



## Can films philosophize? The rationality and the imposition objections

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There is an ongoing debate in the Anglo-American philosophy of film, around the possibility that at least some films may be means to do philosophy. This has been defended mainly by Stephen Mulhall (2001) and Thomas Wartenberg (2007). Critics of this ‘film as philosophy’ (FAP) hypothesis make several objections, some of which are borrowed from objections to the idea of literature as philosophy, but I will be focusing on two. First, the rationality objection suggests that it is irrational to use films to do philosophy if literature achieves the same results more effectively. Second, the imposition objection states that any philosophizing is never done by the film itself, but the philosopher interpreting it. The following will be a defence of a version of the ‘moderate pro-cinematic philosophy’ position taken by Wartenberg (2011: 16). I will begin by briefly presenting Wartenberg's theory and his responses to the rationality and the imposition objections. Then, I will argue that, although Wartenberg's theory seems to be the most plausible within the FAP debate, it leaves some doubts that can be answered by making some bolder arguments to solve the rationality and the imposition objections.

In 2007, Thomas Wartenberg published his book, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*, where he defended FAP. To defend his ‘moderate pro-cinematic philosophy’ position, he adopted a ‘local’ strategy that considers specific known philosophical techniques and then asks if there are films that can constitute such techniques (Wartenberg 2006: 131)



He argues for three main ways of doing philosophy through film:

1. illustration of a philosophical theory;
2. self-reflection or reflection about the nature of cinema, and;
3. thought experimentation.

Bruce Russell (2002) presents a ‘generality objection’ to films doing philosophy. It states that films cannot do philosophy because philosophy concerns itself with general, universal truths, but films are concerned with particular states of affairs. Wartenberg’s (2007) argument runs, however, that thought experiments are well-established philosophical tools that constitute only particular cases. Therefore, if a film is a thought experiment, then we can consider it to be doing philosophy. That is to say, not all philosophical endeavours aim at establishing general truths, as the ‘generality objection’ posed by Bruce (2002) presupposes. Wartenberg’s appeal to thought experiments, however interesting, leaves some objections unanswered.

The first objection is called the ‘rationality objection’ and is posed by Paisley Livingston (2006). With Hegelian inspiration, Livingston asks: ‘If we in fact believe a more efficient means to our goal is available, would it not indeed be irrational to pass it by?’ (Livingston 2006: 17). So, if we have texts that are known tools that work perfectly to philosophize, it would be irrational to make films instead (Livingston 2009: 56).

Wartenberg hints towards an answer to this challenge by stating that films have abilities texts do not. He claims that ‘film is both a visual and temporally extended art form [that] gives it an immediacy that is greater than other art forms in its presentation of philosophy’ (Wartenberg 2007: 137). This may not seem very concrete, but if we consider Wartenberg’s analysis of *The Matrix* (1999) in *Thinking on Screen*, we can better understand how the film can philosophize in ways that are prompted by cinema’s nature that cannot be done in texts. Briefly, Wartenberg argues that the film is a thought experiment that extends Descartes’ evil genius



thought experiment inasmuch as it makes us experience the same doubts as the main character, Neo, in a way specially allowed by cinema. So, maybe the challenge here is that Wartenberg and philosophers who want to defend this moderate version of a pro-FAP thesis, ought to present more compelling examples. They should present films that make use of their specific techniques that allow them to philosophize more effectively than other more traditional means. This also is a challenge to the argument for the cinematic thought experiment. Why use cinematic thought experiments instead of textual ones? We need a compelling and bold argument for accepting to include films in our philosophical bibliographies.

Our argument in favour of ‘pro-cinematic philosophy’ is ‘moderate’ because of a certain concession. This is that we can only evaluate whether some films do philosophy if there are already established works of philosophy in traditional means. Without being reduced to saying that films merely illustrate a philosophical text, we can say that the existence of recognized philosophical texts on a subject should be a referent that helps us to identify the philosophy being done by the film. Indeed, Wartenberg states that thinking about typical philosophical topics (the ‘eternal questions’) is one conception that we can have of philosophy (Wartenberg 2007: 29)<sup>1</sup>. So, we are not arguing that films should replace texts; rather they can complement them.

If we are to take the position that film has a unique essence, we should note that we need not fulfil the strong demands of what Livingston labels the ‘bold thesis’ (Livingston 2009). This is the strong claim that films can make original contributions to philosophy by means unique to the cinematic medium. For this thesis to be correct, films must meet

1. The ‘means condition’, according to which film can do philosophy through exclusive cinematic means and
2. the ‘results condition’, according to which the philosophy that the film does has to be innovative and original (Livingston 2009: 11).

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<sup>1</sup> Wartenberg argues for two more conceptions of philosophy that he considers to only function if considered in conjunction: philosophy as a meta-discipline, and as a set of methods (Wartenberg 2007: 30).



Perhaps unsurprisingly, Livingston rejects the bold thesis (Livingston 2009). We should say that the requirement of originality and innovation seems to demand from film something that is questionable even for traditional philosophy. How original and innovative can philosophy be in the twenty first century? If we know about the existence of a film that makes some points from a different perspective, adds new premises to an argument, invents a new thought experiment to tackle a philosophical issue, and so forth, and that we can trace that to a traditional philosophical reference, we can still adopt our position of moderate pro-cinematic philosophy.

I want to argue that Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) is a film about the possibility of hyperreality. Hyperreality was not an original concept in 1996, since Baudrillard had already written about this possibility in 1981, but the film contributes with a new perspective on the subject. We do not have to accept any kind of essentialist theory of cinema—that film has a unique essence not enjoyed by other art forms—in order to agree that films have some, not unique, but paradigmatic techniques such as a narrative, sound track, actors, and so on. Thus, as Aaron Smuts states in his defence of the bold thesis, we should just have to be concerned with ‘means that are significantly more cinematic than merely presenting a philosophical lecture’ (Smuts 2006: 10-11). So, we do not have to accept *Scream* as having a unique essence that is not shared by any other art form, we just have to recognize it as a film that employs paradigmatic cinematic means that are crucial to the epistemic power it has. If my argument is that *Scream* is a thought experiment on the possibility of hyperreality, we could ask if there is something about cinematic thought experiments that justifies using them instead of just using texts, responding to the rationality objection.

One way could be to endorse what Tom McClelland calls the ‘Socratic Model’. In this model, films do not make explicit general claims about certain subjects: instead film ‘prompts 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' (McClelland 2001: 12). So, on the one hand, this means that one could object that *Scream* does not philosophize because it is not explicit enough about its position on hyperreality, (because there is not an argument which provides a framework for the thought experiment). But on the other hand, it leaves its potential general conclusion to the audience. This difference between traditional thought experiments and screen ones may be advantageous to film. As McClelland notes, 'letting the scenario speak for itself' can be a better way for us to 'use our own capacity for reason to work out the real significance of the scenario' (McClelland, forthcoming) and that can constitute an epistemic advantage over texts. This properly responds to the rationality objection.

The second objection to films doing philosophy is called the 'imposition objection'. Let us agree that *The Matrix* is a philosophical thought experiment that establishes the deception hypothesis. The problem may be that this meaning is imposed by the philosopher who interprets the film, not having been intended by the Wachowski sisters. Even if we seem to have a strong case of a cinematic thought experiment that establishes the possibility of FAP, it is not guaranteed that the philosophical meaning was intended by the film's author(s).

To solve this problem, Wartenberg argues that we could adopt a 'creator-oriented' kind of interpretation (Wartenberg 2007: 25) which 'attempts to reconstruct the meaning that the author of a work intended' (Wartenberg 2016: 175). This kind of interpretation takes into account the author's social background. If we were to make anachronistic interpretations of a work, this would be an 'imposition' or at least, as Wartenberg says, an 'audience-oriented' interpretation. However, Livingston argues that the creator-oriented kind of interpretation proposed by Wartenberg is too ambiguous and loose. It is hard to know what philosophical theories the author was aware of. Instead, Livingston supports a 'partial intentionalism' in which the author's intentions are only of partial concern (Livingston 2009). This kind of intentionalism makes



use of ‘internal’ as well as ‘external’ evidence of a film (Livingston 2009: 108). It analyses the film itself and sees if the philosophical impression we get ‘meshes’ with the author’s philosophical concerns registered in her interviews, journals, etc. (Livingston 2009: 99). If we do this, we avoid any kind of imposition. Wartenberg replies by saying that we do not need to commit to such a strong intentionalism, saying that the authors (filmmakers) only have to be aware of the ‘philosophical problématique’ and not of any specific theories (Wartenberg 2016: 175). Thus, Livingston’s ‘partial intentionalism’ expands the search for something that need not be found.

The question remains whether I am imposing a hyperrealistic interpretation of *Scream*. I want to argue that both Wartenberg’s and Livingston’s answers to the imposition objection can, in conjunction, help us to make a case for *Scream* as a thought experiment about hyperreality. Wartenberg argues that the philosophical content of a film can be debated and interpreted in several ways in order to understand if it philosophizes or not (Wartenberg 2009: 121). As Livingston rightly notes, Wartenberg’s ‘creator-oriented’ interpretations are too loose: the filmmaker Craven could have intended many different things, and his social context is too rich to try to completely understand one of the philosophical meanings of *Scream*. Thus, a stronger intentionalism, as the one defended by Livingston, can help us make a closer interpretation and understand the philosophy that Craven does through *Scream*. Otherwise we could take the risk of assuming a priori that the film philosophizes, only then to debate particular interpretations, which goes against a kind of experimental approach that goes from the film and the general impression we get from it, to a plausible interpretation (not assuming beforehand that the film philosophizes).

Livingston’s partial intentionalism, however, has some problems too, especially since it seems to make interpretations of films that are too attached to very particular philosophical positions. For example, he argues that director Ingmar Bergman’s work is profoundly influenced by the Finnish philosopher Eino Kaila, rejecting several psychoanalytic



of Bergman's work on the grounds that Kaila was himself critic of psychoanalysis (Livingston 2009: 129). However, the influence of Kaila and psychoanalysis is not mutually exclusive. Could not the work of Bergman show both influences? Influence does not mean endorsement in all aspects. So, in this aspect, Wartenberg's proposal could justify a psychoanalytic account because psychoanalysis was a trend during his years of filmmaking.

Thus, I would like to suggest that both accounts can complement each other sometimes, avoiding too loose or too narrow interpretations. *Scream* can be an example of a film that could benefit from both accounts: in a creator-oriented interpretation, the hypothesis of hyperrealism was a concern of *Scream's* era; but it was also a concern of Wes Craven, as he said several times in various interviews. His concern about the relationship between reality and fiction is common to some of his other great works, as *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* (1994)<sup>2</sup>.

To conclude, with a bolder version of what we could say about cinematic thought experiments, and a conjunction between two types of intentionalism, we can reply to the rationality and the imposition objections. This was achieved by arguing that some films can do philosophy about traditional topics, in new ways. My position may be seen as too conservative, but the advantage is that it could help to convince the more sceptical philosophers. It may be the cautious position to have, but the burden is on pro-FAP philosophers to make the case for adding films to philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to note that if we accept the 'death of the author' this intentionalism does not apply. However, it could be said that someone who is persuaded of the death of the author is probably going to accept more easily FAP, since all interpretations could be valid. However, in an Anglo-American framework usually highly sceptical, and facing the imposition objection, intentionalism can help us make the case for FAP.



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