



If a Film Did Philosophy We Wouldn't Understand It¹

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Review: Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (eds.) (2005)
Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell
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This book enters a realm of highly blurred borders and amicable contention. For one, we have the array of rubrics for thinking and writing about cinema – all with fuzzy edges: Film as Philosophy, Film Theory, Film Criticism, Film Appreciation and Film Review, as well as the pleasantly neutral and suitably vague Cinema Analysis. Second, there are very different traditions within any of the above rubrics, each of which has its own language games – different ways of conceptualizing the medium, resulting in different terminologies and points of distinction. Third, there is the always subtle, often edgy, and occasionally antic universe of Wittgenstein hermeneutics. Fourth, since the book contains a collection of articles, plus a transcribed interview, there are manifold distinct perspectives represented. Fifth, not only is there the matter of taste in art, there is the matter of taste in philosophy.

Then there is the reviewer, and in the case of this review my slightly peculiar perspective figures in a more important way than perhaps it should. Therefore I feel compelled to tell you how I approached this book so that, if need be, you can discount my views from the get go: I am primarily a filmmaker, although trained in analytic philosophy,

¹ This poor lion is dog-eared from having been dragged into rooms like this where it didn't really belong.

not a philosopher, nor a particular fan of Stanley Cavell. I do think of myself as a full-suited Wittgenstinian, however. Also, unlike the writers of this book, I am among those who would describe cinema primarily as an articulated image stream, and, in that light, none of the articles herein deals with those rare films that I had considered capable of *doing* philosophy... before I read some of these essays.

Of course one of the best things that can happen to any reader is to have their preconceptions smashed, revealing a new realm of thought. And to a degree this book did that for me. To a degree it also just confirmed some very deep seated prejudices – prejudices that either should become obvious, or that I will take pains to point out. Above all, this book is an ode to philosophers' love of the movies and their intense desire to bond with them in some way.

Each of the two editors has written an introduction. The first, by Jerry Goodenough begins and ends with the oft-repeated tale of how much Wittgenstein enjoyed schlock cowboy movies and then, in a barely perceptible disjunction, follows by laying out for us four reasons a philosopher might engage professionally with movies. The first would be an interest in the medium per se; the second is the illustration of philosophical themes in some movies; the third, if a film was explicitly about a philosopher; and the fourth – the avowed subject of this book, if a film can be considered to actually be *doing* philosophy.

My first red flags of prejudice flew up when Goodenough completely dismisses the first category and characterizes avant-garde movies as those that 'play with the technology, where cartoon or abstract designs are drawn straight on the celluloid, etc.' (2). After trivializing the genre in this way, he drops it from consideration, since the book focuses on the last three reasons - where avant-garde films are claimed not to have much play.

This prejudice against what sometimes are called experimental or substrate-reflexive films is a curious characteristic of quite a few film-philosophers, and among Wittgenstinians it has puzzled me especially. Wittgenstein's focus was on language, the medium of philosophy per se. Why should the Philosophy of Film explicitly ignore those works that are concerned with an exploration of the medium per se?

To illustrate his second category, film as an illustration of philosophy he discusses *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. In this section he makes a rich and convincing argument for how the film illustrates three philosophical issues: 1) 'the nature of experience and the importance of the cause of our experiences.' 2) the nature of personal identity across time, and 3) the question of external world skepticism.

To illustrate his next significant category, he discusses *Ma Nuit Chez Maude* (Eric Rohmer, 1969) a film that is explicitly about philosophy, in this case Moral Philosophy. He makes the very apt and important distinction, though, that one could sit through *Total Recall* and 'emerge untainted by any philosophical thought at all: but one cannot understand the evening *chez Maude* without grasping something' (10) of the philosophical themes. This is an important step in the continuum of involvement between film and philosophy.

When Goodenough goes for the strongest case, film actually doing philosophy, he uses his analysis of *Blade Runner* (Scott) and *Last Year At Marienbad* (Robbe-Grillet/Resnais) and Baggini's analysis of *Rashomon* (Kurosawa) (in this journal - Volume 7, No. 24). Leaning heavily on Baggini to summarize his argument, he has managed to move me out of one position in which I'd been entrenched, and given me clearer perspective on another.

In order to answer the question implicitly posed by *Blade Runner*, 'Is a replicant a person?' he draws on Dennett's six criteria for personhood, and then looks toward Wittgenstein's treatment of the problem of other minds. The parallel he draws is crisp, concise and convincing, and definitely provides us with a framework within which we can watch the movie confronted by distinctly philosophical issues.

Up to this point in the argument I am intrigued, but not convinced. For one thing it seems clearer to me that, if I watch *Blade Runner* under the Wittgenstein/Dennett perspective, I am *having philosophical thoughts*, more than that I am actually *doing philosophy*. I am not being taken through an argument or a set of questions and possible conclusions. Rather, I am given something to contemplate of a philosophical nature. It's true we have an apparatus of sorts to test out a philosophical point of view, but if we arrive at conclusions, they are ours and not the film's. The film does not make a case for or against Wittgenstein's or Dennett's arguments, though it may allow us to, if we're clever. Also, and this becomes important as regards Baggini's argument, as we'll see in a bit, I would maintain that there isn't a significant difference between the character of that contemplation whether it was stimulated by reading, for instance – and especially) the Philip K. Dick novel, or looking at the film. In my opinion, this is where the idea of Film as Philosophy is skating very close to Literary Criticism. So, in this case, we are confronted with having to analyze the difference between the way literature handles philosophical themes and the way philosophy does philosophy.

His case for *Last Year at Marienbad* is to me far more persuasive. But first I want to leapfrog to Baggini's comments on *Rashomon*, where he makes the very convincing point

that Kurosawa's obviously intentional commentary on the nature of objectivity and appearance is all the more powerful for showing, rather than telling. Here, I still have the somewhat weakened objection that the story richly told in words could do the showing also, in a way that was still distinct from a philosopher's kind of telling. But clearly this is a case where the added potential of film feeds the force of the argument. So, I am more convinced here that the film is doing some of that work that I characterize as philosophical, and I am doing some *with* it. Partly because it seems that Kurosawa's intentions are to make a powerful statement on a particularly philosophical theme by offering a kind of a thought experiment. Sort of like Rohmer's film in that regard, but in this case more epistemological than moral.

Marienbad however, does fulfill my strong case criterion for actually doing philosophy. It is this: If you need to relocate your perspective in order to understand a film's existence, then it is possible it has done some philosophy on (with) you. Unless you started out, or were prepared to slip easily inside Robbe-Grillet/Resnais' head, you would find *Marienbad* a very difficult film. There is a huge vortex here that should influence our entire discussion: Entertainment is easy and philosophy is hard. Meaningful, progressive, serious, significant philosophy is very hard. Only a good writer can make it any easier. Goodenough does a sweet and masterful job of describing how the film not only illustrates solipsism, but is, in its form, the embodiment of a solipsistic perspective, and that the film can only be understood if the viewer enters a state of mind that projects, that shows the implications of being in the state of belief that characterizes.

Goodenough's summary gives me some pause however. Speaking about *Marienbad* he says: 'If we cannot make sense of the film, then solipsism doesn't make sense. And we can't. And it doesn't.' (25) It seems to me that the corollary, if we can make sense of the film, we can make sense of solipsism, is a clearer and more critical formulation. However, the film gives us no better purchase on the question of whether or not solipsism makes sense.

In the next paragraph he says, 'If we are right then film genuinely can be philosophy. Not always deliberately philosophy – I make no claims that Scott or Resnais were *consciously* engaging in this kind of philosophical work – but philosophy for all that' (25). Well, what do you call this? Accidental philosophy? Ancillary philosophy? Philosophical candy? So I fall off the bus with – 'but philosophy for all that'. *Marienbad*, in my opinion, is philosophy at least partly because it was clearly intended as an investigation of principally existential/epistemological issues, and cannot be understood other wise.

To me there is a gesture both of hopefulness and of a kind of hollowness in Goodenough closing his essay with the observation with which he began, and upon which he still makes no directly relevant observation: 'And if we were right then maybe Wittgenstein really wasn't wasting his time in those Cambridge cinemas.' (25).

Rupert Read's introduction is simpler and mostly abjures the idea of Film Theory, as Wittgenstein abjures the idea of theory period. He then, with rather broad brush strokes expresses his view of how the authors of the essays in this book show their debt-in-thinking to either Wittgenstein or Cavell. For me these descriptions are a bit tepid and not so very convincing, but along with abstracts of each of the essays, he does give the reader a way of approaching each article. The mild smarm of this intro is quite all right though, because along with Phil Hutchison, co-author, their essay, *Memento, a Philosophical Investigation* is for me the most brilliant piece in the book, an essay that truly overturned my prejudice about making Wittgenstein directly relevant to the analysis of a narrative film.

Part I of the book contains seven essays and Part II, the transcription of an interview that Andrew Klevan conducts with Stanley Cavell. The first piece, Nancy Bauer's essay *Cogito Ergo Film: Plato, Descartes and Fight Club* is a well crafted and compelling account of how film watching as an experience makes the metaphor of Plato's cave explicit; and how in particular, *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) expresses certain peculiarly Cartesian themes. Her descriptions are marvelous, both of the issues and the film. She made me go out and rent *Fight Club* and that in itself was worth the essay. And in terms of Goodenough's apt criterion, it seemed to me that after watching the film it would be difficult for an even relatively thoughtless person to emerge from it untainted by any philosophical thoughts; and as well that Palahniuk/Fincher were obviously overtly posing existential questions. However, she leans on a Cavellian justification for considering the film itself to be doing philosophy, which I simply don't buy and that I'll get into later. What Bauer herself seems to me to be doing is a philosophical kind of Film Criticism, and while I have no quarrel with saying that this is a predominately philosophical film, despite its insistent violence, I don't think it does much, if any, philosophy on its own. That is, we needn't acquire much in the way of a new perspective in order to understand what it's about. It is, after all, entertainment – complex, reflexive, rich and subtle, but entertainment nonetheless, and that means that whether he might have wanted to or not, Fincher was not free of the economic constraints of the genre, and could therefore not risk totally leaving his audience behind.

Stephan Mulhall's essay, *In Space, No-one Can Hear You Scream: Acknowledging the Human Voice in the Alien Universe* is an elaboration of a theme he's developed in an earlier book, and makes some assumptions about the reader's familiarity both with his earlier work and with the series of four *Alien* films that made this essay a bit more difficult for me to follow. Mulhall divides his focus on the idea of *voice* into three concerns: Ripley's voice, the directors' voice and finally philosophy's voice. The first of these is a brilliant piece of gender oriented Film Criticism; the second a less convincing discussion of the supposed or imagined dialogue among the four directors of the series; the third is a still less convincing discussion of the voice of philosophy, as it supposedly speaks through these films. His arguments here are more hortatory than analytic, and I will risk positing a motivation for his exhortations. In his earlier section on Ripley's voice, he says: 'But if any particular inflection of the social world is to maintain and reproduce itself, it must find willing participants from amongst those born within it; their alienation would amount to its annihilation.' (62). This sounds to me like the lament of a teacher of philosophy in an audio-visual universe, recognizing that it is time to adapt or die. I agree with this diagnosis, but for entirely different reasons and toward thoroughly different ends.

Phil Hutchinson and Rupert Read's article, *Memento, A Philosophical Investigation* moves smartly out of the realm of Literary/Film Criticism and into Analytic Philosophy, and does it by taking the very first section of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and clarifying their position on *W's* motivations by counter-posing it with Baker and Hacker's, as laid out in their *Analytic Commentary on Philosophical Investigations*. This part of the essay is set out deftly and very clearly, and makes connections on many levels between the famous trip to the grocer's to buy five red apples in PI §1, and a set of structural/plot devices in the film *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000). I won't say too much for fear of spoiling the ending of this wonderfully crafted analysis, but not only do the authors make clear in a highly nuanced way how their view of PI§1 informs our viewing of the film, but how the film informs our reading of PI§1. Not only does the essay do philosophy, which I would not have thought possible, but it makes it possible to do philosophy when reflecting on the film. As they put it in their strongest claim:

The film sets out to induce in us an experience, an experience as of the very protagonist whose experience we are seeking to understand. One comes vicariously to inhabit Leonard's confusing, peculiar, tragic condition, by being placed oneself in this position of having to play the detective, as he perpetually does...The reflexivity *Memento* requires of an attentive audience is something of intellectual substance. (80)

Memento, is about as hard a film as ever gets advertised in mainstream media. However, in the last clinch I would still maintain that it is no harder than a John Le Carre novel, or a crossword puzzle, and that the shift of perspective required on our part to understand it happens in crisp, relatively predictable increments as the film unwinds backwards to the beginning of the tale. The puzzling out that viewers achieve through these perspective shifts reveals more in the way of details relevant to the plot of the movie than their own existential condition. It is Hutchinson and Read's analysis that makes the film responsive to Wittgenstein².

Unfortunately, this was the highlight of the volume, and I found subsequent essays, though often engaging, less genuinely focused on the specific theme of the book. Simon Glendinning in his essay, *The Everydayness of Don Giovanni* begins with an observation on the P.I. that I suspect is a minority opinion, but one with which I agree wholeheartedly and that I was encouraged to see expressed so clearly:

...what distinguishes Wittgenstein's thought from more traditional forms of philosophy is that while the latter presents itself as resolving or solving a problem of the intellect or the mind, Wittgenstein regards that understanding as itself a form of disorientation. And reorientation will require an understanding of the kind sought not in scientific or theoretical studies of phenomena but from the kind of understanding one looks for in the appreciation of a work of art. (95)

He draws his sustenance for this perspective from a very important (to me) passage in the P.I. (§531):

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by any other.)

In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem.)

Glendinning makes an observation, with which I have much sympathy, '...we might say that philosophy begins every time we find our words as failing to come to terms with the difficulty of reality.' (97). Here the twin conception of poetry and philosophy is made apparent, and I am a bit disappointed not to have found this a more dominant theme (but understandable since the book barely deals with poetic film at all.) Unfortunately, the rest of the essay in which he draws on Cora Diamond, Plato and a music review by Kierkegaard to discuss the film of *Don Giovanni* by Joseph Losey (1979) struck me as strained and a bit

² Their most concise affirmation of *my* major criterion is to be found in number 18 of the 33 footnotes to this article.

inflated. However, I should qualify this by saying that I have not seen the film and perhaps as a result did not truly understand his final argument about the 'everydayness' of the character, Don Giovanni.

Silent Dialogue: Philosophising with Jan Svankmajer exemplifies the art of film-describing at its best. In this essay David Rudrum compares three parts of the animated short, *Dimensions of Dialogue* (Svankmajer, 1982) with several philosophical thinkers. But first he has to describe the film, and even though each of the three parts of the animation contains a linear narrative, still, their presence isn't easy to capture. He compares the first part of the film, titled *Exhaustive Discussion* with the writings of Emmanuel Levinas (*Totality & Infinity*) in a lively and illuminating contrast of their positions on the place of the Face in dialogue and the place of dialogue in the foundations of language. In the second part of the essay he contrasts the second part of the film, titled, *Passionate Discourse* with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and I found this comparison a bit thinner. But when he compares part three, *Factual Conversation* with Wittgenstein, while it's true that he caught strong similarities in flavor in the attitude of both thinkers toward language, particularly dialogue, I found the comparisons more superficial, only enriching my perspective on the film a bit.

Simon Critchley begins his short essay, *Calm: On Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line* with A poem from Wallace Stevens, a poet who for me has been as clear and penetrating on many philosophical issues as any poet, or for that matter philosopher. But I was disappointed that while he made the most explicit and wide-ranging claim:

It seems to me that a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories – let's call that a *philoso-fugal* reading – and more a form of philosophising, of reflection, reasoning and argument. (139)

He pays off least. Most of the essay is concerned with describing how Malick's guarding of his personal privacy makes some kinds of interpretations difficult; pointing out his background as a philosopher in his own right; and describing the film's lineage and the personalities of its characters. The central argument he presents about the state of calm that pervades the film seems to me explicitly in the realm of Film Criticism or Cinema Analysis, and a somewhat mystical one at that. He does discuss the use of music in an engaging way, and the film's cinematic use of musical devices – an observation that might have been the springboard for more formal revelations with relevance to the film-as-language discussion.

So, at this point in my review, it is time to confess that I have many problems with Stanley Cavell and the idea that what he does in relation to film is philosophy at all (of the kind that suits my taste at least) and the problems color my analysis of the final essay in part I, and all of Part II, the interview. My first is with his populist prejudices and the way he paints his own taste across many distinctions. To me, this seems the gesture of a cultural hegemonist, and I am especially offended because *my* taste is marginalized by it. The second, is with his habitual terminological sloppiness. What doesn't matter to Cavell *ought not* matter. When Andrew Klevan asks him (194) about his use of the word *ontology* in the subtitle of *The World Viewed* he confesses to wanting to be provocative and mysterious. Sorry. For me this term has such a powerful and precarious relationship to film studies that this cavalier attitude is more than a bit of a travesty. My third has to do with his emphasis on audience size, popularity and fashion; and his dismissal (*The World Viewed*, 1979,4) of the practitioners of 'Music painting, sculpture, poetry – as they are now sought by artists of major ambition...are not *generally* important, except pretty much for the men and women devoted to creating them.' The fact that this could be said of philosophy as well, is to me very telling, and explains, to a degree, the existence of this anthology: the perennial fear of the cultural marginalization of philosophy.

The last essay in Part I, *Habitual Remarriage: The Ends of Happiness in The Palm Beach Story* by Stuart Klawans is largely a speculation on why Cavell did not write about this film. I have not seen the film, nor have I read Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* and so I am eminently unqualified to comment on the essay.

My only comment about the interview is that it enhanced my prejudices that Cavell's relationship to Wittgenstein is tangential to his Film Criticism, that indeed what he does is a personal sort of Film Criticism with a heavily biased theoretical framework.

All of this of course is coming from someone with his own heavy bias – one that wonders why *Back and Forth* (1969) or *La Region Centrale* (1971) by Michael Snow was not discussed, or *Tom, Tom The Piper's Son* (1969) or *The Nervous System* (1970's-present) by Ken Jacobs or any of the experiments in ontology and epistemology of Owen Land, Kurt Kren or Taka Iimura or Ken Kobland, or the experiments in language structure by Hollis Frampton, AK. Dewdney or Peter Greenaway. These artists actually do what Cavell claims to be doing – examining what is most obvious in the medium. I would claim that they have penetrated the veil of bewitchment with film that Cavell believes he has, whereas in fact, to me, he seems more trapped in his bewitchment with the superficial flash of movies, while ignoring the hard films that are doing the hard work.