *Film as Film* would seem straightforward. In fact, however, as with Wittgenstein's later work, the book's commitment to description and examples made its basic argument elusive. Perkins' analyses of film moments were acute. But as Wittgenstein's students had said, it could be 'hard to see where all this concrete talk was leading', especially for someone used to High Theory. After beginning *Philosophical Investigations* with Augustine's account of learning his native language, before proceeding to his own example of the builders, Wittgenstein withheld the clearest formulations of his project until §§ 89-92 and 109-124, not

coincidentally the book's most often quoted passages. Perkins was similarly discreet. Only on p. 120, in the midst of *Film as Film*'s longest chapter, did he offer a clear summary of his examples' underlying point:

The movie is committed to finding a balance between equally insistent pulls, one towards credibility, the other towards shape and significance. And it is threatened by collapse on both sides. It may shatter illusion in straining after expression. It may subside into meaningless reproduction presenting a world which is credible but without significance.

As a diagnosis of one of moviemaking's most important problems, Perkins' four sentences could hardly be better: they explain, for example, why so many noir films appear pretentious and sentimental (too much 'straining after expression' and significance) and some neorealist ones merely dull ('credible but without significance'). In fact, Perkins' proposition amounts to an ideal heuristic. But blink and you could miss it.[1]

Sam Rohdie's *Screen* review of *Film as Film* and *The Movie Reader* was predictably negative, but it did articulate the difference between the two journals:

The 'organic' work, in *Movie*, took precedence over any generality about artistic forms and techniques. It was always the forms and techniques within this or that given text that *Movie* writers regarded as primary. All hope of a theoretical, scientific view of the cinema […] was ruled out by this sort of approach. (138)

The need to attend closely to the film text became a kind of *Movie* fetish – 'the best antidote to the prevalent woolliness about the cinema seemed to us to lie in detailed, descriptive criticism'. *Movie* published few general articles, no theoretical ones […]. (140).

Rohdie's value-words (what Rorty would have called *Screen*'s 'final vocabulary') were precisely the ones criticised by Wittgenstein for their capacity to mislead: *generality, theoretical, scientific*. What Rohdie dismissed – *detailed, descriptive criticism* – was exactly what Wittgenstein had called for as the remedy.

Screen's writers seemed more interested in Glauber Rocha and Straub-Huillet than in Preminger and Minnelli. In the early 1930s, Wittgenstein had rejected the idea of an ideal language, purified by scientific logic: 'ordinary language is all right', he had insisted (1965: 28). While Godard and the other avant-gardists sought a more rigorous *cinematic* language, cleansed of ideological contamination, Perkins announced that he would draw his own examples neither 'from the accepted classics of Film Art nor from the fashionable "triumphs" of the past few years, but generally from films which seem to represent what the Movies meant to their public in the cinema's commercial heyday' (1972: 7). This disposition often meant 'Hollywood', but *Movie* never restricted its interest to any one filmmaking tradition. It did, however, assert the priority of studying what most people mean when they say, 'We're going to a movie'. In the face of *Screen*, Perkins and the *Movie* group suggested something almost shocking: *Ordinary cinema is all right*.

Robert B. Ray

Robert B. Ray is the author of *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy*, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*, *The ABCs of Classic Hollywood*, *The Structure of Complex Images*, and (with Christian Keathley) the forthcoming BFI Classic Films Guide to *All the President's Men*. He was also a member of the band *The Vulgar Boatmen*. He is Professor of English at the University of Florida.

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Notes

[1.] The question whether *Film as Film* offers a theory of the cinema remains contested. In *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (1988), Noël Carroll argued that in showing the weaknesses of the Eisenstein and Bazin positions, Perkins had inadvertently mounted a theory of his own. I would say, however, that what Perkins provided was not a theory, but rather a description of a certain kind of movie that enabled a perspective from which to make evaluations. He

explicitly excluded types of films, including comedies and things like
Les Carabiniers (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963). If you want to argue for Perkins
operating as a theorist in *Film as Film*, you would have to say that he
tried to stipulate a narrow definition of 'film', effectively turning it into a
technical term like 'isosceles triangle'. Wittgenstein says you can always
make this move as long as you recognise that your sense of the word in
question 'will never entirely coincide with the actual usage, as this usage
has no sharp boundary' (1965: 19).

But the issue gets messy. If Perkins converted 'film' into a technical
term, capable of precise definition, where does evaluation enter? It would
make no sense to call something a 'bad' isosceles triangle. Was Perkins
offering less a definition of 'film' than the rules for a certain kind of game
we call filmmaking? In this sense, his argument would again depend on
stipulating a narrow use of 'film', as if we wanted to talk only about games
with two sides, a ball, and goals with nets. Such games can be well or
badly played, but the rules for them would not apply elsewhere: a tennis
player cannot hit a ball into the net and declare a goal.

Two final points: (1) Ultimately this issue seems moot: whatever
Perkins thought he was doing, academic Film Studies, thoroughly
dominated by *Screen* theory, did not recognise Perkins as a theorist.
(Did Perkins' claim to that title suggest how dominant that position had
become?) (2) In arguing that Perkins was not offering a theory, I do not
mean to criticise him. On the contrary, I am suggesting that his way of
working had far more in common with Wittgenstein's than we have
previously noticed – the Wittgenstein who insisted that philosophy
should not consist of theories, and that explanation should yield
to description.