

Why Film and Philosophy?

Introduction

This book examines a broad range of philosophical issues through film, as well as issues about the nature of film itself. There are two rather distinct parts to philosophy and film. One part seeks to examine philosophical issues raised in films. For example, films may question a particular ethical point of view or raise questions about skepticism or the nature of personal identity. The other part pertains to issues raised by film understood as an art form. What, if anything, is distinctive about film or cinematic depiction as an art form? What is the philosophical significance of the technique and technology film employs? What is the philosophical significance of audience responses to film? What special benefits or dangers does film harbor given its mass appeal and ability to evoke strong emotion?

One issue that seems to relate to both aspects of film and philosophy is the question of film as a philosophical medium. More than simply illustrating philosophical ideas, can films actually *do* philosophy? Can films be vehicles of philosophical investigation?¹ The present chapter addresses this question. The second aspect of film and philosophy – philosophical discussion of film itself – is introduced in the following chapter. Before launching on the topic of the relation between film and philosophy, let us briefly review some features of film that make it such an attractive basis for philosophy.

The Reach and Power of Film

Academicians sometimes refer to “the canon.” This is supposedly a core body of literature (“classics”) that people in successive generations refer to. The canon is supposed to transmit meaning and modes of conceptualization from one generation to another, as well as form a common body of work for those within a single generation. In theory, canonical works serve to individuate and characterize particular epochs and generations – their views on family, on love, duty to country, and ideals (or alleged ideals), for example. The canon is supposed to be a common source of reference no matter how different people within a particular culture may be. There are questions about whether there really is or ever was such a canon; what it consists in (the Bible; other scripture; Shakespeare; J. D. Salinger?) and also what its status should be. How should it be used? In what ways and for what purposes might it be authoritative?

Arguably, narrative film – and we include in this category feature films and series shown on television and available in numerous other formats – furnishes a canon, something that may even be the first real canon. If so, it is because of the popular and non-elitist status of film art. More people see and discuss films than read – certainly more people see the same films than read the same books – and films cut across socio-economic and other audience barriers in ways that the classic western canon never could do. In developed nations virtually everyone sees and talks about films on occasion. With the availability of films in inexpensive formats, many people in economically deprived circumstances also often see films. For many, films constitute a common core of reference in which values, moral issues, philosophical and other questions are examined. The way these things are presented in films is distinctive. Films are accessible, and often aesthetically engaging and entertaining in ways that make them emotionally and intellectually or ideationally powerful (see Carroll: 2004). They are generally neither obtuse nor inaccessible in the ways that philosophical texts or formal arguments often are. Films are popular, accessible, ubiquitous, and emotionally engaging.

Film frequently employs other art forms (music, visual arts, literature) and their ability to affect us is integrated into film’s power. The ability of film to influence and emotionally affect us is not a straightforward sum of its component art forms, however. There is after all much music, literature, poetry, and visual art that on its own may affect us far more than when taken up in film. Nevertheless, the fact that a feature film can convey so much to so many in such a relatively short time (generally less than

two hours, almost always less than three) is one of its most remarkable features. It is also something that has worried many philosophers and film theorists. Adorno and Horkheimer (1990), for example, were concerned with the possible negative influence of mass art on passive and uncritical audiences. (Why not also on active and critical audiences? Is an active and critical attitude enough to dispel the charm of film?) Alfred Hitchcock was alleged to have said “all actors are cattle.” However, he didn’t quite say this: “I never said all actors are cattle; what I said was all actors should be treated like cattle.” One wonders what he must have thought of audiences.

On the other hand, other philosophers, for example Walter Benjamin, are optimistic about the powers of film to enhance social and political freedom and creative thought.² Who is more likely right on balance: pessimists such as Adorno or optimists like Benjamin? This turns out to be a very difficult question to answer. Think of a particular case: the power of political speech versus the political power of film. Is a spoken political argument more or less likely to change attitudes than a political film? Chaplin’s political speech at the end of *The Great Dictator* (1940) is an interesting case in point. It has considerable power, and many people fondly remember it after watching the film. But the film’s overt aim in 1940 was to turn its audience off any residual appeal that Adolf Hitler and nationalistic fascism in general might have had for them and it achieves this quite independently of the speech. Much of the real work is done when Chaplin, playing Adenoid Hynkel, Dictator of Tomania, bounces an inflated globe of the world off his rear. This is a marvelously effective way of satirizing dreams of world domination. Whether that amounts to a philosophically robust critique of fascism is another story.

By its very nature, film is an extremely valuable way of introducing and discussing topics in philosophy. But it is important to realize the dangers inherent in this. Films can obfuscate and confuse through the way they are framed and filmed, through the way they play on the emotions, or pander to various desires. Keeping track of these obfuscations is an important part of any approach to thinking through film. Many films cater to and prey on unconscious or unwelcome desires, wish-fulfillments, and prejudices. Arguably, the success of a film often depends on its success in catering to these things. (Consider revenge films such as *Harry Brown* (2009), *Death Wish* (1974), and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968).) Just as we often believe what we want (or would like) to believe rather than what we have good reason to believe, we often believe things because we feel a certain way. Emotions influence belief, as do desires. This is a fact that cinema often exploits, and one that largely accounts for

its ability to engage an audience. This is why films so often misinform and mislead us philosophically, just as they often inform and deepen us philosophically.

As we have been at pains to point out, one of cinema's great virtues is its capacity to engage and entertain. It certainly has this virtue by comparison with most philosophical writing, which is often as dry as a desert. At the same time, the accessibility of film (and mass media generally) to audiences, its power to engage and affect, to emotionally and intellectually manipulate and "do a job" on us, is at the core of ethical concerns over mass media we mentioned earlier, for instance those raised by Adorno and Horkheimer (1990) and others. Philosophical engagement with film is not always positive. Nonetheless, as Freud noted, art can provide the path from fantasy back to reality. Film is useful in examining a great many, albeit not all, of the areas that philosophy covers. Particular films address topics in ethics, metaphysics, religion, and aesthetics, as well as in social and political philosophy. One area perhaps stands out among all others. Like novels, films often depict and philosophically explore aspects of the multitude of human relations – especially love and friendship. This is no surprise given the extent to which we are generally absorbed most with those things which engage us emotionally.

What is the Relation between Philosophy and Film?

Philosophy and film has burgeoned into a field of its own – and it is growing. This is part of a trend of broadening the range of topics considered suitable for serious philosophical scrutiny. The broadening of philosophical subject matter has been coupled with the recognition that film and other forms of media and entertainment can be powerful vehicles for ideas. Many of these ideas are philosophically interesting and are ingrained in ordinary life – just as friendship, love, death, purpose, and meaning are. It is not exactly a new discovery that everyday life is a philosophical resource. Ancient philosophers knew it, though the twentieth-century professionalization of philosophy may have sometimes obscured such focus on the everyday. There has been a proliferation of books and journal articles not only on philosophy and film, but more generally on philosophy and culture. Some of these focus on philosophy and everyday concerns as they feature in television (a form of film) and contemporary music. Others consider more classic philosophical issues – ethical, political, epistemological, social, psychological – as they feature in mainstream movies.

Film, especially in its narrative component, provides philosophy with material (scenarios, case studies, stories, hypotheses, and arguments) to scrutinize. Films tell stories, make assertions, and state or intimate hypotheses that give people, and by extension philosophers, material to critically assess. Films can be objects of direct philosophical scrutiny. For example, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), a film recording the 1934 Nuremberg congress of the Nazi Party, provides us with material for a good deal of philosophical reflection. This includes reflection on the relation between aesthetic and moral value. (Riefenstahl's film is often considered to be an aesthetic masterpiece and moral failure.) Watching *Triumph of the Will* inevitably brings out questions about artists' moral responsibility for their artistic productions. However, films don't become especially philosophical simply in virtue of their being objects of philosophical scrutiny. After all, anything and everything can be an object of philosophical scrutiny (a table, a pen, a cloud, a cathedral). Usually something becomes an object of philosophical scrutiny by representing a certain type of thing, or certain type of experience or phenomenon, that philosophically puzzles and challenges us. Films become philosophical in a more interesting and thoroughgoing sense when they do more than this. They become philosophical by engaging us philosophically as we watch them.

What is the best way to understand the relationship between film (film-making) and philosophy (philosophizing)? Can a film *be* a philosophical text, rather than just a resource for philosophers? Can filmmaking *be* philosophizing? Can film-watching *be* philosophizing? Perhaps it simply depends on how expansive and inclusive our conception of philosophy is.³ One theorist of philosophy and film, Murray Smith (2006: 33), says "I take it to be relatively uncontentious that, in some broad sense, a film can be philosophical. This is hardly surprising if we regard both film (as an art form) and philosophy as extensions of the human capacity for self-consciousness, that is, of our capacity for reflection on ourselves." If we think of philosophy as simply an expression of the human capacity for reflection, then films obviously share this capacity. But there is more to the issue than this.

How should we understand the philosophical potential of film? Paisley Livingston (2008: 3) usefully frames the question in what he terms the *bold thesis*.

[Can films] make independent, innovative and significant contributions to philosophy by means unique to the cinematic medium (such as montage and sound-image relations), where such contributions are independent in

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the sense that they are inherent in the film and not based on verbally articulated philosophizing, such as a commentary or paraphrase? Films, it is often claimed in the large literature inspired by Gilles Deleuze's speculative writings on film, do indeed engage in creative philosophical thinking and in the formation of new philosophical concepts.

The bold thesis claims that a film's contribution to philosophy, if genuine, must be irreplaceable or irreducible to any other forms of communication. It is a strong thesis indeed. But why think that the philosophical *value* of film is determined by its philosophical *uniqueness*? Livingston himself is no fan of the bold thesis. He says (Livingston 2008:12),

[We should] drop the bold thesis about film as philosophy and shift to more modest and viable claims. Some fiction films are made by an author who uses the medium, in conjunction with linguistic means, to express a philosophically informed perspective. Other fiction films are not so made, but can nonetheless be used to illustrate familiar but valuable views about practical wisdom, scepticism and other topics. Films of both sorts offer a vivid way into philosophical positions and arguments, and may provide worthwhile stimulus to creative philosophical thinking . . .

Livingston goes on to modify these "modest and viable" claims in a revealing way. He continues (2008: 12), ". . . as long as it [is] remembered that the introduction of sophisticated distinctions and arguments will require a verbal articulation that is not provided by the cinematic display on its own. Descriptions of the plot, no matter how subtle, are no substitute for the latter."

Livingston's suggestion seems to be that if we want to do real philosophy, the kind that requires sophisticated distinctions and arguments, we will need to knuckle down and explicitly – that is verbally – articulate an argument. There is no question that certain kinds of philosophical argumentation require this. We know that film is no substitute for certain useful ways of doing philosophy. Why would anyone claim that it is? Why would they want it to be? But Livingston's claim is more deflationary than this. He implies that film is, in some sense, philosophy's handmaiden. Film is (on occasion) an impetus to philosophizing; it is not a way of philosophizing. In contrast to the bold thesis, let us call this suggestion the *null thesis*. According to the null thesis, film has no role at all to play in philosophizing as such. Its only role is to provide an impetus to, or material for, philosophical work that is done wholly linguistically in written and verbal texts. Films don't themselves make philosophical points (except where they have characters make philosophical points verbally). To make

philosophical points films must be paraphrased, interpreted, and then integrated into philosophical argument that carries on much as usual. This is the null thesis. The null thesis is a rather unadventurous and disappointing conclusion to draw. Are there more ambitious options for those who are wary of the bold thesis?

Stephen Mulhall is one prominent figure who rejects what we have called the null thesis. Mulhall (2002: 2) says

I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the same ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, are not a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing.

At first glance, there is something a little puzzling in this passage. What does Mulhall mean by “just the same ways?” Films can be philosophy in action and just as philosophical as texts (sometimes more so) without being so in “just the same ways.” If taken too literally, Mulhall's insistence on equivalence would mean that, methodologically speaking, there is really no distinct category of philosophy in film after all. There would simply be philosophy done in the same way in one medium as in another. It would then, paradoxically, imply that there is no particular value in film “doing” philosophy. Of course, Mulhall can be interpreted more charitably than this. The essential claim in the passage is that philosophy done verbally and philosophy done cinematically are both ways of thinking seriously and systematically about views and arguments. Let's call this the *modest thesis*. Whereas the bold thesis claims that the cinematic performance of philosophy is unique and irreducible to other forms of doing philosophy and the null thesis claims that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a cinematic performance of philosophy, the modest thesis claims that there is such a thing as the cinematic performance of philosophy and it really is a performance of philosophy. However, the modest thesis denies the uniqueness of film-philosophy. A cinematic performance of philosophy is not untranslatable into verbal philosophical forms; the philosophy can be re-expressed verbally without loss, at least in principle. Philosophy done cinematically need not be done in the same way that philosophy is done verbally (usually it isn't); but it needn't follow from this that doing philosophy cinematically grants us access to philosophical truths and insights that are inaccessible to philosophers working non-cinematically. (This last condition is a way of restating the bold

thesis.) The modest thesis lies somewhere between the bold thesis and the null thesis.

The bold thesis might turn out to be false without making the question of the relation between film and philosophy otiose or uninteresting. And for many, the bold thesis is too bold. The modest thesis, on the other hand, seems too modest. It could be right without there being anything particularly interesting to say about the relation between film and philosophy. Is there anything especially philosophically valuable about philosophy done cinematically? Irving Singer suggests that this has something to do with the artistic qualities of films *per se*. He writes (2007: 3) “Apart from any unfortunate efforts to duplicate what trained philosophers do, films we consider great are philosophical insofar as the meaningfulness they embody, and the techniques that convey their type of meaningfulness, exploit at a significantly deep level the visual, literary, and sonic dimensions of this art form.”⁴ Is Singer right about any of this? Why can’t a film be considered “great,” embody meaning, employ techniques to convey that meaning, and “exploit at a significantly deep level the visual, literary, and sonic dimensions of this art form” and yet not be particularly philosophical? (Consider great musicals like *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944) and *42nd Street* (1933).) Furthermore, what is it that Singer thinks “trained philosophers” do? Among the things that trained philosophers do is to examine many of the very same sorts of ethical, political, social, and personal issues sometimes examined in film. They assemble reminders of persistent and persistently overlooked features of human experience; they reflect on the phenomenology of human experience as well as the coherence and evidential soundness of philosophical theories. And there are some films that undoubtedly do a far better (i.e. insightful, accurate, intellectually convincing) job doing at least some of this work than many trained philosophers do.

Perhaps, then, we should adopt a moderate thesis: certain philosophical things are better done in film than in written texts. Perhaps films sometimes deepen philosophical perspectives in ways that written texts struggle to. This would not require film to have unique access to its own mode of philosophizing or its own branch of philosophical insight. It would not require that films be capable of performing philosophical activities that *can't* be managed at all in written or verbal philosophical performances. So it isn't the bold thesis. On the other hand, the moderate thesis requires that films can sometimes do some things better than written texts can. So they aren't simply resources for philosophizing and they aren't *merely* ways of reflecting systematically on fundamental beliefs. They are ways of doing

philosophy *especially well*. The moderate thesis is enough to vouchsafe the deep philosophical significance of film.

The key idea behind the moderate thesis is that films can sometimes be better at presenting certain kinds of philosophical material than standard philosophical genres are. This is not just because film can be more emotionally engaging and entertaining. Films are, mostly, more engaging than standard philosophical writing. After all, philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Hume, Rawls, Dummett – none are real page-turners. If film can be a superior philosophical medium at times, this is partly because film can present a kind of nuance and perspective that is not often found in professional philosophy and is hard to reproduce within the genres of professional philosophy. And this, in turn, is partly because professional philosophy has been too bound by its own specialized genres: the journal article and the monograph.

Underlying some conservative views on whether or not film can do philosophy lies a precious, overly-fastidious, and territorial notion of what philosophy is. It might be that some philosophers simply do not wish to entertain the possibility, let alone the simple truth, that poets, novelists, filmmakers, and others with less lofty professions, may often succeed where they fail and sometimes be better at doing philosophy than professional philosophers are. Concerning a “precious” notion of philosophy, the alleged supposition is that film has something to live up to, standards it must achieve, if it is to be considered as doing, or contributing to, philosophy. It is worth considering, however, whether philosophers have not misconstrued the proper order of the relation between philosophy and film. A more fertile avenue might be to ask the question “What does philosophy have to do, what standards should it strive for, to become more like, or contribute to, (certain) films?”

Some philosophers think that contemporary philosophical practice distorts many philosophical issues. In particular, some philosophers (for example, Iris Murdoch (1970) and Martha Nussbaum (1990)) think that philosophy, at least sometimes and in domains such as ethics, is more at home – more intelligible and more finely tuned – in literature and the arts than it is among the philosophers. The aesthetics and techniques of film, such as montage, deep focus, close-up, and the tracking shot are all suited to focusing and enhancing the attention and due consideration that Murdoch and Nussbaum think good fiction embodies. Film however has an even larger bag of tricks than novels. The camera takes us precisely to where the director wishes to take us, and a point of view can be further emphasized with sound or music. And films show us faces; they give full

rein to our capacity to read faces and grasp the significance of gesture. A novelist has to say or hint at things a filmmaker can simply show. This is not to say that films are, on Murdoch and Nussbaum's terms, always better at morally and critically engaging the viewer than novels. (Films generally lack the obvious authoritative voice of some novels – though this is by no means always a bad thing.) Even with the extra dimensions or devices in film, many novels (virtually all the great ones) are better at drawing the viewer in, at morally focusing the viewer, aiding their discernment of relevant particulars (sometimes by obscuring certain things), than films tend to be. Nevertheless, the variety of techniques available in film may well make possible a degree of moral and emotional engagement that in many cases literary fiction is unable to muster. The argument can be expanded beyond ethics and beyond the novel. Film is capable of presenting some philosophical views and perspectives better, for example with greater clarity, than they can be presented in any written form. This view, of course, is what we have been calling the moderate thesis about the relation between film and philosophy.

In this book, we will be examining many films, some of them will illustrate philosophical ideas; some will represent phenomena that call for philosophical scrutiny; some will themselves *be* objects of philosophical scrutiny. Alongside this, however, are films we interpret as evoking philosophical thought experiments, and others as realizing nuanced investigations of philosophical topics by assembling powerful reminders about various aspects of our experience of life and drawing conclusions from them. In this second category of cases we will be assuming the moderate thesis. We think that thought experiments are sometimes (not always) better run in cinematic form than in the deliberately thin and context-free form typical of philosophical writing. We think that film can sometimes offer nuanced investigation of fundamental features of our experience, well beyond the ordinary achievements of written philosophical texts, and in doing so robustly refute hollow and simplistic ways of understanding life.

Cinematic Philosophy and Authorial Intention

If films do philosophy, then *who* is doing the philosophizing? In *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (2007) Thomas Wartenberg argues that Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) presents a cogent criticism of utilitarianism. This is offered as part of Wartenberg's attempt to defend the claim that films actually *do* philosophy – in this

case, by offering a strong counterexample by means of a thought experiment. In the process of developing his case, Wartenberg assumes that the source or home of utilitarianism as a normative ethical view is nineteenth-century England – and its progenitors are John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. His view is that the film's creators intend to argue against utilitarianism by means of a counterexample. The film portrays such a counterexample through narrative in particular, but also sound, acting, camera-work, etc. Wartenberg's particular concern is to show that this philosophical objection is not some philosopher's (his) imposition or projection of a philosophical view onto the film, but is inherent in the film as part of its creators' intention. Furthermore, whether or not the filmmakers actually know that their target is a standard philosophical theory of normative ethics called utilitarianism is, on Wartenberg's account, largely irrelevant. It is enough that they had some conception of the relevant idea and a good grasp of where it might be going wrong. (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is the story of two people who have the memories of their relationship artificially removed from their consciousness after a particularly painful breakup. The film usually has the effect of gaining assent from the audience that this is a very bad idea; that there are more important things in life than minimizing pain.⁵)

The relation between filmmakers' intentions and the philosophical scrutiny of film raises a number of questions. An interesting aspect of film, like other forms of narrative art (such as novels), is that it often lets us see and surmise a great deal more than its creators intended. A philosophical view may be embedded in a film without its being the director's or writer's intention that the view be apparent and sometimes without them even being aware that it is a view they hold or one implied by other views they hold. Apart from the explicit endorsement of a view by the director or writer (and even with such an endorsement) care must be shown in attributing such views to them. Do the creators of vigilante movies – say Michael Winner, director of *Death Wish* (1974), or Don Siegel, director of *Dirty Harry* (1971), endorse the views about justice portrayed by actors in those movies – even when the audiences overwhelmingly do? The films operate as (very bad) arguments for vigilante justice irrespective of the answer to this question.

The philosophical views presented in films, or thought to be presented in films, can be assessed independently of authorial intention. Of course not every view attributed to a film, whether as intentionally or unintentionally present in the film, is correctly attributed, and since some films may be ambiguous, unclear, or confused about the views they present, it will not always be possible to discern whether a position is being presented

or argued for. This is the case with philosophical arguments in texts as well, and there is no reason to suppose that film has a natural advantage in terms of unambiguously or clearly presenting philosophical views or arguments.

Determining just what the creators' intention is may or may not help the process of extracting a philosophical response to the film. Without a good deal of corroborating evidence it may well be impossible to determine authorial intent, or to justify the attribution of authorial intention, even in cases where one is right. In any case, authorial intention is not always, perhaps not even very often, particularly important – unless one is specifically interested in an individual filmmaker's views. For example, it seems important to understand the intentions of very deliberate and provocative filmmakers such as Michael Haneke. But Haneke's underlying intentions in films such as *Benny's Video* (1992), *Funny Games* (1997; 2007), and *The White Ribbon* (2009) do not determine or limit the philosophical potentiality of these films. What should be of philosophical interest in the vigilante movies noted above is not whether the filmmakers believed in the conception of justice they portray, but whether the films do anything to substantially bolster the case for them. Indeed, if we conclude that they do not, then the more interesting question for philosophy and film becomes a question about the reception of films. How do audiences relate cognitively to a massaging of their instincts for vengeance? Why do they get so much satisfaction (of some kind – of what kind?) from such movies?

Livingston (2008: 4) remarks that “Wartenberg wisely concedes that saying that a film ‘does philosophy’ is only a ‘shorthand expression for stating that the film’s makers are the ones who are actually doing philosophy in/on/through film.” If agency is required to do anything at all and a film is not an agent then of course film can no more “do philosophy” than tie its shoelaces. Livingston's point may seem obviously correct, but in fact it is not at all obvious. There is a natural sense which films, much like works of fiction, can have a sense of agency attributed to them. Films can do things because they can have meaningful effects well beyond the intentions of their creators. Much like character development in fiction, though possibly to an even greater extent, film can present nuanced perspectives and unintended consequences that may further a philosophical argument or make a point whether or not the filmmakers intend or foresee them. Part of the task of a film editor is to extract or highlight narrative, plot development, and meaning that is present or nascent in the film. But the film may be greater or lesser than the sum of its parts in terms of its overall aesthetic value and meaning – intended or not. It is often possible

to distinguish authorial intention from what is revealed in film narrative, visual effect, or performance.

Like novels, films have lives and meanings of their own which will vary over time and are relative to a degree to particular audiences. These kinds of considerations suggest that to say that films “do philosophy” is more than a *façon de parler*. Good films often outdistance even the combined creative intentions of those who create them. Consider too that it is common in film theory to query the notion of the auteur. Films do (or may) express the personal ideas of the director, as Truffaut (1954) claims with his coining the phrase *la politique des auteurs*. But film theorists point out that, unlike a novel, a film is a collaborative project and the product of many more people than just the writer/director. Insofar as a film embodies collaborative agency, it should also be seen as something greater than the sum of its parts; where the results, including meanings, can be wholly attributed neither to the director nor to the writer, nor even to the sum of all those involved with the production of the film.⁶

Conclusion

Let’s return to Wartenberg’s account of Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. We want to take up an earlier suggestion that in order to appreciate and understand the relation between film and philosophy one must see films’ philosophical preeminence. At least to some extent and in some ways, philosophy should look towards film rather than vice versa.

Wartenberg (2007: 91) calls attention to the “distinction between creator-oriented and audience-oriented interpretations of works of art.”

[C]reator-oriented ones . . . present interpretations that a work’s creator could have intended it to have. But . . . this did not mean that the creator had to have direct acquaintance with the philosophical position that the creator-oriented interpretation . . . [presents] as the focus of the work, only that it had to be plausible that he might be responding to the positions or ideas contained in that work. Although philosophical texts are the origins of many ideas, theories, and positions, they acquire a life of their own within a culture and all that is necessary for a creator-oriented interpretation to be acceptable in this regard is that the creator might have been acquainted with the philosophical ideas, etc., because of, for example, their general circulation within a culture. Utilitarianism is a philosophical theory that has gained wide-ranging recognition within American culture in general. The slogan “the greatest good for the greatest number” is known by many more people

than have read the texts from which it springs. It therefore seems plausible to me that a contemporary film might target such a view.

For further confirmation of his view Wartenberg (2007: 92) points to “the film’s explicit invocation of Nietzsche” along with the fact that “one of the targets of Nietzsche’s philosophical critique is utilitarianism.”

One need not reject Wartenberg’s account of this film as doing philosophy to suggest that the form the defense of film as philosophy takes has a curious presupposition. Unless we see what this presupposition is, we are likely to misunderstand how and why film and philosophy are often intimately connected. Wartenberg successfully argues that films can and often do present, illustrate, or argue philosophical positions and raise philosophical questions; we suggest – in what we have called the moderate thesis – that films are often quite better at doing this than written or verbal philosophical texts. Perhaps the key question here is not whether or how films could do these things but how could they not? Wartenberg (2007: 93) says “We have seen that one film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* presents a counterexample to utilitarianism and thus actually *does* philosophy . . . [C]ounter-intuitive as it might seem to film scholars and philosophers alike, fiction films can present arguments through their narratives because they screen thought experiments that play a crucial role in providing counterexamples to philosophical theses.” This is an expression of what we are calling the modest thesis. It seems to us that such a tame position is likely to strike us as counterintuitive only if we are knee-deep in some implausible ideology concerning film, philosophy, or both. The point here is not necessarily directed at Wartenberg so much as the philosophical objectors he has in view. They have in mind, it seems, a remarkably shallow conception of philosophy and the origin of philosophizing.

Wartenberg presupposes two things in his discussion of this matter. First, he presupposes the primacy of philosophy. If a film screens a thought experiment in philosophy, it does so by lining up against a well-known philosophical position. The philosophical position comes first and the film does philosophy by reacting to it in some way. (This is very often the case, but is it always the case? *Need* it be the case?) Second, he appears to overemphasize the intellectual content of filmic arguments rather than the way the argument is packaged and delivered in a film. An important part of the way film does philosophy is that it is able to capture argument in affective ways, i.e. in ways that have emotional as well as intellectual resonance for us. The emotion generated by a film can focus attention and enables one to “see” or consider or appreciate aspects of an argument that might otherwise go by the wayside. Except in the cases of empirical facts

(i.e. “I see the cat is on the mat”) belief is more often than not a function of desire and emotion as well as reason and evidence. Sometimes philosophical thought should take notice of this affective component of good philosophy.

Consider the sorts of philosophies Wartenberg thinks are at issue in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. With the exception of staunch utilitarians and deontologists, the one fact that seems to have made the debate between these two normative ethical theories (or supreme normative principles) intractable is that neither theory alone seems to do justice to or satisfy ordinary intuitions regarding what is right for all moral cases.⁷ Imagine Mill and Bentham, together with Kant, taking in an afternoon matinee at the movies. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is Mill’s and Bentham’s choice of film. Kant is headed towards cinema 2 to see a re-run of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. They meet in the lobby after the movies are over. Kant says “Well, I had that business about lying all wrong. Those protecting Anne and her family did the right thing in lying when asked about their whereabouts. I must rewrite my *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* and *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*.” Mill and Bentham respond, “No, no, actually we think you were onto something. It’s utilitarianism that needs to be seriously modified.” On Wartenberg’s account of how films generate philosophical argument, it is hard to imagine anyone – let alone Kant, Mill, or Bentham – changing their mind as the result of intellectually registering a filmic counterexample. The counterexamples will be finessed in the context of prior intellectual commitments. However, some films, for some people at some times, are able to generate the kind of attentiveness and emotional insight that may undermine prior commitments and suppositions even when they had been thought to be intellectually and rationally grounded. Films can *force* counterexamples on us in ways that allow us to better understand and appreciate their power and value as counterexamples, which is not to deny that they may still be rejected or that they sometimes ought still to be rejected.

Wartenberg’s presupposition of the primacy of philosophy over film might be grounded in a mistaken view about the genesis of philosophical problems. He says (2007: 91) “Although philosophical texts are the origins of many ideas, theories, and positions, they acquire a life of their own within a culture.” However, it is not always, or even very often, philosophical texts that are the origin of ideas, but culture. It is in philosophical texts rather than culture that “many ideas, theories, and positions” acquire a life of their own. Outside some of professional philosophy’s narrow scope, philosophy does not constitute its own source. Philosophical inquiry is generated by a sustained and focused sense of

wonder, engagement, and bewilderment with life as lived – one’s own as well as everybody else’s.

The ethical questions that utilitarianism raises, the answers that it gives, are not, in the first instance, found in Mill and Bentham – nor were they invented *ex nihilo* by them. They are ethical issues that arise in ordinary life. It is only after the fact that ethicists and the philosophically minded get hold of the relevant issues and, in this case, that utilitarianism endeavors to organize and systematize responses to them. The belief, as *Star Trek’s* Spock puts it, that “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few” (or those of the individual) predates nineteenth-century formulations of utilitarianism. Philosophical problems that are not highly specialized are not found first and foremost in philosophical articles and tracts, but are ingredients in life. As such, and with varying degrees of success, they are often depicted and analyzed in literature and film, as well as in art forms such as music and painting that have less explicit narrative content, or perhaps no narrative component at all.

Philosophers do not, at least not ordinarily, invent the broad philosophical problems that are ingredients in life. These are neither philosophy’s invention, nor its exclusive property. Thus, to understand the fundamental connection between film and philosophy and to understand film as philosophy, one should not look only to film’s capacity to illustrate pre-set philosophical ideas or make philosophical arguments about pre-set philosophical positions. The more basic connection is to be found in a common source of philosophical engagement, life as it is lived, and particularly in film’s engagement with the stories we tell ourselves by way of seeking to understand, explain, justify, excuse, and guide ourselves. Film’s capacity as a philosophical resource is not exhausted by its ability to deal with standard philosophical issues in various ways. Its capacity in this regard is formidable but not the sole feature of film’s relation to philosophy. Much like literature, film is a medium employing various techniques, not all of them wholly its own, that portrays philosophical issues as they arise, or could arise, in life and in the imagination. It is film’s capacity to depict life as real and imagined, and life is always imaginary to a degree, that constitutes the fundamental connection between philosophy and film.

The chapters in the second part of this work suppose that film and philosophy are often intertwined in ways that mutually illuminate them. Combining in-depth critical discussion with the experience of viewing a film can be an engaging way into philosophy as well as into film. There is no unique perspective that philosophy brings to film and no singular connection between the two. Instead, films are themselves (often muddled) philosophical investigations, just as such investigations by philosophers are often muddled.

Questions

Can film change, or has film changed, the way philosophy is done?

Can philosophy change, or has philosophy changed, the nature of film?

Can philosophy do film? What are the strongest objections to the claim that it can?

The bold thesis claims that a film's contribution to philosophy, if genuine, must be irreplaceable by or irreducible to any other forms of communication. What is the significance and plausibility of the thesis?

Many films people like are "escapist fluff." Are such films suitable for philosophical inquiry? If so, how; if not, why not?

"Emotions influence belief, as do desires. This is a fact that cinema often exploits, and one that largely accounts for its ability to engage an audience. This is why films so often misinform and mislead us philosophically, just as they often inform and deepen us philosophically." Is this true? How?

In what ways, if any, do some films resemble life? Does this resemblance play a role in film's ability to do philosophy?

Are films better suited for dealing with certain topics philosophically than fiction or the visual arts? Can they be better than philosophy books and journal articles?

Notes

- 1 Smith and Wartenberg (2006a) focus on this question and sees it as perhaps the dominant or "very prominent" (1) question in philosophy and film.
- 2 See Laura D'Olimpio (2008). *The Moral Possibilities of Mass Art*, unpublished dissertation, The University of Western Australia. See Carroll (2004) for a discussion of "The Power of Movies."
- 3 See Smith and Wartenberg (2006a), "Introduction," 1–4; Smith (2006: 33–42).
- 4 This passage is also quoted by Livingston (2008:11).
- 5 You might wonder, then, just how successful Wartenberg's interpretation of the film is. Perhaps the real target, when translated in standard philosophical terminology, is negative hedonism. Negative hedonism is the view that we ought to do what it takes to remove pain from our lives. (The most famous negative hedonist in the history of philosophy is not a utilitarian, but the Hellenistic philosopher Epicurus.) The characters in the film both try to escape

from pain merely to find themselves in a desolate place where important aspects of their identity are missing in action. This is only tangentially related to the classical utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill (neither of whom were negative hedonists). If utilitarianism is the issue of the film, it might be that version of utilitarianism that contemporary philosophers call preference utilitarianism. According to preference utilitarianism, the best state of affairs is obtained when people have their preferences realized. The characters in the movie get what they want; but that's far from the best state of affairs.

6 See Livingston's (2008:4–7) discussion of authors and intention.

7 See note 5 above where we question Wartenberg's interpretation of the film. We investigate the relation between utilitarianism and deontology with the help of *The Dark Knight* (2008) in chapter 13.

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