FILM AS PHILOSOPHY

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13 Movie-Made Philosophy

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Currently, the philosophy of the moving image is flourishing. It has already spawned a number of subfields. First, there is what might be thought of as "the philosophy *of* the moving image proper"—the do- main of inquiry where the classic questions of philosophy, including those of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, are applied to the case of the moving image. Philosophers *of* the moving image proper, for example, ask, What is the moving image? Can documentary motion pictures be objective? and Can evil films, like *The Triumph of the Will,* nevertheless, at the same time, be aesthetically excellent?

However, coexisting with these more or less predictable philo- sophical interests in the moving image, there is also a thriving con- cern with what we may broadly label as "philosophy *in* the moving image" or "philosophy *in* cinema." This is a matter of identifying philosophical themes or theses in particular motion pictures—of for instance, finding philosophy *in* motion pictures—of finding the Myth of the Eternal Return in *Groundhog Day* or the question of the nature of personhood in *Blade Runner* or the issue of skepticism about the external world in *The Matrix.*

This enterprise, I speculate, by far dominates publication in the area of philosophy and the motion image. In the United States three different publishers have "Philosophy and ———" series, where the blank is frequently filled in by the name of a motion picture, such as a TV series. And most of the essays in those books are of the philosophy- in-cinema variety, as are the majority of articles in the American aca- demic journal *Film and Philosophy.* In addition, Routledge has a series in which philosophers discourse on the philosophy found in individ- ual motion pictures such as *Vertigo* and *The Thin Red Line.*

Of course, the reasons for the predominance of publication in the philosophy and cinema domain are not hard to come by. Integrating motion pictures into the philosophy curriculum makes philosophy more and more accessible to an ever increasingly screen-oriented stu- dent body. Showing movies that illustrate philosophical themes is the sugar that makes the abstract

theory go down. So all of those titles like *Hitchcock and Philosophy* are potentially best-selling textbooks.

Furthermore, the pursuit of philosophy *in* cinema puts philoso- phers in the business of interpretation, thereby making themselves attractive to students in the neighboring departments of literary and cinema studies. Moreover, philosophical interpretation tends to be broadly humanistic, thus appealing to students sated by the “cultural turn” in adjacent branches of the humanities.

Of course, these material considerations are not meant to deny that many of the pertinent philosophers really enjoy finding their favorite philosophical themes in their favorite movie narratives. It is only to acknowledge that they could not indulge that pleasure if there were no pedagogical/institutional/economic base to support it.

At this point, it should be noted that there are at least two different kinds of activities that we may count as examples of the philosophy *in* cinema relation. In general, this approach regards the motion picture as an illustration of some or another philosophical tenet. But it may be an illustration of a tenet intended by the motion picture maker, or alternatively, the philosopher may use some film to illustrate the tenet in question which is unbeknownst, so to speak, to the creator of the motion picture. An example of the former case might be Berg- man’s relationship to the philosophical psychology of Eino Kaila in his *From the Lives of Marionettes,*[1] whereas an example of the latter case might be the use of Herzog’s *Kaspar Hauser* as an illustration of Lacan’s theory of language. In the Bergman case, the philosopher argues, plausibly, that Bergman intended to engage Kaila’s views, whereas in the Herzog example, the commentator applies Lacan’s theory of language to the film in the hope, perhaps, that the film will illuminate the theory as a metaphor might. Or one might say, in the Bergman case, the philosopher finds Kaila illustrated in the film, whereas in the Herzog case, the philosopher brings a theoretical grid to the film. This is how Žižek frequently appears to use movies.

Of course, in the case of discovering philosophy illustrated in a

motion picture, the situation does not have to be as direct as it is in the relation of Bergman to Kaila. The motion picture creator may intend to be illustrating a more general, widely recognizable philo- sophical theme, like egoism. However, whether discovering philoso- phy in the motion picture or imposing it, both practices can count as examples of the philosophy *in* cinema approach, with the latter version being more liberal or tolerant than the other.

Furthermore, both variants of philosophy in cinema operate within a framework where the philosophy that is associated with the motion picture in question is not particularly original to the motion picture. The philosophy, so to speak, exists prior to the motion pic- ture. It is an illustration of something else, where that *something else* is some specimen of literally already extant philosophy.

Yet if cinema can illustrate preexisting philosophy, the question naturally arises as to whether it might also be possible for cinema to produce philosophy. That is, can the moving image *do* philosophy? Do the creators of motion pictures possess the resources to make original philosophical contributions—can they propound philoso- phy *through* the moving image?

Clearly, motion pictures can possess philosophical themes, as Fritz Lang’s *The Weary Dead* possesses the theme of fatalism. However, a motion picture may possess a certain theme without taking a specific position on it. *Blade Runner* raises the question of whether replicants are persons or could be, arguably, without answering it.

However, sometimes a motion picture will stake out or endorse a position on the theme it illustrates. And where a motion picture takes a stance on its theme, we can say that it has a thesis. For instance, King Vidor's *The Fountainhead* is *for* individualism of the Randian objectivist variety. Of course, this position quite literally antedated the film in the work of Ayn Rand, who also wrote its screenplay. Thus, the film merely illustrates a preexisting theory.

Nevertheless, insofar as it appears unobjectionable to suppose that movies possess theses, it is tempting to ask whether movies might be capable of producing original philosophical theses—that is, could a movie advance its own conception of individuality? What if Ayn Rand had first aired her philosophy in the movie *The Fountainhead* instead of her novel of the same name?

In the era of the art cinema, one often spoke of filmmakers like

Godard, Bresson, Bergson, and even Antonioni as philosophical. Thus, it does not sound strange to our ears to say that one can philosophize *through* the moving image. Yet in these cases, it was not always evi- dent whether what was meant was that these filmmakers illustrated preexisting philosophical themes—as Antonioni was said to illustrate the theme of the meaninglessness of modern existence—or that these filmmakers developed original philosophical theses. Consequently, although the critical rhetoric surrounding the art cinema made the association of philosophy and movies sound very familiar, it did not settle the issue of whether movie makers could produce original phi- losophy by means of the moving image.

Indeed, formidable arguments have been marshaled in recent years attempting to demonstrate the impossibility or, at least, the implausibility of philosophizing through the moving image. In fact, these arguments are so powerful that one is tempted to say that such skepticism is the dominant perspective nowadays, at least among Anglophone philosophers.

It is to these skeptical arguments that I now turn. I shall try to show that they are not ultimately successful. There are, I contend, *some* cases of movie-made philosophy. And if some movie-made phi- losophy is actual, then movie-made philosophy is possible. Or so I shall attempt to demonstrate. Moreover, in defeating the leading skeptical arguments in this area of debate, I hope to vindicate the commonplace view that movie-made philosophy is conceptually fea- sible, thereby shifting the burden of proof in this matter back to the skeptics.

However, before embarking on that project, let me note paren- thetically that although I am arguing about what is possible in the realm of philosophy *in* cinema, the debate itself belongs to the arena of the philosophy *of* the moving image proper, since it is a question concerning the epistemological limits of cinema.

On the Possibility of Movie-Made Philosophy

During the past decade and a half—undoubtedly prefigured and en- couraged by the work of Stanley Cavell—Anglophone philosophers have become keenly interested in the philosophical potential of the moving image. Anthologies abound in which rank-and-file philoso-

phers attempt to distill the philosophical message to be found in this or that movie.

Although many philosophers are interested in the relation between movies and philosophy, there is not a converging consensus about the nature of that relation. Some philosophers

maintain that it is within the reach of the moving image to make contributions to philosophy that stand on all fours with the contributions made by card-carrying philosophers in journal articles and at academic conferences. Others argue that this is beyond the capability of the moving image.

Admittedly, this concern is more a worry in the analytic wing of contemporary philosophy than it is on the so-called continental side of things. After all, since Hegel, Schiller, and Schelling, continental philosophers have been comfortable with the idea that art could be philosophical. But the analytic tradition is more skeptical about these claims.

Such skeptics may concede that movies can illustrate philosophi- cal ideas, motivate philosophical problems, suggest philosophical solutions, reframe problems, and possibly even present counter- examples to existing philosophical views. Nevertheless, the skeptics draw a line in the sand when it comes to the possibility of movies making philosophy—that is, of movies acting as a vehicle for the creation and substantiation of original, positive philosophical theses.

Three recent arguments against movie-made philosophy have been mounted by Paisley Livingston, Murray Smith, and Bruce Rus- sell, respectively.[2]

Livingston's target is specifically fictional, narrative cinema; he challenges the notion that this kind of movie can make philosophy. Livingston begins by introducing two conditions that he maintains that proponents of movie-made philosophy allegedly believe must be met in order for any example to count as an instance of movie- made philosophy. He calls this "the bold thesis." Although Livingston identifies the bold thesis as a matter of requirements advanced by the friends of movie-made philosophy, I am less convinced of this and suspect that they represent Livingston's own standards, standards, in- deed, more demanding than I believe that defending the possibility of movie-made philosophy requires.

But in any event, the first condition of the bold thesis à la Living- ston asserts that X is a specimen of movie-made philosophy only if

it is a historically innovative philosophical proposal rather than sim- ply an illustration of a preexisting position. It must not be parasitic on previous philosophical discourse; it must be independent. Thus, Rossellini's *Socrates, Augustine, Pascal,* and *Descartes* do not count as movie-made philosophy, since the actors playing these philosophers are only prosaically repeating exactly what these original thinkers al- ready said. Ditto Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein.* This demand for inno- vative philosophy is called the *results condition.*

In addition to the independence requirement of the results condi- tion, Livingston also requires that a candidate for the title of movie- made philosophy be articulated exclusively by cinematic means. Consequently, a cinematic recording of a contemporary philosopher, like the late Bob Solomon, sharing his thoughts with the camera on the philosophy of the emotions—as he does in one of the Great Courses produced by the Teaching Company—falls short of movie- made philosophy just because the mode of presentation does not really exploit features, like montage, that are putatively exclusive to the moving image. Rather, Solomon basically communicates his phi- losophy to listeners in the conventional way by lecturing. This exclu- sivity requirement is called the *means condition.*

With these two criteria in hand, Livingston presents the propo- nent of movie-made philosophy with what he regards as the dilemma of paraphrase. It goes like this: either the motion picture articulates a philosophical thesis that can be put into words—that can be paraphrased—or it doesn't. If it doesn't, then there is no call to sup- pose that it has propounded philosophy, either innovative or other- wise; the possibility of movie-made philosophy cannot be based upon something ineffable. It is on these grounds that Livingston rejects the influential project of filmosophy as defended by Daniel Frampton.[3]

If it can be put into words, however, Livingston maintains that this will run afoul of both the independence requirement and the demand for cinematic exclusivity. It will conflict with the cinematic exclusivity condition because if it requires a paraphrase in order to be identified as a piece of philosophy, then this particular piece of phi- losophy has not been forged exclusively by cinematic means alone. It needs language to finish the job inasmuch, as it supposedly depends upon the paraphrase.

Moreover, if the case in question requires a paraphrase that, as it undoubtedly will, must make reference to existing philosophical debates, then the candidate will not be altogether epistemically in- novative. Thus, it will violate the independence requirement, thereby offending the results condition.

Murray Smith does not argue that there are things that philosophy can do, but that movies can't. Both can, for instance, concoct fic- tional thought experiments. However, the two practices fashion their thought experiments for different purposes. The philosopher hatches his in order to motivate a distinction or to pose a counterexample. He aims at truth. The movie maker presents her thought experiments, first and foremost, for the sake of art. These differing purposes— which we might call, roughly and only provisionally, the cognitive and the artistic— shape the design of the thought experiments as they are issued from these very different institutions. Ostensibly, the phil- osophical thought experiment will aspire to clarity, whereas the artis- tic thought experiment will aim for ambiguity, insofar as ambiguity is a value of art. Moreover, this commitment to ambiguity will cashier the movie candidate from the order of philosophy, since however virtuous ambiguity is in the realm of art, it is allegedly a disqualifying factor when it comes to philosophy.

Bruce Russell unabashedly identifies doing philosophy with explicit argumentation and explanation. Like Livingston, he would deny that a motion picture that contained literal, verbal argumentation and ex- planation would count as *movie-made* philosophy, since, he surmises, that if a movie has a philosopher or actor-playing-a-philosopher merely reciting an argument or an explanation outright, then it is not the movie that is making the philosophy but the monologue. For example, Roark's speech in *The Fountainhead* is not movie-made philosophy. It is language and not cinema that gets the credit here.

The intuition that underlies Russell's position is probably the thought that it is not enough to count as philosophy to simply signal a commitment to this or that philosophical notion. For example, merely indicating faith in determinism does not make one a philoso- pher. To warrant the label "philosophy" requires something more. Given his analytic background, Russell proposes that that something more is an argument.

 Confronting the Skeptics

I do not find the metaphilosophical assumptions upon which the preceding skeptical arguments rest to be finally decisive. The require- ment that movie-made philosophy be created solely

through uniquely cinematic means is not ultimately compelling. Livingston attributes this criterion to proponents of movie-made philosophy, but I see no convincing reason to accept it, whether it originates with the friends of movie-made philosophy or, as I have suggested, with Livingston.

One problem with this requirement is isolating exclusively cine- matic means. A feature of film, like the frequently mentioned ex- ample of montage, is shared with video, photography, perhaps fine art in general, poetry, and even the novel, as in the case of John Dos Passos. Recall, Sergei Eisenstein analogized cinematic montage with all of these. Nor have other candidates for the uniquely cinematic fared well either. But if there are no exclusive features of the cinematic medium or specific devices unique to the art form, then this demand is unrealistic.

Livingston seems to think that the lack of specificity here is a prob- lem for the friends of movie-made philosophy. It will thwart their efforts to establish that the philosophy in question is really *movie*- made. But I suspect that it is Livingston who has set the bar too high in this matter. It is undoubtedly reasonable to demand that movie-made philosophy involve the deployment of devices typically associated with the art of cinema, but that requirement falls short of exclusivity and is easier to secure. In fact, I conjecture that what is really required here is nothing more than that the philosophy in question not simply be delivered by a prosaic audiovisual recording of someone baldly decanting the philosophy in question—even though, ironically enough, this capacity for recording would be an example of a feature of film often claimed by some to be specific to the medium!

Moreover, if the means condition can be met by cinematic struc- tures characteristic of the motion picture that go beyond mere record- ing, as Livingston at least once, perhaps inadvertently, concedes, then it seems that movie-made philosophy is not as problematic as Liv- ingston contends.

Aaron Smuts, for example, persuasively argues that the “Gods” se- quence in Eisenstein’s *October* presents a debunking genealogy of the

Christian god, unmasking via montage its origin in primitive beliefs.[4] Montage may not be exclusively cinematic, but it is a typical struc- ture of the art of cinema. So it should satisfy the requirement that movie-made philosophy should be recognizably cinematic, a reason- able expectation inflated beyond credibility by calling for exclusivity. Moreover, genealogy is a respectable form of philosophical debate, at least since Nietzsche.

In response to this example, Livingston says that it violates the results condition, since the meaning of the shot chain is too indeterminate; he maintains that it requires a paraphrase in order to be understood.

However, I am not persuaded that the Gods sequence is so indeter- minate. What more compelling or even equally compelling alternative interpretations are there? What are the alternate interpretations that viewers are wavering between? Furthermore, although many viewers may require hearing Smuts’s interpretation in order to make sense of the shot chain, that does not entail that the meaning of the sequence *depends* on the interpretation; Smuts did not require the interpretation to get the philosophical point of Eisenstein’s montage. He saw what Eisenstein was up to, and then he interpreted it for others.

That is, the meaning of the shot chain does not depend onto- logically upon the paraphrase/interpretation that some viewers may require to understand it; the meaning is carried by the montage and is recognized by astute viewers. Perhaps, Livingston is confusing Smuts’s interpretation of the sequence with what it is an interpre- tation of, going on then to call

the latter “a paraphrase.” Yet what Livingston is calling a paraphrase is not a constituent of the meaning of the Gods sequence but is more akin to what we may very loosely and only metaphorically refer to as a “translation,” a translation for the cinematically unsophisticated.

Thomas Wartenberg has interpreted the assembly line scene in Chaplin’s *Modern Times* as an expansion upon Marx’s view of the deg- radation of human labor under capitalism.[5] Since Chaplin conveys this idea primarily by means of his comic mime of the way in which the repetitive work movement takes over the Tramp’s body, perhaps Livingston might charge that it violates the means condition, since it could have been done on stage with equal effect. However, I think this is a more austere requirement than can be reasonably expected, since Chaplin gets his idea across without prosaically reciting it and

since mime is a characteristic—though not an exclusive feature—of motion pictures, especially silent ones. Furthermore, if Livingston complains that Chaplin is only repeating, albeit gesturally, what Marx already wrote, Wartenberg can point out that the assembly line was invented after Marx was dead. So Chaplin, as Wartenberg argues, is not just parroting Marx but expanding upon him.

Perhaps, Livingston would attempt to reject Wartenberg’s example of Chaplin by mobilizing his results condition and contending that this example still invokes preexisting Marxist ideas, even if it expands upon them. Yet does simply working within a Marxist framework, as G. A. Cohen did, discount his contribution as philosophy?

Livingston’s results condition, if I understand it, claims that para- phrasing the view of a movie compromises its status as independent philosophy. But why? If I paraphrase a difficult passage from Kant for my students, does that compromise Kant’s status as a philoso- pher? When one paraphrases a candidate of movie-made philosophy, one is interpreting the philosophy already cinematically advanced by the motion picture. It is not necessarily a matter of completing the philosophical idea in question. Livingston, it seems to me, may be confusing the interpretation of the motion picture for some audi- ence to whom the filmmaker’s idea is not obvious with the cinematic presentation of the ideas.

Sometimes, it appears that the problem of paraphrase for Living- ston arises because the movie-made philosophy will presuppose some already existing philosophy. But doesn’t all philosophizing require a preexisting discursive context? Presumably no philosophizing, at least since Thales (and probably not even then), emerges ex nihilo.

I suspect that Livingston would agree with this but then go on to explain that what he is getting at is that the philosophizing in ques- tion should be an original contribution. But what does Livingston mean by “original”? He can’t mean that nothing quite like it has ever been seen or heard before. Little philosophy, if any, could survive a test like that.

Specifically, Livingston thinks that if something is paraphrased, it cannot be original. I have already challenged that view. But I think that the notion of an original contribution is exorbitant if that is understood as a totally original contribution. I think that Livingston appears to have made the criterion for original philosophizing way

too demanding. He seems to think that if the paraphrase draws upon preexisting philosophical discussions, which it is indeed very apt to do, then that shows that the movie is not truly,

epistemically inde- pendent. But I think that a standard this draconian would disallow most of what we are ordinarily ready to call philosophy. There aren't that many brand-new positions. There are generally new arguments, examples, refinements, and nuanced qualifications of already existing positions. Indeed, an absolutely independent philosophical thesis— one detached altogether from preexisting philosophical discourse— might just be too independent for any of us to grasp.

When Bernard Williams presented the counterexample to utilitari- anism that imagined a man given the choice between killing one pris- oner himself or all twenty prisoners being executed by their captors, he was contributing to the philosophical debate, though the position he was defending and the kind of thought experiment he contrived were not utterly unprecedented. Let us say, Williams's intervention here was "original enough." Perhaps, we can regard Wartenberg's ex- ample from *Modern Times* in a similar light.

Moreover, as long as the requirement of originality is not excessive, I think it can be met by certain motion pictures, especially within the realm of ethics and political philosophy. Godard's *A Married Woman,* for example, visually conveys a notion of objectification that will become important in feminist philosophy, especially with reference to pornography, in the decades after the film appeared. In the course of the film, Godard introduces advertising images of women's under- clothing, notably bras, dissecting, in the manner of a pop artist, the ways in which the ads depersonalize and reduce the female models to sexual objects: they are their breasts.

These advertising images, of course, anchor the sequences in the film where the married woman has sex alternatively with her husband and her lover—where bodies are fragmented by the framing and ed- iting in a way that suggests that the depersonalization, replaceability, and objectification that motivate the advertising imagery has taken over everyday life, a thought exemplified as well by the shot of the married woman walking under (as if dominated by) the enormous billboard of a woman—with outsized breasts—in a bra.

Likewise, the photo-negative images of the women being photo- graphed in the swimming pool visually divest them of their individuality

and reduce them to curvaceous bodies. This is not just a reflexive ac- knowledgment of the presence of the filmic medium, although it is that. It is also an acknowledgment of cinema's capacity to objectify, a concept that was arguably relatively original in its historical context.

In addition, it should be noted that Livingston's requirement of originality is biased in favor of some kinds of philosophy rather than others. For from certain points of view, one office of philosophy is to remind us of things known but forgotten or even repressed. Heideg- ger did not pretend to discover that human life was headed toward death. His task, among other things, was to remind us of this fact and of our tendency to deny it. Some movie-made philosophy may be similarly committed to recalling to mind certain essential truths about human life that, although well known, are easily, even willfully, forgotten. One might understand Billy Wilder's ingenious use of cine- matic stardom in *Sunset Boulevard* in this way—as remindful of the fact of mortal aging and the costs exacted by the suppressing of this inevitable feature of human nature. Livingston's conception of origi- nality would preclude—by fiat and without argument—this variety of movie-made philosophizing, although, in other respects, Wilder's film is a stunningly original and effective image of something many of us, particularly those of us of a certain age, need to remember on an almost daily basis.

Murray Smith's argument against movie-made philosophy on the basis of ambiguity is not conclusive, because at best he is dealing with tendencies. Perhaps much philosophy or, more accurately, most philosophy in a certain tradition goes in for clarity. But sometimes, a philosopher, especially one like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard or Philip Kapleau, from a nonanalytic tradition (or Wittgenstein from the analytic tradition), may have a motive for shrouding their thought experiments in ambiguity, while the thought experiments of some artists, like Charles Dickens in *Hard Times,* serve their artistic pur- poses by being blazingly clear. Ambiguity may be a primary literary value from certain critical perspectives, like the American new critics and, maybe, deconstructionists like Paul DeMan. But whether it is the ne plus ultra of artistic achievement is uncontroversially contro- versial. The philosophical thought experiment filmed by Pudovkin in his *Mechanics of the Brain,* for instance, exhibits not a smidgen of ambiguity, but it is no less artistic or cinematic for that.

Bruce Russell maintains that philosophy requires explicit argu- mentation and/or explanation. This demand, needless to say, will not be accepted by anyone who regards Nietzsche's aphorisms or genealo- gies or Wittgenstein's puzzles as philosophy. But even if we suppose Russell's criteria, for the purpose of argument, it is not clear that his skepticism about movie-made philosophy is conclusive.

A thought experiment is a form of philosophical argumentation. Russell allows this. But according to Russell, if a thought experiment is presented in the course of argumentation, its author has to accom- pany it with an explanation of how it works. This is something Rus- sell finds lacking in motion pictures with philosophical pretensions, and indeed, if a movie did include such a verbal explanation literally, the philosophy would not be movie made for Russell for the same reasons it would not be for Livingston.

Yet I find it strange that Russell holds this position on thought ex- periments, since he agrees that motion pictures can provide counter- examples, where, of course, many counterexamples are thought ex- periments. Moreover, I am not convinced that movie-made thought experiments must always be attached to explicit self-explications, because I'm not persuaded that the thought experiments that union- certified philosophers bandy about always need to be explained. The context in which the counterexample is offered to informed listeners may be enough to drive the point home, as may happen in the dis- cussion period after the presentation of a philosophical paper. The context, that is, may be so pregnant and the thought experiment so deft that everyone gets it on contact.

Moreover, there are cinematic contexts like this. In the avant-garde film world of the 1960s through the 1980s, there was an abiding com- mitment to isolating the nature of cinema by means of cinema. This was a metacinematic project dedicated to defining the cinema of the moving image cinematically. This commitment was overtly a concern of what was called structural film, which to my mind might have been more accurately labeled "minimalist cinema," since it was de- voted to establishing the minimal ontological requirements for calling a candidate cinema. When one attended the screening of minimalist cinema, the informed viewer knew what was at stake—answering the question, What is cinema? by creating an exemplar of it.

Maybe the greatest work in this genre is Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity,*

a film of an empty, institutional hallway. By alternating the settings of his zoom lens, Gehr presents the viewer with static images that, with certain juxtapositions of shots, then burst into motion, thereby revealing the secret of animation aleatorically. This film has been so reduced in content that the only thing it is about is the appearance of motion. Yet insofar as we remain willing to call it a film, this implies that movement—or at least its technical possibility—is a minimal condition for cinema.[6]

A philosopher might have thought up an experiment like this. Gehr made it, thereby providing evidence for the hypothesis that movement—or at least its possibility—is a minimal condition for film status. Moreover, informed viewers of the avant-garde cinema recognized that this was the meaning or significance of *Serene Ve- locity* without being told, and they grasped the way in which *Serene Velocity* was evidence for this conjecture.

To Russell's objection that there is no argument here, we may reply that the argument is present in the mind of the informed viewer who, knowing the dialectical context in which the film is presented, works out how *Serene Velocity* answers the question, What is cinema? Just as Socrates maieutically elicits a geometrical proof from the slave in Plato's *Meno,* Gehr presents an experimental film to an audience primed to be on the lookout for an ontological claim about the nature of the mo- tion picture, and then he, Gehr, guides them toward working out how *Serene Velocity* supplies evidence for a specific hypothesis regarding the nature of cinema. Moreover, even if Gehr's conjecture were false, that would not disqualify *Serene Velocity*'s philosophical ambitions. For if truth were required for something to qualify as philosophy, most pro- fessional philosophers would be out of business.

Russell may complain that Gehr's film itself does not explicitly announce to viewers what philosophical point it is evidence for. But that is unnecessary, since informed viewers understand the aims of minimalist cinema in the same way that professional philosophers usually do not need to be told how a given thought experiment does its work. The philosopher figures it out for herself. And even if it is explained to her, she must still think it through on her own, as does the viewer of *Serene Velocity.*

Moreover, recalling Livingston's criterion of originality, Gehr's emphasis on movement as the sine qua non of cinema was innovative

during a period when photography was frequently, though wrongly, thought to be the best candidate for this title.

Contra Russell then, *Serene Velocity* demonstrates the possibility of movie-made philosophy, even in the face of his strictures. Although it does not sketch a step-by-step argument on the screen, it prompts and directs one in the mind of the viewer, the laboratory in which all thought experiments must be tested. It provides the evidence the au- dience needs to reach its solution, while the context of experimental cinema specifies the problem at issue. Furthermore, other experimen- tal works have limned other features of cinema by deploying compa- rable strategies. Thus, Russell should not attempt to dismiss *Serene Velocity* as a one-off freak. There is more movie-made philosophy where that comes from.

Standing back, it seems that the preceding arguments against movie-made philosophy presuppose, either directly or indirectly, that the primary vehicle of philosophy must be language. But per- haps that presumption is up for grabs. Maybe audiences can be led to philosophical insights by having their experiences shaped and di- rected in certain ways. They may come to a philosophical conclusion on the basis of their acquaintance with the phenomenon in question through their own experience, as that experience has been molded in order to facilitate the recognition of the processes upon which the experience rests.

Call this appeal to the audience's experience of an artwork for the purposes of casting reflection upon how the artwork works on the audience a matter of *phenomenological address.* It is my contention that some films, like *Memento,* offer philosophical insight to reflective viewers by means of their phenomenological address to the audience. Specifically, for example, by means of its reverse narration, *Memento* makes its viewers aware of the amount of constructive activity they must conscript in order to put the story together for themselves. That is, the film's structure forces them to self-consciously fill in the gaps, to formulate expectations and to test them, and to retrospect, in an effort of determining consistency, what is going on in the narrative on a scene-to-scene basis. Thus, the film focuses our attention upon the kind of constructive activities in which audiences need to engage in response to any cinematic narrative, although these processes usu- ally fly beneath our radar screen. The film makes the attentive viewer

aware of this process of construction experientially, disclosing how the narrative mind works in the process of putting it through its paces.[7] This may be stated in words; it is not irretrievably ineffable. Nevertheless, the demonstration of the mind's participation in the construction of cinematic meaning here is in the experience of the activity in real time.

Furthermore, since the structures of phenomenological address need not be strictly linguistic and may remain inexplicit, the movie- made philosophy that comes by way of phenomenological address may not be threatened by the kinds of skeptical concerns I have rehearsed.

On Thought Experiments

So far much of the argument has been based primarily upon the presupposition that at least some motion pictures can be construed as doing philosophy on the grounds that they function as thought experiments in such a way that they raise, clarify, reframe, and even advance philosophical positions. However, some philosophers are apt to reject this suggestion on the grounds that no motion picture, fic- tional or otherwise, can be regarded as a genuine thought experiment or, at least, the sort of thought experiments that one encounters in philosophical lectures and writings. Deborah Knight, for example, maintains that fictional thought experiments are so disanalogous to philosophical thought experiments that they should not even be con- sidered to belong to the same species.[8]

To this end, she presents a series of disanalogies. These include that thought experiments often involve science fiction, whereas most artistic fictions are not science fictions; that philosophical thought experiments are short, whereas artistic fictions are much longer; that the story is indispensable to artistic fictions, whereas it is not necessary for philosophical thought experiments; that philosophi- cal thought experiments do not arouse emotions, whereas artistic fictions do; that philosophical thought experiments are unresolved, whereas artistic fictions have resolutions; and finally, paralleling the previously discussed view of Murray Smith, that philosophical versus artistic thought experiments have different institutional aims.

However, none of these disanalogies strike me as very persuasive. Knight is wrong in her first assertion that all or, even, most thought

experiments involve science fiction. Searle's Chinese room and Danto's nine identical red canvases are famous philosophical thought experiments that do not involve science fiction. For every brain-in-a- vat thought experiment, there is a refutation of act utilitarianism that imagines

framing an innocent homeless person. For every Putnam- esque twin Earth, there is at least one Rawlsian veil of ignorance. The counterexamples here are indefinitely great in number.

Knight is right that most philosophical thought experiments are short and that the fictional-cinema ones are short. But so what? Some philosophical thought experiments are longer than some fictions. What is Plato's imagining of his republic but a thought experiment, one longer than most movies. Moreover, the same point can be made with regard to Voltaire's *Candide.*

Furthermore, one complaint regarding contemporary philosoph- ical thought experiments is that they are too short. In this respect, perhaps many of the relevant motion picture thought experiments are improvements on standard philosophical practice. And in any event, maybe some artistic/cinematic thought experiments need the length they go to in order to make the insight they are promoting sink in. What principled reason, in examples like these, does Knight have for limiting the word count of thought experiments?

Knight's notion that the story is not necessary to philosophical thought experiments is a bit obscure. A thought experiment is an intuition pump.[9] It is a tool for thinking. It is true that it is under- taken to promote thinking or even to provoke a certain thought. And of course, the thought's the thing. But if the thought is reached by means of the story that embodies the thought experiment, why is it unnecessary? Because there is always another way, another thought experiment, sans story, available to get to the thought in question? But how would someone know that this is the way things stand in every instance?

Knight maintains that fictional thought experiments recruit the emotions but that philosophical thought experiments do not. This is flat-out false. Consider thought experiments in moral theory, such as the killing of the innocent homeless person counterexample rehearsed in every introduction to ethics class. Surely, the intuition it evokes depends on a gut reaction, as do a great many of the other thought experiments deployed in debates in ethics and political philosophy.

At the very least, the emotions these thought experiments evoke are germane to our reflection upon these thought experiments and, in some cases, may be arguably decisive.

That thought experiments engage the emotions should be clear from the fact that they evoke intuitions, which, of course, are often connected to the emotions in everyday life, particularly in regard to ethical phenomena. Moreover, the connection of thought experi- ments to the emotions may be relevant to answering two of Knight's other misgivings. That is, in order to secure deep emotional responses, a fictional, cinematic thought experiment may require greater detail and, therefore, greater length than a typical philosophical thought experiment, *and* this may be why stories are not dispensable in the case of many fictional, cinematic thought experiments.

The view that philosophical thought experiments leave matters open, merely facilitating debate, is also wrong. Some philosophi- cal thought experiments open up a question. But some compel one conclusion to the exclusion of others. The aforementioned counter- example to act utilitarianism belongs to this class. Admittedly, it is also the case that some movie fictions may promote philosophical reflection without suggesting. *Blade Runner,* in its original-release version, arguably exemplifies this possibility. Yet this hardly pertains to *all* thought experiments, whether propounded in philosophical essays or motion pictures. If *Vertigo* is a

thought experiment that in- terrogates the notion that genuine love is love of the properties of the beloved, can there be any way to avoid the conclusion that Hitchcock unequivocally rejects this perspective?

Lastly, like Smith, Knight suggests thought experiments have dif- ferent functions in the institution of philosophy than they do in the art world, including the movie world. Knight does not specify these alternative functions, but as we have seen, Smith does. Art world thought experiments in general and movie world thought experi- ments in particular aim at ambiguity, whereas philosophical thought experiments aim at determinate truth. This distinction, needless to say, is somewhat in tension with Knight's (mistaken) contention that philosophical thought experiments never aspire to resolution. But in any event, the distinction does not hold. Some literary and cinematic thought experiments are anything but ambiguous—consider *Animal Farm* and *Clockwork Orange* and their adaptations for the screen.

However, there are philosophers whose thought experiments are am- biguous enough to require interpretation. Think again of Wittgen- stein, for example.

Concluding Remarks

In discussing motion pictures, it has seemed unexceptionable to asso- ciate them with philosophy. Undoubtedly, the relationship of cinema to philosophy is multifarious. Herzog, for example, may be said to be philosophical insofar as he consistently defamiliarizes human life, examining it from a position detached and quizzical and, therefore, philosophical. And moreover, it is hard to deny that some motion pictures have illustrated philosophical themes. But the question has been broached of late of whether it is possible for cinema to do philosophy—to philosophize through the moving image. I have tried to defend that possibility, primarily by challenging the various skeptical objections abroad today. However, although I have rejected the strongest, universalizing versions of those objections, I think the skeptics have performed a useful service insofar as they have fore- grounded what is involved in calling movies philosophical. And I think they have at least shown that there is probably not as much movie-made philosophy as the commentators often believe. Movie- made philosophy is possible, in my view, but probably rare. It can come in various forms; it need not be thought of exclusively in terms of argumentation. But even in its variety, it is not commonly avail- able. And we have the skeptics to thank for making that clear.

Notes

I would like to thank Thomas Wartenberg for his comments on this paper.

1. See Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman.*

2. See Livingston, "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy"; Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*; Smith, "Film, Art, Argument, and Ambiguity"; Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film"; Russell, "The Limits of Film Again."

3. See Frampton, *Filmosophy.*
4. See Smuts, "Film as Philosophy."
5. See Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen.* For Wartenberg's response to critics,

see "On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy."
6. See Carroll, "Philosophizing through the Moving Image."

7. See Carroll, “Memento and the Phenomenology of Comprehending Motion Picture Narration.”

8. See Knight, “The Third Man.”

9. The notion that intuitions play a viable role in philosophy has been challenged by some proponents of experimental philosophy on the grounds that so-called intuition pumps, like thought experiments, do not track what actual nonphilosophers think, as evidenced by questionnaires. And this might seem to undermine my case for movie-made philosophy, since it rests so heavily on the idea of movie-made thought experiments. However, I question the premise that the intuitions elicited by thought experiments in philosophical discussions are supposed to track what everyone allegedly thinks. Rather, thought experiments engender thinking as we strive to find a reflective equilibrium between our be- liefs, our emotional responses, and the solution we are drawn to with respect to the problem the thought experiment highlights. Thought experiments in philosophy don’t aim at what everyone supposedly already believes—i.e., what the x-phi questionnaires may establish—but on the way a certain set of cir- cumstances elicits and clarifies reflective reasoning as it strives for equilibrium, thereby laying it open to criticism. To that extent, I think that intuitions, as obtained through thought experiments, still have an acceptable role to play in philosophical debate.

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