THE PHILOSOPHY OF FILM AND FILM AS PHILOSOPHY

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There are two key respects in which the medium of film and the discipline of philosophy can intersect. First, the philosophy *of* film is an established sub-discipline that asks philosophical questions about the nature of film: What, if anything, are the necessary and sufficient conditions of being a film? How do audiences engage imaginatively with films? What cognitive or emotional value does the viewing of motion pictures have? Here the philosophical practice of clarifying concepts and exploring abstract problems simply takes film as its *object*. Second, the more controversial notion of film *as* philosophy suggests that films themselves can take up philosophical issues, and can contribute to a range of philosophical debates. Here the object of investigation might be the epistemic problem of skepticism, the metaphysical problem of personal identity or the ethical problem of why we should be moral.[1] But on this approach the *film itself* participates in the philosophical investigation.

This paper is primarily concerned with the idea of film *as* philosophy (FAP) and explores some of the problems that this notion raises. Putting documentary and art films aside, I will focus on the idea that *popular narrative* film can "be" philosophy.[2] The two over-arching issues surrounding FAP can be captured by way of an analogy. Someone suggests that you go to the cinema tonight to see a popular new film. In response to this suggestion there are two questions you might naturally ask: whether there are any tickets available, and whether the film is any good. In other words, you would want to know whether it is *possible* to go to the film and whether it is *worth* going. When presented with the notion of FAP we should be asking

analogous questions. Is it even *possible* for a film to make an active contribution to philosophy? And if it is possible, is it *worth* turning to a film for that contribution or would we be better off reading an academic text, or even a novel, to develop our knowledge?

I dedicate a section to each of these questions in turn and focus on a pair of problems that occur in connection to each question: The Generality Problem and the Explicitness Problem.[3] I argue in defence of FAP whilst acknowledging the limitations of film.[4] I develop what I call the "Socratic Model" of how film can contribute to philosophy and also propose that the obstacles faced by FAP are most effectively overcome when a film engages reflexively in the philosophy *of film*. The third section backs up my conclusions with an examination of the philosophical contributions of a particular film: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). I argue that this film embodies an intriguing and important intersection of film and philosophy by offering us a case of *film as philosophy of film*.

1. HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR FILM TO "BE" PHILOSOPHY?

1.1. Philosophy Imposed on Film

Those sceptical of FAP are generally happy to accept that a film can be philosophical in a variety of ways. The scenarios presented in narrative film can exemplify a philosophical problem, and can be put to good use as illustrations of that problem. For example, *The Matrix* (1999) presents a narrative in which the protagonist learns that his life has been an illusion reminiscent of the Cartesian deception hypothesis.[5] This film can, and has, been deployed to illustrate the epistemic problems entailed by such scenarios. Film can also *present* ideas in philosophy through explicitly philosophical dialogue, offering those ideas in an engaging form.

The sceptical outlook permits a positive assessment of film's use as a popular and accessible way of illustrating or presenting philosophical ideas. It denies, however, that film has any *contribution* to make to philosophical debate. Film is a passive tool philosophers might use to communicate pre-existing philosophical concerns, or as raw material for the application of a theory. Either way, no genuine philosophical work is being done by the film. Where the film contains philosophical dialogue, some philosophy is merely being reported, and is no more a contribution to philosophy than a recording of a philosophy lecture would be.[6]

Often interpreters of film exceed the boundaries laid down by the sceptic and attribute a film its own philosophical significance. However, the sceptic claims that such interpretations are merely *impositions* of the interpreter's own philosophical reflections on to the film.[7] Advocates of FAP resist this stance, arguing there is philosophical content to be *discovered* in the film rather than *projected* on to it — that film has an *active* place in philosophical inquiry. On this account, film is not always just a mirror in which we see philosophical ideas reflected, but is sometimes a window that offers valuable philosophical insights.

This captures the central contention of FAP, but the task now is to build up a defensible understanding of exactly how film can be philosophy. I will consider a first pass at achieving this but argue that it faces serious objections. I will then introduce a second pass that avoids those objections and reveals how it is possible for film to be philosophy.

1.2. Film as Philosopher

Perhaps the boldest formulation of the FAP position is offered by Mulhall, who claims that *Alien* (1979) and its sequels should be seen not as mere illustrations of philosophical issues, but as

themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action — film as philosophizing.[8]

The phrase "just as philosophers do" suggests that films do not philosophise in some qualified or restricted sense, but do it fully and without limitations. The philosophical content of film is parasitic on neither the philosophical intentions of the film's creators, nor on the responses of its philosophically-inclined audience.[9] Films are not passive material to be put to philosophical use, but active interventions in philosophical debate. Interpreters of those films are not putting their own words in the mouth of the film, so to speak, but are rather reporting what the film itself has said. I will consider two serious problems for this proposal.

1.2.1. The Generality Problem

Films have content. Though the film *Citizen Kane* (1941) is not an agent, that Kane died in Xanadu is something analogous to a *propositional claim* that the film contains.[10] The Generality Problem suggests that the kind of content distinctive to philosophy is not the kind of content that narrative film can have. Philosophy usually involves general questions that require general answers — the philosophical question "what is knowledge?" requires a general answer such as "knowledge is justified true belief."[11] Narrative films present specific concrete scenarios, and any content a film has must be implicit in its depiction of that scenario. A film *cannot* have general content that goes beyond the boundaries of the fictional world it presents. *The Matrix* has the content that what Mr. Anderson took to be the real world was actually a comprehensive deception. It cannot, however, have the

content that what *any* person takes to be the real world might actually be an elaborate deception. Only the latter content would be genuinely philosophical. A possible response is that some philosophical issues do not have this general concern for *all* possible worlds, but are instead concerned only with the *actual* world. However, since films present (at best) a non-actual possible world, they cannot have content concerning *our* world.[12]

Of course, films may include *dialogue* that involves general claims. In *The Matrix*, Morpheus makes the general philosophical claim "If real is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." However, any philosophical value this has would be parasitic on the words the film records, rendering the medium of film irrelevant. Furthermore, the fact that a *character* in a film makes a philosophical claim does not mean that the *film* makes that claim. After all, when different characters make contradictory claims, which one is the "film" speaking?

1.2.2. The Explicitness Problem

The Explicitness Problem presents a further contrast between the kind of content that film can have, and the kind of content that can be described as philosophical. As discussed, a film itself cannot make an explicit assertion, but through their depiction of a narrative they can have *implicit* content. Since visual representations lack the conceptual precision of linguistic representation, such implicit content is inevitably imprecise. Indeed, in his 1948 work on the nature of film Astruc states that "the fundamental problem of cinema is how to express thought."[13] Philosophical claims, such as "knowledge is justified true belief" are characterised by their precision. The worry, paraphrased by Wartenberg, is that "film lacks the explicitness to formulate and defend the precise claims that are characteristic of

philosophical writing."[14] The motion picture is too inarticulate an instrument to provide any content that could qualify as philosophical.

These concerns about film's lack of precise content have several manifestations. Philosophy involves *systematic* thought but film lacks the expressive power to organise its content in a systematic way. Where philosophical thought essentially requires *arguments* for its claims, film cannot make a formal argument, nor assess its content in any other way.[15] As Carroll puts it, "narrative films are not arguments."[16] But if films are not arguments, it is hard to believe that they could genuinely be doing philosophy.

The explicitness problem casts doubt on attributions of precise philosophical content to film, such as Mulhall's account of the *Alien* films. Why should we take his *philosophical* reconstruction of the content of a film over some *non*-philosophical reading that fits just as well with what the film presents? Bruce Russell concludes that "[n]arrative films so lack explicitness that it is not true that there is some particular argument to be found in them."[17] When faced with the *indeterminacy* of a film's content, to selectively attribute precise philosophical content is surely to impose philosophy on the film, rather than to discover philosophical content within it.

Overall, these two problems strongly suggest that it is *not* possible for film to "be" philosophy in the strong sense that Mulhall proposes.

1.3. Film as a Contributor to Philosophy

The central thought behind FAP is a rejection of the sceptical position that films are at best passive illustrations of philosophical problems and positions. Mulhall reveals this motivation when he accuses other approaches of "lacking any sense that films themselves might have anything to contribute to our understanding."[18] His mistake is to go too far in the opposite direction by proposing that films can philosophise *autonomously*.

We can accept that films are not themselves philosophical investigations but maintain that they have a philosophical value that is not imposed on them by the interpreter. We can accept that films cannot do *all* the philosophical work themselves, but regard a film as philosophy insofar as it plays an integral role in wider philosophical exercises. As Hunt explains, though film has many limitations "it would be fallacious to jump to the conclusion that the motion picture has no contribution to make to philosophical inquiry."[19] By regarding films as *contributions* to philosophy rather than independent philosophical works, we can overcome the two problems discussed.

1.3.1. Overcoming the Generality Problem

Philosophical positions do indeed involve general claims, or at least claims about the actual world. For film to contribute to such positions, it need not be able to *make* those general claims. It only needs to play an integral role in *our* ability to make those general claims. In response to this a sceptic might simply adjust the Generality Problem in the following way: not only can narrative films not *make* general claims, they cannot be used to *justify* general claims. Carroll imagines a sceptic arguing "the moving image trades in a single case, and one case is not enough to warrant the sort of general claims that are the stuff of philosophy."[20] In a similar vein, Russell notes that "imaginary situations cannot provide real data," placing severe limitations on the philosophical relevance of fictional narratives to the actual world.[21]

Wartenberg captures exactly how the proponent of FAP should respond to this problem. He notes that "there is a well-developed philosophical technique that involves narratives, indeed, fictional ones at that: the thought experiment."[22] He goes on to explain that "[a] thought experiment functions in a philosophical argument by presenting readers with a hypothetical case. They are then asked to endorse a general principle on the basis of their reaction to this case."[23] Thought-

experiments are a philosophical method used to reach philosophical conclusions. They are thus philosophical in what Livingston calls both "means" and "results."[24] If a *film* can act like a thought-experiment, its presentation of a single fictional narrative will be entirely compatible with its making a valuable contribution to the pursuit of general philosophical truths.

Worries may remain about exactly how philosophical conclusions are extrapolated from fictional scenarios. Russell, for instance, raises concerns about the validity of drawing inferences from an induction base of just one case.[25] Hunt's model of the place of narratives in philosophical reasoning allows us to overcome this worry.[26] He suggests that narratives encourage a process of *abduction*. A narrative leads us to make an assessment about that fictional scenario, but through an inference-to-the-best-explanation of that narrow conclusion, we can reach a *general* conclusion. Hunt draws our attention to the famous "slave boy" scenario in Plato's *Meno*. Here Socrates seems to take a boy from ignorance to mathematical knowledge simply by asking him questions. We reach the narrow conclusion that knowledge can be attained in this way, but it is in an attempt to *explain* this fact that Socrates offers a *general* theory of knowledge in terms of "recollection." The particular narrative serves as a reason to believe a general philosophical claim. This example from Plato is clearly representative of a philosophical technique that has been used ever since. Overall, narrative film can be philosophy when it makes a contribution to philosophical inquiry analogous to that of the thought-experiment.

1.3.2. Overcoming the Explicitness Problem

Given the above model of film-as-thought-experiment, it is tempting to say that an *explicit* narrative can have *implicit* philosophical content: the narrative is a premise of an implied precise argument and conclusion. This approach fails because philosophical thought-experiments are inevitably open to many interpretations.

Returning to the example of Plato's *Meno*, if that text had presented us with the slave boy exchange but omitted Socrates' subsequent theorising, we could construct any number of arguments and conclusions on the basis of that narrative. Socrates' specific account of those events in terms of recollection would probably not even occur to a modern audience. His explicit arguments and conclusions are what gives the text its precise philosophical content. In film, however, there is no philosopher-guide telling us how to deploy the narrative as part of a philosophical argument.[27] The fact that a narrative can *justify* a philosophical claim does not mean that the presentation of the narrative constitutes *making* that claim.

Wartenberg acknowledges that philosophical thought-experiments involve both a narrative *and* an explicit argument that makes use of that narrative.[28] However, he goes on to make the following puzzling claim: "If one could show that a thought experiment was an essential element in certain philosophical arguments, the path would be open to showing that films could also make philosophical arguments because their narratives contained thought experiments."[29]

That narrative thought-experiments are *essential* to certain philosophical arguments offers no support for the conclusion that those narratives are *sufficient* for the instantiation of a philosophical argument.[30] Wartenberg does note that a film can contain vital hints about the philosophical significance of its narrative. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) a character's description of a utilitarian ethical system indicates that the film's story of memory-erasure should be regarded as a counter-example to utilitarianism.[31] Here we find a faint analogue to a commentator guiding us through the philosophical implications of a concrete event, but this falls a long way short of the kind of conceptual clarity required for a film to have precise philosophical content.

Instead of claiming that film can implicitly present precise philosophical positions I suggest that proponents of FAP should adopt a more modest position.

Perhaps a film can behave as an *invitation* for its audience to engage in a philosophical inquiry that treats events in the film like thought-experiments. On this picture there is a kind of mutual co-operation between the film and its audience. The film contributes a salient narrative in a manner that sheds light on a philosophical issue, while the audience is left to contribute the kind of explicit formal argument and articulate conclusion that integrates that narrative into a full philosophical exercise. After all, the central claim of this second pass on FAP is that film cannot philosophise *autonomously*, but can make an active *contribution* to wider philosophical activities. Just as essentially general conclusions can be reached with the active assistance of specific narratives, so essentially explicit and precise conclusions can be reached with the help of works that themselves lack such explicitness and precision.

A possible objection to this picture is that it concedes too much to the sceptic. It might seem that all the real philosophical work is being done by the audience rather than by the film itself. However, if we attend to the ways in which something can contribute to philosophy it will become clear that the restricted role attributed to film is nevertheless a *genuine* philosophical contribution. In a philosophical discussion, someone can present a salient thought-experiment without elaborating on its implications. It is clear that they present the scenario as something that *has* philosophical ramifications, and it is even clear roughly what *kind* of philosophical conclusion it encourages. If such a speaker invites others to develop a rigorous and precise position on the basis of their thought-experiment, they are nevertheless making an active contribution to the philosophical activity.[32] Though this kind of open-ended contribution is rare in academic texts, it is the kind of thing one will often see in philosophical dialogue. There is something deeply *Socratic* about this way of contributing to philosophy — without stating any philosophical conclusions, one can cleverly stimulate an audience into achieving their own insights. I claim that

the voice that film can have in philosophical debate is analogous to this Socratic voice.

We are now in a position to overcome the main objections raised against the possibility of film-as-philosophy. Though film cannot itself perform full philosophical exercises, it can make an active *contribution* to such exercises by presenting narratives to its audience that serve the role of thought-experiments. In this way film can actively prompt us to reach the general and precise propositions characteristic of philosophy, despite its inability to express such propositions itself. We can call this view of film's philosophical abilities the "Socratic Model" since film acts as a *midwife* to philosophical knowledge rather than expressing such knowledge itself. The full relevance of Socratic thought to the proposed model will emerge in the next section.

2. WHY TURN TO FILM FOR PHILOSOPHICAL CONTRIBUTIONS?

Having offered a viable notion of film-as-philosophy we now need to consider whether this philosophical resource has any serious value. Returning to our initial metaphor, we have established that there are tickets available for the movie tonight, but have not yet discerned that the movie is worth seeing. Why, when performing a philosophical inquiry, would it ever be advantageous to look to film for assistance rather than using more traditional resources? If narratives can play the role of thought-experiments then, as Fumerton asks, "What significance, if any, does their portrayal in film have?"[33] If film fails to achieve anything that could not have been achieved better by different means, then the notion of film-as-philosophy will be of little value.[34] Livingston captures the challenge in terms of the following principle, which he draws from Hegel's work on the value of art:

If we in fact believe a better (for example, more efficient) means to our goal

is available, would it not indeed be irrational to pass it by? To propose an

analogy: if you know you can quickly, easily, and very effectively tighten a

screw with a screwdriver that is ready to hand, or laboriously and

imperfectly tighten it with a coin, would it not be irrational to prefer the

coin […]?[35]

Though this challenge seems to have received less attention than the more

foundational question of the possibility of FAP, its importance is clear. I introduce

two challenges to the value of film before presenting the main obstacle that must be

overcome to meet those challenges.

2.1. Two Challenges

2.1.1. *Film vs. Academia*

Film has been attributed many advantages over academic philosophical texts.

Wartenberg cites their accessibility, popularity and vivacity and explains how they

give philosophical problems a "human garb" that makes them appear less like a

"mock fight."[36] This all contributes to the *pedagogic* value of film, which is

championed by many.[37] The problem here is that such virtues of film are not

philosophical. A swish new lecture theatre might contribute to the *teaching* of

philosophy, but clearly it does not make any *philosophical* contributions.

It is easy to doubt that film can ever have philosophical advantages over

academic texts. Smith captures the sceptical stance perfectly: "As that sage of

Hollywood, Sam Goldwyn, might have put it: 'Pictures are for entertainment — if I

wanted to make a philosophical point, I'd publish an essay in Proceedings of the

Aristotelian Society'."[38] Advocates of FAP must cast doubt on that stance. They must

show how film offers something to philosophy, *qua philosophy*, that academic texts do not. Otherwise why should philosophers take the detour from academia at all?

2.1.2. Film vs. Other Arts

As we have already established, recording a philosophy lecture or giving characters philosophical dialogue will not constitute a case of FAP. This is because a film's contribution must be made in what Wartenberg calls "a specifically cinematic manner."[39] For a contribution to meet that criterion, it must have advantages over *any non-filmic version* of that contribution. Consequently, film must have a philosophical advantage not just over academic texts, but over art works of any other medium. We can adopt an *elimination test* to establish whether or not this criterion has been satisfied. If the content of a film — its narrative or its dialogue, for example — could be translated into a different medium without diminishing its philosophical contribution, then the contribution it makes is not specifically filmic. This criterion is broad enough to allow resources that film shares with other media, such as dialogue, to play *some* role in its contribution, so long as film's more distinctive visual nature is integral to the *overall* contribution that it makes.[40]

The challenge here is that if we are taking the detour from academic philosophy, there are other resources to which one would intuitively turn before turning to film. Hunt, despite his support of the film-as-thought-experiment model, claims that the novel is a better medium for making such contributions.[41] As Goodenough asks, "What philosophically can a film do […] that a book cannot?"[42] More to the point, what can a film do that a book cannot do *better*?

2.2. Generality and Explicitness Revisited

FAP has two battles on its hands and the main obstacle to victory is provided by our old friends the Generality and Explicitness Problems. The concerns on which they

are based ultimately failed to show that film cannot be philosophy, but they may yet show that film cannot be *good* philosophy. On our model of film-as-philosophy, film can *present* a philosophically salient scenario and *prompt* the audience to construct, on the basis of that narrative, the kind of rigorous arguments and precise general conclusions that the film cannot provide by itself. The question is this: Would it not be better for that salient scenario to be presented in a medium that *can* present rigorous arguments and precise general conclusions?

Leaving the audience to perform that share of the philosophical work is problematic in two main respects. First, the audience might not *recognise* the general philosophical significance of the film's narrative. They might even lack the background knowledge required to extract its general significance.[43] Second, even a philosophically-inclined viewer might have difficulty formulating a *reasoned argument* on the basis of that narrative. They might see that it has relevance to a philosophical issue, but fail to extrapolate its specific ramifications. The fact that there is a great deal going on in any film to *distract* us from its philosophical relevance makes these two possibilities all the more probable.[44]

An academic text need not face these problems. It can explicitly state the general significance of a thought-experiment and explicitly present an argument that reveals the general ramifications of that thought-experiment. Furthermore, even when an academic text does aim to entertain, its primary function is philosophical, so any counter-productive distractions will (usually) be avoided. This indicates that any philosophical contribution made by a film would have been better achieved by an academic text based on the same narrative. Film's lack of generality and explicitness is again causing trouble.

The same considerations also cast doubt on film winning the battle with literature. First, the problem of extrapolating general significance from a narrative is avoided if a novel's narrator makes appropriate explicit observations about the

significance of events.[45] Some novels, such as Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, even have a narrator who acknowledges that the narrative is a fiction and spells out the relevance of that fiction to our own lives in the actual world. Surely a medium with a narrator — a potential philosopher-guide — will be a better aid to our philosophical activities than an inarticulate film? Second, Hunt proposes that "motion pictures are less philosophical than literary narrative insofar as they are less suited to the task of embodying arguments."[46] A novel can present a reasoning process in a way that film cannot. Though a novel will doubtless contain non-philosophical distractions, the explicit guidance of a narrator could help us attend to the relevant points. Overall, there is a real threat that even if presenting a salient narrative through art rather than an academic text could be valuable to philosophy, its presentation in film will inevitably be weaker than its presentation in literature.

2.3 Meeting the Challenges

Overall, the limitations of film mean that it can present a philosophically salient scenario but has no voice standing outside that narrative to guide us through the significance of that scenario. Though this is compatible with film making a contribution to philosophy through its narratives, it seems that their presentation in film is inevitably *weaker* than an equivalent presentation in an academic or literary text — a text that can provide that guiding voice. I think we should concede that for most philosophical purposes it is better to have the articulate guiding voice that film typically lacks. However, our task is to show that film has special advantages on at least *some* occasions, and this can still be achieved. I argue that the apparent *disadvantages* of film relative to academic or literary texts are actually potential *advantages*.

We followed Hunt in using Socrates' exchange with the slave boy in *Meno* as an example of philosophy being done through narrative. Fittingly, it is to the central

thesis of that dialogue that we will now turn. The slave boy scenario was supposed to show that he could come to know something "without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself."[47] Though this model will not apply to empirical knowledge it does capture the process of reaching philosophical knowledge. Socrates also argues that repeating assertions made by others might constitute "true opinion", but discovering that conclusion for ourselves will provide us with *knowledge*.[48] Compare being told the answer to a maths problem with working out the answer for yourself. The epistemic superiority of the latter illustrates Socrates' claim.

Strangely, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates is not very good at respecting his own epistemic claims. He tends to impose interpretations of a narrative on his interlocutors and to ask leading questions that give them little opportunity to work things out for themselves. This worry generalises to all philosophical texts. If a salient narrative is of philosophical significance, given the right prompts the audience should be able to work out that significance for themselves and, in doing so, be in a better epistemic position than if it had been spelled out to them.

What does this mean for the philosophical value of film? Film's inability to express *explicit* reasoning or *general* conclusions actually makes it a suitable medium for prompting an audience into reaching philosophical conclusions for themselves, with the depth of understanding that process provides. Most of the time explicitness and generality will be integral to philosophical progress, but here we see the possible philosophical advantage of the inarticulate presentation of a narrative. On this Socratic Model a film can prompt its audience into greater philosophical understanding precisely by *not* making explicit philosophical claims about its narrative, but rather by inviting us to do some of the work for ourselves. Despite describing himself as a "midwife" to knowledge, Socrates often *does* act as an

articulate commentator. Ironically, film could then be considered more "Socratic" than Socrates.

So far, we have shown how the apparent weaknesses of filmic presentations of a philosophically salient narrative might actually be a source of strength. What we have not shown is how a film with these strengths might make a *specifically filmic* contribution. After all, a novel could easily present a narrative without providing the kind of commentary that we have just objected to. In fact, an academic text could conceivably do the same. We are yet to find something that film has a special ability to achieve.

I suggest that a philosophical contribution is specifically filmic precisely when *the fact that the audience is watching a film* is integral to its achievement. Obviously, no medium other than film can have an audience with that status. But when would that status ever be relevant to philosophy? I suggest it can be of special relevance when the film is contributing to *the philosophy of film*. Unlike an academic text on the philosophy of film, a film can stimulate its audience into a philosophical insight *while they are watching*. We will see how this might work shortly, but it is worth noting that the proposed contribution requires more than "reflexivity" in a film. The fact that a film is in some sense *about* film does not mean it is making any philosophical contribution to our understanding of film, nor any contribution that could not better have been achieved by an academic text.[49] After all, there is a sense in which *all* art has reflexive significance, but it is implausible that all art makes a contribution to philosophy. We are looking for something more.

Philosophy of film is not the *only* area to which the audience's status as viewers can be relevant. Wartenberg, for instance, provides an excellent account of how *The Matrix* reinforces the Cartesian deception hypothesis by deceiving the audience into believing that the world they perceive in the early sections of the film is (fictionally) real.[50] This kind of perceptual deception takes advantage of the fact that the

audience is watching a film. However, too often it is only a film's narrative that is philosophically salient, and the fact that the audience is experiencing that narrative through film is irrelevant. I suggest that the contribution of a film is *most likely* to be specifically filmic when it engages in philosophy of film. There are many plausible cases of film engaging in a critique of the conditions of its existence. For example, the experimental films *Empire* (1964) and *The Flicker* (1965) are explored by Wartenberg, *Serene Velocity* (1970) is considered by Carroll, and the art film *The Five Obstructions* (2003) is discussed by Hjort.[51] These cases complement my stance, but it is worth noting that they are not popular films. Also, the question of the conditions of film is just one of a much wider range of possible issues in the philosophy of film on which a film can shed light. Rather than exploring further conceptual considerations, the time has come to consider an example of film-as-philosophy that promises to vindicate the various conclusions we have reached.

3. HITCHCOCK'S *REAR WINDOW*:
A CASE STUDY IN FILM AS PHILOSOPHY OF FILM

Alfred Hitchcock's acclaimed 1954 film *Rear Window* grew to become his greatest box office success. Though one dissenting contemporary critic states "Mr Hitchcock's film is not significant [and] is superficial and glib," we will soon see that the opposite is the case.[52] The protagonist of *Rear Window*, L.B. "Jeff" Jeffries, is a photographer bound to a wheelchair after sustaining a broken leg. Bored in his New York apartment, he begins to watch the lives of his various neighbours on the other side of the courtyard. Looking into the apartment of Lars Thorwald, Jeff starts to suspect that Thorwald has murdered his wife. With the help of his girlfriend Lisa and nurse Stella, his suspicions are confirmed, but in the process Thorwald

discovers Jeff's surveillance. In a thrilling confrontation in Jeff's apartment, Jeff survives a fall from his window before the police finally catch the killer.

The cornerstone of *Rear Window*'s relevance to the philosophy of film is Jeff's similarity to the cinema-goer. Belton explains that "Jeff serves as a surrogate for the spectator. Seated in his chair and unable to move, he looks, through a frame that resembles that of the screen, at events that take place in a semidistant space."[53] Barton Palmer adds that "to relieve his bordem" Jeff is "poised eagerly before the screen in hopes of a narrative which might become an object of pleasure."[54] The analogy is reinforced by the opening and closing of the apartment's blind at the beginning and end of the film. Mid-way through the film there is even an "interval' in which Lisa closes the blind saying "the show's over for tonight." This kind of content cleverly invites us to compare ourselves as spectators with Jeff. We can now consider to what philosophical use this comparison is put.

3.1. Voyeurism

The film guides the audience through an exploration of the ethical status of voyeurism, with Stella and Lisa often challenging the morality of Jeff's behaviour. Our alignment with Jeff indicates that *we too* are voyeurs, so we are invited to consider the ethical status of viewing film.[55] It would be simplistic to transfer our assessment of Jeff's voyeurism onto ourselves since there are obvious respects in which we are not aligned.[56] Nevertheless, the comparative exercise is valuable. In the film Jeff compares what he can see from his window with a photographic negative of the courtyard — perhaps this is a model of the kind of comparative exercise that the audience is supposed to perform. One of many illuminating points of contrast between Jeff and the spectator is that Jeff's actions lead to the apprehension of a killer. This suggests that *his* voyeurism is excusable, but since *we*

have no such excuse we are prompted to consider how our voyeuristic gaze could be justifiable.

Jeff's apparent preference for *viewing* life rather than *living* it also has ramifications for the cinema-goer. His choice to watch his neighbours rather than respond to Lisa's advances indicates that "[h]e opts for a one-way relationship based on voyeurism instead of a two-way relationship rooted in mutual regard."[57] Lisa begins to form a judgement of Jeff that she says is "too frightful to utter," indicating there is something perverse about his behaviour.[58] Are we similarly perverse in our choice to watch a film, or does the fact we are viewing a fiction somehow make things better?

There are many other ways in which the film systematically prompts a philosophical moral assessment of ourselves as viewers of film. It is worth noting that an academic text presenting the same narrative could not catch us whilst we are engaged in the potentially voyeuristic act, so would inevitably put us a step further away from the object of investigation. When it comes to literature, conveniently we can compare *Rear Window* to the short story by Cornell Woolrich on which it is based. That story has little to say about voyeurism and the ethical status of our engagement with fiction, indicating that the philosophical value of *Rear Window* is specifically filmic.

3.2. The Epistemology of Film

In *Rear Window* Jeff is not the passive recipient of information about events in his neighbouring apartments. He actively *looks* in order to acquire evidence — sometimes audio but primarily visual — then *constructs* hypothetical narratives to account for what he perceives. The film's narrative is effectively the *story* of Jeff's interpretations of what he sees.[59] Since Jeff is presented as a surrogate of the cinema-goer, we are invited to regard our own engagement with the filmic audio-visual

display in a similar manner. This sheds light on how we form beliefs about a film's fictional reality — something we might call the *epistemology* of film. We are prompted to notice the interpretive role that we play.

Interestingly, the narratives Jeff constructs often seem to reflect his own desires and anxieties.[60] This invites the audience to consider what role their *own* psychological states might play in their interpretations. Furthermore, Jeff appears to interpret events according to the guidelines of specific genres: one apartment is a romance, another is a melodrama and Thorwald's is clearly a murder-mystery. This invites us to assess the extent to which our interpretations are guided by our background understanding of genre rather than by the audio-visual evidence with which we are presented. *Rear Window* reinforces this invitation by toying with its *own* murder-mystery genre. In a contemporary review, Sondheim notes that suspense is achieved by the fact that "[h]alf way through *Rear Window* we are not certain there will be a murder, not sure that Hitchcock may not have a new gimmick, which is to let us *think* there'll be a murder."[61] By threatening to defy our genre-based expectations, *Rear Window* highlights the *presence* of those expectations and the role that they play in our experience of film.

Jeff's epistemic relationship to events may appear *disanalogous* to that of the cinema-goer when he starts to interfere with what he sees. Jeff sends Lisa to Thorwald's apartment and watches as she posts a note under his door. Viewers of film cannot influence events on the screen — they can only form beliefs on the basis of what they are given. However, if we look at events in *Rear Window* more closely, their relevance to the cinema-goer becomes clearer. The note that Jeff sends reads "What have you done with her?", but this question is never answered by Thorwald. Furthermore, when Thorwald finally spots Jeff and becomes the viewer rather than the viewed, he invades Jeff's apartment and says one thing — "What do you want from me?" This question also goes unanswered. In both cases, the "viewer" is

analogous to the cinema audience in that they can ask questions but can receive no direct answers. Film *shows* us a reality from a perceptual perspective but, unlike the novel, provides no flat statements of how things stand in that world. We have to make sense of the evidence ourselves. By contrast, in Woolrich's story we simply have to take Jeff's interpretations as gospel, since we are not given the perceptual evidence from which to construct our own hypotheses. The view of film encouraged by *Rear Window* complements our Socratic Model perfectly. Film makes no direct *philosophical* statements, but can provide audio-visual prompts that assist the audience's philosophical inquiries.

At some points in the film, the perceptual evidence offered to the viewer differs from the perceptual evidence available to Jeff. For example, while Jeff is asleep, we see Thorwald leave his apartment with a woman we can only suppose is his still-living wife.[62] Here we recognise that Jeff's interpretation of events is based on limited evidence. However, since Jeff is clearly a surrogate of the cinema-goer, we are invited to conclude that *we too* have limited access to the film's reality. Perhaps we can never be certain of the "facts" of a filmic fictional world — we can only form more or less satisfactory interpretations based on the limited evidence we have. Again, any sense that film *fully discloses* a world to us is cleverly frustrated by *Rear Window*.

In summation, there is a viable notion of film-as-philosophy. The inarticulate nature of film entails that it cannot make the general and explicit claims characteristic of philosophy. Nevertheless, film can make valuable contributions to philosophical inquiry by presenting narratives that behave like philosophical thought-experiments. By attributing film the Socratic role of prompting its audience into philosophical understanding, we can make sense of how it is *possible* for film to actively contribute to philosophy. For instance, *Rear Window* invites its audience to treat Jeff's behaviour as a salient example for the evaluation of the moral status of

voyeurism. Once the possibility of FAP has been acknowledged, there remains a worry about its *value*. Why would we choose an inarticulate medium over one that can lay out the ramifications of a narrative in general and explicit terms? The Socratic Model allows us to understand how the absence of an articulate guiding voice in film can sometimes *enhance* its philosophical contributions. Where *Rear Window* encourages us to extrapolate the implications of a scenario for ourselves, we achieve a deeper and more reliable insight than we would through an equivalent textual presentation of that scenario. How can there be anything specifically *cinematic* about a film's contribution? Where a film engages reflexively in the philosophy of film, it can utilise the distinctive status of its audience to great effect. *Rear Window* invites us to consider our own interpretative role in the experience of film whilst we are engaged in that very activity. Despite the substantial conceptual obstacles to the notion of FAP, the Socratic Model allows us to make sense of the possibility and value of filmic contributions to philosophy. The case of *Rear Window* shows us that film, despite its limitations, has distinctive advantages over textual works, whether academic or literary. Of course, *this* text can only gesture towards the full significance of the film. Much like the cop that Jeff phones in *Rear Window*, you've heard an eyewitness account, but can only find the real evidence by looking for yourself.

NOTES

1. See, respectively, Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), Daniel Shaw's "On Being Philosophical and 'Being John Malkovich'," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:1 (2006) and Chris Falzon's, "Why be Moral?" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).
2. This decision is motivated by the fact that most of the pro-FAP literature focuses on popular narrative films, so defending FAP in the context of documentaries or art films would do little to vindicate that literature.
3. These labels are taken from Wartenberg, though I will not always follow his formulation of the problems. See Thomas E. Wartenberg's "Beyond Mere Illustration: How Film Can Be Philosophy." *The*

Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 64:1 (2006) and "On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy" in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

4. This places my proposal in the category Wartenberg labels the "Moderate Pro-Cinematic Position' on the FAP debate in his "Film as Philosophy" in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).

5. *The Matrix* is a fitting example since it is perhaps the single film that has most dominated the film-as-philosophy literature.

6. See Paisley Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2009) and Noël Carroll, "Philosophising Through the Moving Image: The Case of Serene Velocity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:1 (2006).

7. For an account of this "Imposition Objection' see Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 8.

8. Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 1st edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.

9. The importance of film-makers' intentions to FAP is emphasised in Paisley Livingston's "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:1 (2006) and in Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*. I will generally avoid engaging with this topic. The central question for us is whether the philosophical content of a film is discovered or imposed. If we conclude it is discovered in the film, we can then ask what role actual or possible intentions play in its being there.

10. It should be clear that films are not thinking agents, but Mulhall's way of describing FAP sometimes seems to suggest that they are. Livingston specifically argues against the attribution of agency to film in his Livingston *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 3, 194. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 12, explains that talk of film "developing an idea" is a turn of phrase no more suspicious than talk of an academic text "developing an idea."

11. Wartenberg, *Thinking on* Screen, 21.

12. I say "at best" since films may present us with impossible scenarios, such as the time-travel paradoxes in *Back to the Future* (1985)

13. Quoted by Karen Hanson, "Minerva in the Movies: Relations Between Philosophy and Film," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 391.

14. See Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 16. As with the Generality Problem, an appeal to the explicit content of the *dialogue* in the film will not help. Such verbal assertions are not made by the film, and can contribute nothing specifically "filmic."

15. The central place of systematicity and reason-giving in philosophy is noted by Julian Baggini "Serious Men: The Films of the Coen Brothers as Ethics," in *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*, ed. Havi Carel and Greg Tuck (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

16. Quoted in Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 76

17. Quoted in ibid., 18

18. Mulhall, *On Film*, 1st edn., 7.

19. Lester Hunt "Motion Pictures as a Philosophical Resource," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, ed. Carroll and Choi, 397.

20. Quoted in Mette Hjort, "The Five Obstructions," in *The Routledge Companion to Film and Philosophy,* ed. Livingston and Plantinga, 631.

21. Bruce Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film," in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 390.

22. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen,* 24.

23. Ibid., 36.

24. Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 13.

25. Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film."

26. Hunt, "Motion Pictures as a Philosophical Resource," 401.

27. For more on this point see Smuts, "Review of R. J. Yanal *Hitchcock as Philosopher*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:3 (2007): 340.

28. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 57.

29. Ibid., 134.

30. Related doubts about film's ability to utilise narratives as philosophical thought experiments are expressed by Murray Smith in "Film Art, Ambiguity and Argument," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:1 (2006): 38.

31. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 92.

32. This point is made vividly in Noël Carroll, "Philosophising Through the Moving Image: The Case of *Serene Velocity*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64:1 (2006): 180.

33. Richard Fumerton, "Skepticism," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 604.

34. Concerns about the value of film's contributions are captured in what Wartenberg calls the "Banality Objection," which he ties to Stolnitz and Carroll in Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen,* 104.

35. Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 56

36. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen*, 4, 8.

37. See Fumerton's "Skepticism," Russell's "The Philosophical Limits of Film," Livingston's "Theses on Cinema as Philosophy" and Carroll's "Philosophising Through the Moving Image."

38. Smith, "Film Art, Ambiguity and Argument," 39.

39. Wartenberg, *Thinking on* Screen, 12.

40. A strong case against the total omission of dialogue as a filmic resource is made by Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2008), 150.

41. Hunt, "Motion Pictures as a Philosophical Resource."

42. Jerry Goodenough, "A Philosopher Goes to the Cinema," in *Film as Philosophy: Essays in Cinema After Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 12.

43. On the second point see Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 196-197.

44. Smith's "Film Art, Ambiguity and Argument" notes that film's prioritisation of non-philosophical goals inevitably leads to such compromises. Specific examples of "philosophical" science-fiction films that spend much of their time on elaborate action sequences are noted by Goodenough, "A Philosopher Goes to the Cinema," 6, and Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 198.

45. See Hunt, "Motion Pictures as a Philosophical Resource," 403.

46. Ibid., 402.

47. Plato, *Meno*, 85d.

48. Ibid., 97-99.

49. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen,* raises this as an objection to the argument implicit in Mulhall, *On Film,* 2nd edn., 131-132, that being *about* film is sufficient for a film being philosophical.

50. Wartenberg, *Thinking on* Screen, 79.

51. Wartenberg's *Thinking on Screen*, Carroll's "Philosophising Through the Moving Image" and Hjort's "The Five Obstructions."

52. From Bosley Crowther, "Rear Window," *New York Times*, 5 August 1954, reprinted in *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, ed. John Belton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

53. John Belton, "Spectacle and Narrative," in *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, ed. Belton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

54. Barton Palmer, "The Metafictional Hitchcock: The Experience of Viewing and the Viewing of Experience in Rear Window and Psycho," in *Perspectives on Alfred Hitchcock*, ed. D. Boyd (New York: Simon & Schuster MacMillan, 1995), 145-146. It is worth noting that these observations about the film, along with all the others in this section, are not taken from philosophers, so are unlikely to express a bias in favour of philosophical interpretations. Some thinkers do approach Hitchcock with explicitly philosophical objectives, such as Robert J. Yanal's *Hitchcock as Philosopher* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), but we will not draw on their work.

55. The movie's advertising slogan — "revealing the privacy of a dozen lives" — overtly plays on its voyeuristic lure. See Belton, "Spectacle and Narrative," 3.

56. This is against the Pearson & Stam account of the film challenged by Barton Palmer, "The Metafictional Hitchcock," 148.

57. See Belton, "Spectacle and Narrative," 7.

58. Elise Lemire, "Voyeurism and the Postwar Crisis of Masculinity in *Rear Window*" in *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, ed. John Belton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.

59. Belton, "Spectacle and Narrative," 3.

60. This point is emphasised in Lemire's "Voyeurism and the Postwar Crisis of Masculinity in *Rear Window*," 57-58, and in Jean Douchet, "Hitch and his Public," trans. Verana A. Conley, in *A Hitchcock Reader*, ed. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 18.

61. Stephen Sondheim, "Rear Window," in *Films in Review* 5:8 (1954), reprinted in *Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window*, ed. John Belton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 170.

62. See David Bordwell's "The Viewer's Activity," in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 43.