

Film as Philosophy: In Defense of the Bold Thesis

Abstract

I argue for a position close to what Paisley Livingston calls the *bold thesis* of cinema as philosophy. The bold thesis I defend is that films can make innovative, independent philosophical contributions by paradigmatic cinematic means. I clarify the thesis before presenting what Livingston thinks is a fatal problem for any similar position. As an example in defense of the bold thesis, I offer the "For God and Country" sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928). I argue that this scene offers an analogical argument similar in form to what some think Nietzsche presents in the *Genealogy of Morality*. Moreover, I argue that the argument presented in *October* is independent, could have been innovative, and is presented via the paradigmatic cinematic means of montage.

Introduction

The philosophy *of* film is the discussion of philosophical problems related to film, its nature, effects, and value.¹ But what of philosophy *in* film? One says of certain filmmakers, such as Bergman, Eisenstein, Godard, Rohmer, Wenders, and Linklater, that they are philosophical, meaning that they grapple with philosophical questions in their work.² Likewise, one describes many films philosophical, as in some sense doing philosophy.³ However, it is not altogether clear how a film could be said to "do philosophy." Of course, it all depends on exactly what we mean by "doing philosophy." And it is plausible that doing philosophy is something along the lines of offering arguments related to a philosophical question.⁴ If so, then we must ask: How can a film argue? Or, how can a filmmaker argue using a film?

I think film can "do philosophy" and in this paper I defend a position close to what Paisley Livingston calls the *bold thesis* of cinema as philosophy.⁵ My goal is not to merely play gadfly to Livingston, but to defend a well articulated, strong thesis about the philosophical abilities of film. The bold thesis fits the bill. As described by Livingston, the bold thesis is that some films can make innovative, independent philosophical contributions by cinematic means. In the abstract, the idea is simply that film can do philosophy in an interesting way. And it is certainly not interesting to point out that a film could be philosophical by simply presenting a philosopher reading a paper. If the film as

philosophy thesis has any significance, it must hold that film can do philosophy in a way more “cinematic” than merely recording a talk. In addition, if film can be said to do first-rate philosophy, it must be able to make original contributions to the field. The central problem with the bold thesis is that it runs into what Livingston calls the *problem of paraphrase*. Before exploring this problem and my solution, it will be useful to tighten up the version of the bold thesis that I intend to defend.

The Bold Thesis

The “bold thesis” that film can do philosophy has two major parts—an epistemic criterion and an artistic criterion. Livingston states the thesis, roughly, as follows: Films can make innovative, independent contributions to philosophy through means that are exclusive to cinema. In order to understand the thesis, we will need to explain the epistemic criterion—what it means for a philosophical contribution to be innovative and independent. We will also need to expand the notion of “means that are exclusive to cinema”—the artistic criterion. I will begin with the latter.

The Artistic Criterion

Livingston may have a couple of different ideas in mind when he says that the bold thesis holds that film can contribute to philosophy by “means exclusive to cinema.” As mentioned above, the general spirit of this qualification is to distinguish between filmed presentations of philosophical debates, discussions, or arguments, and other more interesting candidates. For instance, Godard's *Weekend* (1967) features several actors reading from revered Marxist texts, but the film is not philosophical (in the relevant way) because of these bits of Marxist thought. The philosophy, as Noël Carroll puts it, has simply been “downloaded onto the sound track.”⁶ Similarly, in *Waking Life* (2001) Linklater shows Robert Solomon discussing existentialism. Professor Solomon also features in the Teaching Company's “Great Professors” series, where he delivers lectures on existentialism and

Nietzsche. The videos in the “Great Professors” series are certainly doing philosophy, but not in a relevant way. The tapes merely present a philosopher giving a lecture; it is not the film doing philosophy, but the professor. Although the Teaching Company's tapes tell us about someone doing philosophy, they do not actually do any philosophy. A transcription of the tape would have the same philosophical content; if the film was doing philosophy, most plausibly, this could not be the case. It should be clear that Solomon is doing philosophy, not the technician behind the curtain in the Teaching Company studios.

Livingston suggests that we try to distinguish between these mere presentations of philosophy and the kind of cinematic philosophical achievements that we are looking for by requiring the defender of the bold thesis to show how a film could make a philosophical contribution through “means exclusive to cinema.” Unfortunately, the phrase “exclusive to cinema” is ambiguous. It could mean at least two things. It could be a claim either about the putative philosophical contributions or merely about the means. This important difference requires careful elaboration, since it marks the distinction between a *super bold* and a merely bold thesis.

First, “exclusive to cinema” could mean that the *contributions* can only be made by means unique to the medium. If so, the idea would be that film—the medium or artform—could make philosophical contributions that could not be made in other media. That is, no works in any other media could make similar contributions to philosophy. The claim would be that some special features of the cinematic medium endow works in the artform with a unique ability to make philosophical contributions. This can be given a trivial or an ambitious elaboration. In one sense, if a film could make a philosophical contribution then the contribution would be made by means that are necessarily unique to cinema, since no other artform is cinema. This amounts to a mere tautology. The more ambitious claim would be that through means available only to cinema films are able to make philosophical contributions that cannot be roughly approximated in other media. This would be a claim

about the *unique* philosophical abilities of the cinematic artform. I will call this the *super bold thesis*. But this is not a claim that I wish to defend here.

Of course, some theorists, such as Daniel Frampton, make highly ambitious pronouncements about the unique philosophical abilities of film.⁷ Much contemporary film theory, under the influence of Gilles Deleuze, is concerned with whether film has unique abilities to for novel concept formation, a process that is philosophical in an expansive sense of the term. Although this might raise interesting questions, it does not track the core of the active debate in which I am interested—that is, whether or not film can do philosophy, in the most mundane sense of what it is to do philosophy. If uniqueness is what Livingston intends, then I am presenting a different bold thesis. In any case, it is important to note that by defending what I am calling the bold thesis, I am not offering support for the Deleuzean position—the super bold thesis.⁸

The problem, as I understand it, is to explain how it is that a film could make an original (not unique) contribution to philosophy by using what we might call its cinematic means. Such means include montage, camera angles and movement, and the juxtaposition of word and image. It is not clear that there are means that are exclusive to cinema, but there are means that are typical of cinema that make sense of why we want to exclude the filmed philosophy lecture. It is often said of such filmmakers as Eric Rohmer that they are not cinematic. For instance, the discussion of Pascal's Wager in *My Night at Maud's* (1969) is not particularly cinematic. With long shots and almost no camera movement, the movie is much like a filmed conversation, and in that sense, perhaps the philosophical contribution it makes, if any, is not what we are looking for.

The bold thesis that I intend to defend is that some films can make philosophical contributions by way of paradigmatic cinematic means. My position is much more intimately tied to the question of whether narrative artworks can do philosophy, rather than if film as a medium has some unique abilities, unavailable to other media, whereby it can do philosophy. Although the uniqueness claim

raises difficult questions, it does not seem to be a question that anyone cares about, principally because medium specificity claims are likely specious.⁹ So, by “exclusive cinematic means” I mean something much closer to “by means that are significantly more cinematic than merely presenting a philosophical lecture.” I do not mean to attribute unique philosophical abilities to film; I simply claim that films can do philosophy through what we might loosely call cinematic means.

The Epistemic Criterion

The epistemic criterion of the bold thesis is more substantial. As Livingston explains it, the epistemic criterion involves both innovation and independence. Just what Livingston has in mind by “independence” is a bit obscure, so I will first describe the other condition. By “innovative” he simply means that the philosophical contribution should be unique in human history.¹⁰ The purpose of this criterion is to help distinguish between the mere illustration of a pre-existing philosophical concept and the presentation of a new idea. If films are incapable of making innovative philosophical contributions, then they are extremely limited. The requirement is not that all philosophical contributions made by films must be innovative, but that in principle films should be capable of innovation. Noël Carroll accepts a similar originality requirement for any claim that film can do philosophy. He argues that in order for us to say that a filmmaker could do philosophy through film, it would have to be possible to make an original contribution to the field. Otherwise, the philosophy we might find in a film would most plausibly be mere illustration. In order to do philosophy at this level, one must be able to do more than illustrate a pre-existing idea.¹¹

By “independent” Livingston means that the philosophical contribution made by a film is not grossly dependent on some interpretation or imported, pre-existing philosophical context. Imagine a filmed philosophy lecture where some of the examples were dramatized on film. For instance, consider the parable of the cave, shown, rather than told by Plato. All philosophical work that the cinematic

dramatization could perform would be dependent on the un-cinematic, linguistic elements. I take it that the basic motivation behind this criterion is to force the contributions to be more than supplementary. That is, if film is robustly able to make philosophical contributions, these contributions should be more than mere teacher's supplements to philosophical texts. The independence condition also rules out a certain form of shameful interpretive dependence—that is, the independence condition forces films to be able to make their own way philosophically.

To repeat, the bold thesis I intend to defend is as follows: Films can make innovative, independent contributions to philosophy through paradigmatic cinematic means. It pays to note that as a standard of what is required to "do philosophy" the innovative condition of the bold thesis is far too strong. Very little philosophy is innovative in this strong sense of the term. Hence, we should not think of the bold thesis as setting a minimal standard of what counts as doing philosophy. Rather, we should see the bold thesis as a claim about the philosophical potential of film. If we are able to show that film can satisfy the conditions of the bold thesis, then we have good reason to think that film is indeed a powerful medium in which one can do first-rate philosophy.

The Problem of Paraphrase

Now that we have a clearer idea of the thesis that I want to defend, we can examine the most damning criticism that has been leveled against it, namely, the *problem of paraphrase*. The problem of paraphrase rests on the non-controversial premise that if we claim that a film makes a philosophical contribution then we ought to be able to state what the contribution is.¹² If we cannot say what the philosophical work amounts to, then we have no reason to think that any philosophical contribution was made. However, if we can say what the philosophical contribution of a film is, then we need reason to think that the contribution is not wholly dependent on the linguistic medium. This last condition is a bit confusing, but it can be clarified. Livingston's worry seems to be two-fold. First, if

we can state the philosophical contribution, then it might become difficult to divorce the contribution from the interpretive statement. What reason do we have to think that the film made the contribution and not the interpretation which might import a philosophical problematic? Second, if the philosophical contribution is not the sole product of an interpretation but it can still be stated, then why should we think that the contribution was made by cinematic means and not simply the linguistic means available to the film?

The problem of paraphrase is essentially a demand that anyone claiming that film can do philosophy needs to give us a solid basis for thinking that a film could make an independent contribution—to demonstrate how a film could present a new idea or argument that is not grossly dependent on textual sources, non-cinematic devices, or interpretations. Livingston does not think that this can be done. It will not do to claim, as do the defenders of “filmosophy”, that there is some obscure source of philosophical knowledge contained in the film, accessible through some experiential but ultimately inexpressible means.¹³

I, however, think that the problem of paraphrase can be solved and that the solution will be apparent if we unpack the notion of a “philosophical contribution”. So far, I have avoided expanding the concept as to limit the specificity of the position. Livingston does not spend much time unpacking the notion; instead, he expands it in a couple of appositives: “new idea or argument” and “philosophical knowledge.”¹⁴ He contrasts what it means to make an innovative philosophical contribution with more limited goals that he thinks films can achieve, such as: helping us appreciate the significance of an idea¹⁵, prompting us to come up with new ideas, renewing our motivation and interest in a problem, or “merely illustrating previously published ideas.”¹⁶

One important question that must again be raised is whether or not innovation amounts to an adequate criterion of philosophical significance. Thomas Wartenberg, for instance, does not agree.¹⁷ He argues that illustrating a previously published idea, by helping us see its philosophical significance,

should be considered doing philosophy. Although convincing, Wartenberg's criticisms are irrelevant to the bold thesis. We can agree that illustrations could be valuable, but still not consider them innovative philosophical contributions of the highest kind. That is, the bold thesis may be false, but some more limited thesis, such as Wartenberg's, might be correct. In fact, this is what Livingston thinks. The disagreement is about the limits of the philosophical abilities of cinema.

My solution to the problem of paraphrase also involves a criticism of the criterion of what constitutes an innovative philosophical contribution, but I do not think that my subtle modification lessens the stringency of the bold thesis; in fact, my solution helps keep the bold thesis from sliding into a tautology. My argument in brief is that Livingston's informal suggestions, “new idea or argument” and “philosophical knowledge”, should be refined. For starters, philosophical knowledge is clearly too high of a standard, since no philosophical argument for any significant position has ever achieved positive results that we could non-controversially call knowledge. The only philosophical knowledge that we seem to have is along the lines of simple negative theses, such as: Whatever the concept of knowledge might amount to it is more than simply justified, true belief.¹⁸ However the notion of philosophical knowledge does point to a way of clarifying the criterion, namely via belief: One can make a significant contribution to philosophy by providing an innovative reason to believe some philosophical claim. Rather than merely counting a “new idea or argument,” if we say that an innovative philosophical contribution is one that provides a new idea or “reason” to believe a philosophical claim, then we can solve the problem of paraphrase.

There are two reasons why “reason to believe,” although not perfect, is a better alternative than “argument.” The first is easy to show: The notion of a “reason to believe” helps the bold thesis avoid a tautological formulation. Under most interpretations, an argument is the proffering of premises in support of a conclusion. Although there may be non-linguistic thoughts, the notion of premises implies linguistic means. But it is not interesting to point out that a film could not offer an argument by means

other than language if the only way to present an argument is via language. There is no reason to offer a problem of paraphrase to reach such a conclusion. One would merely need to define an argument as linguistic and construct a not-so bold thesis that requires the impossible—that films be able to offer (linguistic) arguments non-linguistically. Perhaps under a more generous notion of what constitutes an argument, say, reasons in support of a conclusion, the criterion might be acceptable. To avoid confusion, I'll simply refer to reasons. Hedging my bets, I will, however, argue that films can present arguments. Either way, my argument for the bold thesis cannot be dismissed in the same way as Wartenberg's defense of illustration.

The second reason to think that “reason to believe” is an acceptable alternative to “argument” will require some discussion of what we are up to when we do philosophy.

Doing Philosophy

In order to answer the question of whether or not a film can do innovative philosophy by cinematic means, we must first step back and explain just what it is to do philosophy. For the purposes of this article, we do not need to develop a precise answer to this question; a largely non-controversial gloss will do. Rather than start with the means, the practice of philosophy as it occurs in books, journals, and conversations, I will first look to the ends. Perhaps a good way to determine what it is to “do philosophy” is to figure out just what we are trying to accomplish when we do it. In order to explain what it is to do philosophy, we could look at the various ways that we do it, find some commonalities, and then try to figure out what if anything distinguishes these activities from others. Rather than describe the *way* we do philosophy, it might be easier to figure out *why* we do it. What is the goal of philosophy? What are we trying to accomplish when we do philosophy?

An initial answer to this question is that when we do philosophy we are trying to convince an opponent that our stance on a philosophical problem is correct. However, there are immediate

problems with this suggestion. Ignoring the circularity, the chief problem is that philosophical arguments seldom convince opponents; at best they may shake an opponent's conviction. Most of us engaged in philosophy are cognizant of the relative powerlessness of our discourse, and, as such, neither expect to nor intend to convert our dialectical opponents to our position. As a standard for evaluating the success of a philosophical argument, Peter van Inwagen suggest that we consider the ability to persuade an idealized, neutral observer who is committed to neither side of an issue that our position is more compelling than that of our opponent.¹⁹ Although van Inwagen is concerned with the success of philosophical arguments, we can take his suggestion as relevant to specifying what goal we are trying to achieve when we do philosophy.²⁰

If we can accept something along the lines of van Inwagen's suggestion, then the question arises as to what kind of neutral observer we have in mind. It would not be enough to convince a child or a mentally handicapped person of our position. That would set the bar too low. Instead, we would hope to convince an idealized, rational audience. This too is problematic, since an idealized audience might be too high of a standard, especially if they had knowledge of the philosophy of the future. A supremely patient, rational, and neutral audience of our contemporaries is more reasonable.

This sounds more plausible, but it is not specific enough for the purposes of specifying what it means to do philosophy. To see why, we merely need to ask, Does any attempt to convince a neutral observer of a position on any issue count as a philosophical goal? Clearly not all issues are philosophical and not all attempts to convince are philosophical. Assuming that we could specify what constitutes a philosophical issue, we need to distinguish between philosophical and other means of persuasion. Imagine a future pharmacology where a drug could be designed to inculcate any belief. Pouring a dose of non-naturalist-moral-realism into someone's drink would not count as doing philosophy. Similarly, whipping a crowd into a fearful panic in order to get them to consent to torturing suspects would not be considered a philosophical argument for the moral justification of

torture. Nor should a film filled with subliminal messages be considered philosophical even if it could convince us of the truth of some philosophical claim. Hence, the goal is not sufficient to differentiate the practice, even if we could specify the subject matter of philosophy.

In order to specify what it is to do philosophy, we must not only describe the end but also the means. As the preceding discussion indicates, philosophy is not pharmacology, nor is it merely rhetoric. This is not to deny that there are ineliminable rhetorical elements to philosophical works, or that they have no impact on what positions are accepted. One plausible solution is that our idealized audience would not be persuaded by mere rhetorical strategies, but by reasons. Perhaps the most obvious way to explain this would be to say that our arguments or reasons persuade and not merely our rhetoric. That is, we want to encourage rationally justified beliefs. Saying this I certainly do not want to digress into a debate about the rationality of the emotions, or whether or not our emotional reactions give us reason to believe.²¹

My modest claim is loosely that, assuming that we can identify what constitutes philosophical subject matter, to do philosophy is, stated crudely, to attempt to provide reasons to believe some philosophical claim. To offer an innovative philosophical contribution is to provide a historically novel reason to believe some philosophical position. Although most philosophy will fail to achieve this goal, it sets a high bar, compatible with Livingston's epistemic criterion, for the bold thesis of film as philosophy that I want to defend. Since a rough characterization of the goals of philosophical activity will satisfy present purposes, we need not pursue any further refinement. I will now show how film can meet this criterion through paradigmatically cinematic means.

Film as Philosophy

The most popular argument for the film-as-philosophy thesis is that some films can function as a typical element in philosophical discourse, namely thought experiments. There are two principal

ways in which thought experiments are used in philosophy. First, thought experiments are used as “intuition pumps,” particularly in moral philosophy. An intuition pump can be used as a form of analogous reasoning or as a counterexample to a claim. Consider the abortion debate and the role of vivid thought scenarios: We do not treat acorns as we do venerable oaks, so why should we afford a fetus the rights of an adult person. A woman accidentally hooked up as a dialysis machine to a midget has no obligation to the recipient; neither should a fetus be able to claim the womb of a pregnant woman.

Thought experiments can also be used as counterexamples to claims. You may think that you could not be wrong about the existence of the external world, but consider the possibility of the situation of the characters in the *Matrix*. The problem with the thought experiment argument for film as philosophy is that it does not show how films could do philosophy, much less innovative philosophy, only how *we* could do philosophy with a film.²² No one denies that you can use a fictional scenario in a philosophical argument; the question is how can the fiction itself, independently, do philosophy?

I will argue that there is at least one form of argument that can be made by cinematic means, namely, analogical arguments. We can find an exemplary case of film doing philosophy via an analogical argument in the “For God and Country Sequence” of Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* (1928). Before looking at this cinematic example of a possibly innovative philosophical contribution, I would like to set up the basis of a comparison with an innovative philosophical text—Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

Nietzsche offers a genealogy of our moral concepts; that is, he traces the sources of our current moral practice (the ethics of pity), locating the original motivations in base resentment. But, to what purpose does he offer the genealogy? Why should we care about the origins of the current practice of morality? The central interpretive problem is to explain how Nietzsche’s text might escape the

genealogical fallacy. In a general sense, to commit the genealogical fallacy is to assume that the contemporary meaning of a practice is determined by its origination or historical meaning. The concept guides much of contemporary anthropology and folklore, where the search for the origins of a cultural practice is seldom treated as relevant to its current significance. Consider the practice of saying “Bless you” when someone sneezes. Suppose we dug into the history of the practice and discovered that people started saying “Bless you” out of a belief that a demon left the body in each sneeze and that the person needed to be blessed to prevent the demon from returning to its host. Although this discovery might be of historical interest, it would tell us nothing about the current function of the practice, which is simply politeness.

Nietzsche was most likely perfectly aware of the problems associated with the genealogical fallacy, which raises the question of his purpose in writing *On the Genealogy of Morality*. According to Brian Leiter, Nietzsche is not offering an argument to the effect that current moral practice is inherently flawed because of its lowly origins; instead, Nietzsche is trying to disabuse certain “higher types” from their perceived obligation to the norms of Christian slave morality.²³ On this interpretation, Nietzsche is attempting to rhetorically disparage Christian morality by exposing its soiled roots. That is, Nietzsche does not commit the genealogical fallacy, but, most plausibly, he invites his readers to do so. Although Nietzsche seems to have a largely rhetorical goal, this does not cause us to doubt that the *Genealogy* is a work that makes great philosophical contributions.

Of course, the *Genealogy* gives us additional reasons to be suspect of “slave morality.” Knowing the origin of a practice may help us detect similar motivating factors in its continuance—that is, it directs our attention by arousing suspicion. Further, if “slave morality” is genuinely the product of resentment, then a host of meta-ethical theories, most notably intuitionism, are put into question. Hence, although it has a largely rhetorical structure, the philosophical contribution made by the *Genealogy* is not confined to the rhetorical goals Leiter plausibly identifies.

There is good reason to think that there are numerous films that engage in similar techniques. For instance, the “For God and Country” sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928) functions in an analogous manner.²⁴ We often talk about the “argument” of a work of art, but this is typically a metaphorical term. We use this term when we are discussing the rhetorical structure of a work—how the work gets us to feel a certain way. However, Eisenstein thought that the montage in this sequence functions dialectically, just like an indisputable philosophical argument:

Step by step, by a process of comparing each new image with the common denotation, power is accumulated behind a process that can be formally identified with that of logical deduction. The decision to release these ideas, as well as the method used, is already intellectually conceived. The conventional *descriptive* form for film leads to the formal possibility of a kind of filmic reasoning. While the conventional film directs the *emotions*, this suggests an opportunity to encourage and direct the whole *thought process*, as well.²⁵

Do not quickly chalk this up to hyperbolic self-promotion. Many of Eisenstein's most prominent commentators agree that the sequence is best described as a form of argument. For instance, Vance Kepley argues:

The montage of the sequence links one icon with another in rapid succession and ultimately mocks whatever reverence might be associated with them. What emerges from the passage is an intellectual argument against religion and nationalism, positing that they are, finally, empty concepts. [...] the montage in the 'God and Country' sequence engages the viewer in a complex intellectual activity. The spectator must trace out an elaborate set of associations and arrive at a logical conclusion about the emptiness of religion and nationalism.²⁶

And Noël Carroll has described this sequence as an argument:

Whether or not the deduction described is true is irrelevant. What is important is that it is a logically valid argument form. That is, it seems that there is a set of inferences that we may propose in order to explain the juxtaposition or relation of shots in the “God and Country” sequence that suggest a logically valid (though possibly false) atheological argument.²⁷

Although I am skeptical of the specifics of Eisenstein's claim, the sequence can indeed plausibly be taken as offering an analogical argument.

A standard analogical argument suggests that because two things are alike in some ways they are probably alike in other important ways. The “For God and Country” sequence functions in exactly

this way. Eisenstein describes the sequence this way:

Maintaining the denotation of “God,” the images increasingly disagree with our concept of God, inevitably leading to individual conclusions about the true nature of all deities. In this case, too, a chain of images attempted to achieve a purely intellectual resolution, resulting from a conflict between a preconception and a *gradual discrediting of it in purposeful steps*.²⁸

The sequence begins with displays of religious artifacts in the Christian tradition that Eisenstein's audience would have been familiar with. Images of Christian statuary, cathedrals, and artworks alternate, slowly becoming interspersed with pagan statuary, much of it almost comically demonic. What the sequence offers is a comparison between the familiar, respected Christian artifacts and the artifacts of suspect religions that one might consider the base products of primitive fear and ignorance.

Eisenstein is offering a genealogy of sorts, comparing Christianity to its supposed precursors. The viewer understands that the two classes of artifacts are being compared, and that the overall suggestion is that the Christian artifacts are no better than pagan statuary. The procession of images traces a path through time. The earliest images are of complex artifacts, cathedrals and elaborate sculptures. As the sequence progresses, the icons become increasingly crude. The final image is of a primitive human-like icon with very little detail—a crude stone bobble-head. It is as if Eisenstein says to the viewer “Look at these products of Christianity and notice the similarities with these animistic icons. The practices arise from the same motivations and are both equally false.” Even if one rejects my claim that the sequence presents an analogical argument, if one is led to see some similarity between the two classes of artifacts, the sequence certainly provides a reason to believe its conclusion. The visual similarity between the artifacts lends support for the atheist conclusion, much like the way comparative anatomy supports evolutionary theory.

October thereby provides a philosophical contribution, but it is questionable whether or not the contribution should be considered innovative. Yes, Eisenstein is furthering the Marxist critique of religion, which counts against its originality; but he does provide a somewhat novel analogical

argument. Since I have insufficient knowledge of the history of the philosophy of religion I do not want to claim that his achievement is historically unique, but this is beside the point. For our purposes, we simply need to note that there is no reason why it could not have been original. There is no principled reason to think that the analogical argument offered in the “For God and Country Sequence” must have been less original than any other similar argument. Other than the fact that so much philosophy was done prior to the advent of cinema, we have no reason to think that there is anything about the nature of cinema that curbs originality.²⁹

October offers a philosophical contribution that could have been original, but is it independent? Again, there is reason to doubt the independence of the sequence, since it depends on a general Marxist critique of religion and nationalism. One may argue that the sequence is highly dependent on the importation of this problematic and that no conceivable philosophical contribution could be made without it. However, I see no reason to think that the sequence would not have been comprehensible in a climate not so steeped in Marxism. The general pejorative analogy is readily apparent. Plausibly, the particular critique of religion offered in the sequence is as independent as most critiques that were historically possible at the time of its production. Although the “For God and Country” sequence might not be innovative, it does offer an independent reason to believe a philosophical thesis.

In response to this claim, the critic of the bold thesis may reassert the problem of paraphrase. There is an additional reason to doubt the independence of the philosophical work done by the “For God and Country” sequence: Most plausibly, arguments have to be linguistic, but the sequence under consideration is a mute collection of images. What reason do we have to think that the analogical argument that I attribute to the sequence is not wholly dependent on my interpretation? Where exactly is the argument if not in my interpretation?

The simple answer is that the argument is in the film. Just because I can paraphrase the argument does not mean that I am making the argument and not the film. Any such claim would be

absurd. I paraphrase Nietzsche's argument above, but my paraphrase is not the source of the philosophical contribution. No, Nietzsche makes it in the *Genealogy*. In order to be a paraphrase of something, there must be something to be a paraphrase of. The worry seems to be that paraphrases of the philosophical content of films are not paraphrase, but original philosophy. But this worry is unfounded. There is no denying that one can paraphrase the semantic content of a picture: This is a picture of my cat rubbing its face on the wall mounted scratching post. Similarly, Wartenberg argues, "it would be paradoxical, for example, to say that it is me rather than *Guernica*, that expresses outrage against the atrocity perpetuated by Franco because I have to say what the painting expresses."³⁰ Why would films be any different? We have no reason to think that the situation with *October* is any different from a picture of my cat, *Guernica*, or the *Genealogy*. I can paraphrase the philosophical contribution of the "For God and Country" sequence, but I am not the one doing the philosophy.

Yes, it is true that I cannot state the argument without using language, but this does not mean that the philosophical work done is exhausted by my statement. Through the means of montage the film provides support for its analogical argument—that is, it provides reasons to believe its conclusion. Although the support can be adequately described, it cannot be completely reduced to language. Any mere description will lack the force of the original, non-linguistic presentation.³¹ I am not suggesting *October* makes a philosophical contribution in mysterious ways that are ultimately inexpressible; rather, I am arguing that although we can express the ultimate philosophical contribution in language, this does not mean that the engine of the philosophical work is necessarily linguistic. In the case of *October*, the engine is clearly montage.

Hence, the sequence also meets the third criteria of the bold thesis I intend to defend. The philosophical contribution of the "For God and Country" sequence is made by nothing less than paradigmatic cinematic means, namely montage. The early Soviet montage theorists, such as Kuleshov and Vertov, thought that editing, or montage, was the defining characteristic of cinema.³² The "For

“God and Country” sequence presents an argument through pure montage, independent of any linguistic means other than the intertitle that introduces the sequence. Although the viewer must use language to say what the argument amounts to, the sequence provides the evidence—the reasons—to believe its evident conclusion. Hence, we are safe in saying that the sequence presents an independent, analogical argument by paradigmatic cinematic means. That is, we can boldly assert that *October* does philosophy.

An Additional Example of Cinematic Philosophy

The “For God and Country” montage sequence in *October* is a pure instance of a film doing philosophy through paradigmatic cinematic means. Since this is a fairly unusual case, it will be useful to support my conclusion with an additional example. I will briefly describe the relatively more complex philosophical contribution made by a narrative fiction film—an episode of *The Twilight Zone* called “The Little People.” Given limitations of scope, I will not attempt to provide a complete interpretation of the episode; instead, I will simply attempt to sketch the philosophical contributions it makes.

Although philosophers and social scientists have explored religious rituals and the phenomenology of worship, there has been very little discussion of what makes something worthy of worship.³³ Fortunately, we find a sophisticated examination of the issue by Rod Serling in the *Twilight Zone* episode “The Little People” (3rd Season, March 30, 1962). In this episode, Serling presents a powerful argument to the effect that people can indeed be wrong about their choice in objects of worship—that is, people can worship things that do not warrant the response. More particularly, the episode supports the claim that power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship, or what we can call “worshipable.”

“The Little People” opens on a planet where two spacemen, Peter Craig (Joe Maross) and

William Fletcher (Claude Akins), have made an emergency landing in hopes of repairing their ship. The required repairs are extensive and the spacemen have been toiling away on the planet for days, if not weeks. During the interval, Craig discovers a race of tiny people, perhaps 1/100th his size. By waging a campaign of terror, the immoral psychopath, Craig, demands that the natives worship him and him alone. Through what we can only imagine would be a tremendous effort, the natives erect a life-size effigy of their jealous god. Drunk on power, the self-declared deity refuses to leave when the ship is finally repaired. While forcing his partner off at gunpoint, Craig declares that there is only enough room for one god on the planet. Luckily for the natives, Craig's reign is short. A second group of spacemen, 100 times the size of the previous, arrives on the planet. While looking around, one of the giants accidentally crushes Craig between his fingers. The little people celebrate by tearing down the idol of their fallen god.

To determine what would make something worthy of worship would be to say what makes the complex set of emotions, attitudes, and desires fitting, or appropriate, to an object. "The Little People" shows fairly clearly that having powers like ours—even if they exceed our most fanciful exaggerations—is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship. This is not to say that it would be inadvisable to capitulate to great power. If the options were either to suffer a fate far worse than the Milians at the hands of the Athenian hoplites or to feign worship of a powerful giant such as spaceman Craig, we would all be well advised to fall to our knees and sing his praises. Clearly, if something is far stronger than you, it might be prudent to obey its commands. Periodically, you might even want to publicly acknowledge that you know it is stronger—that is, if it likes this kind of thing. But an advantage in strength would not make a bully worthy of worship, no matter its province—earthly, extraterrestrial, or heavenly.

Spaceman Craig towers over the little people, much like the giant in Goya's painting "The Colossus" (1808).³⁴ Similarly, most of the Greek gods are formidable forces, much stronger and often

smarter than their subjects. From the point of view of mere mortals, the powers of the gods of Olympus are nothing less than awe-inspiring. Certainly it would be prudent to court their favor and to take measures to avoid their wrath, but no Greek god is worshipable. To the last one, they are extremely flawed, if not petty, deities, just like spaceman Craig. Neither are worthy of the special kind of love, admiration, reverence, and respect that is worship. But what if spaceman Craig had powers dwarfing that of a thousand Zeuses—the power to create and destroy universes, the power to create life?

Again, “The Little People” provides an answer. It clearly shows that something with unlimited powers, including power to create and destroy universes, would not necessarily be worthy of worship. No amount of power could make something worthy of worship if it had the moral character of a megalomaniac spaceman. Imagine a demon that created us for the purpose of torture—not to torture us, but to torture others. He might treat us well, but at the same time use us as a means of inflicting even greater torment on others whom he tortures. Perhaps he has secretly placed us on the far side of a one-way mirror of sorts, dividing our opulent suite from the chamber of horrors where our counterparts suffer unspeakable agonies. Despite its vast powers, such a being would not be worthy of worship. If power alone were sufficient to make something worthy of worship, this hypothetical demon would deserve our most sincere love, admiration, and respect. But it should be clear that it would be inappropriate to feel anything but disgust at such arrant evil, no matter how powerful it might be. Hence, not even the powers of a creator god are sufficient to make something worshipable. So, in answer to the question, we can safely reply: Power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship.

This is to merely scratch the surface of the philosophical contributions made by this episode. What is important to note is that it would be impossible to develop an adequate interpretation of “The Little People” without explaining the position it takes on the role of power in worship. Not only does

the episode make philosophical claims, it provides reasons for us to believe these claims. For instance, although spaceman Craig's powers are awe inspiring to the little people, his moral depravity invalidates any suggestion that he is a worthy object of worship. This gives us a compelling reason to believe that power is not sufficient to make something worthy of worship. The episode does not simply come out and tell us that power is insufficient; it actually leads us to this conclusion via the example of a megalomaniac spaceman.³⁵ Since Serling provides support for his evident conclusion, I would not hesitate to say that "The Little People" does philosophy, in the most flat-footed sense of what it means to "do philosophy."³⁶

Conclusion

There is no denying that movies constrain the range of acceptable interpretations. Not just anything goes when we attempt to say what a movie is about. Movies do not merely constrain, they also frequently encourage certain interpretations. Many movies are undeniably about certain things. For instance, I argue that "The Little People" is about the nature of worship. And many movies are not just about things, they make points. Although we can express these points, this does not mean that the expression makes the point and not the movie. If movies can make points and restrict and suggest interpretations, then they can give us reason to believe certain claims. For example: power is never sufficient to make something worthy of worship; or, pagan and Christian religious expression are not so different. Hence, film can do philosophy.

The common philosophical contributions that films make are more like the typical contributions made in the philosophical literature: They may help illustrate a position, an objection, or explore the significance of a claim, but they are rarely historically unique.³⁷ Although there may have never been a film that has made an innovative and independent philosophical contribution, and it is certain that few have, there is no reason to think that films cannot do philosophy. This is not to say that there are no

limitations on the philosophical abilities of film or that film is a philosophical equal in every way to language. In fact, I think that neither of these claims is true. My goal in this essay is merely to defend the bold thesis of film as philosophy, but I am sure that one can come up with an even bolder thesis that cannot be defended.

By way of the example of *October*, I argue that films can offer analogical arguments that can be both innovative and independent. Eisenstein's commentators are not speaking metaphorically when they find an argument in the "For God and Country" sequence, and I am not being an obscurantist in pinpointing the argument. Nor is the argument in the sequence any more dependent on interpretations than many linguistic philosophical texts. There is ample reason to think that the film is able to do philosophy independent of linguistic means, and, further, that the means employed, namely the means of montage, are as cinematic as can be. So, yes, film can make innovative and independent philosophical contributions through means exclusive to cinema.³⁸

Notes

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- 1 For ease of expression, I am using the term “film” to refer to what Noël Carroll calls the art of the moving image, which includes all cinematic artforms. I take it that “film” used to refer to the artform no longer implies celluloid to many readers, and that possibly distracting neologisms can be avoided.
- 2 For instance, the claim that Bergman's work is somehow philosophical is embedded in the very title of Irving Singer's book: *Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher* (MIT, 2007).
- 3 Stephen Mulhall argues that some “films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action—film as philosophizing.” See: Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (Routledge, 2002), p. 2.
- 4 Murray Smith notes that it is extremely difficult to say what it is to do philosophy without recourse to the notion of an argument, but that it is difficult to see how films could be said to provide an argument, at least in the style of what is generally considered to be philosophy. See: Murray Smith, “Film Art, Argument, and Ambiguity” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (vol. 64, no. 1, winter 2006), pp.33-43. The essays in this special JAAC volume have been published as a book: Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2006).
- 5 Paisley Livingston, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (vol. 64, no. 1, Winter 2006), pp.11-19.
- 6 Noël Carroll, “Introduction to Part VIII”, *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2006), p. 381.
- 7 Daniel Frampton defends the strong claim that film has unique philosophical abilities. See Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (Wallflower, 2006).
- 8 Livingston likely has uniqueness claims in mind. But, to be clear, I have no intention of defending here the idea that film has unique philosophical abilities.
- 9 See Noël Carroll, “Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography” in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge UP, 1996).
- 10 We must be careful in how strictly we enforce the originality condition. If there are limitations on what is possible in a given historical period, we might have reason to doubt the absolute originality of any innovation. For our purposes, we merely need to show that cinema can be roughly as innovative as any other form of philosophy.
- 11 Noël Carroll, “Philosophizing Through the Moving Image: The Case of *Serene Velocity*” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (vol. 64, no. 1, Winter 2006), pp.173-187.

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- ¹² Frampton, following Deleuze, prefers a more expansive notion of what counts as doing philosophy. He would deny that a philosophical contribution would have to be expressible in language.
- ¹³ See Frampton, pp. 192, 197, 199.
- ¹⁴ Livingston, p. 13. Bruce Russell also proposes that the production of philosophical knowledge should be considered a criterion of doing philosophy.
- ¹⁵ Livingston, p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Livingston, p. 12.
- ¹⁷ Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Beyond *Mere* Illustration" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (vol. 64, no. 1, Winter 2006), pp.19-33. Wartenberg further develops his claim in *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (Routledge, 2007). Robert Yanal makes a similar claim in his *Hitchcock as Philosopher*, (McFarland, 2006). For criticism of Yanal's argument see: Aaron Smuts, "Robert Yanal, *Hitchcock as Philosopher*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 65, no. 3, pp. 339-341.
- ¹⁸ Bruce Russell argues that the ability of film to do philosophy is seriously limited, since film cannot offer knowledge of necessary or even probably truths. It cannot provide philosophical knowledge in the right way, because, according to Russell, it cannot provide argumentative support for its claims. See Bruce Russell, "The Philosophical Limits of Film," *Film and Philosophy* (2000), pp 163-7. If the criterion for doing philosophy is not philosophical knowledge, as I think it should not be, then Russell's argument, although interesting in its own right, is orthogonal to the film as philosophy debate.
- ¹⁹ Peter van Inwagen, "Philosophical Failure" in *The Problem of Evil: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of St. Andrews in 2003* (Oxford, 2006);
- ²⁰ John Martin Fischer suspects that van Inwagen's standard is too ambitious. Van Inwagen's chapter and Fischer's comments were discussed on this blog:
http://gfp.typepad.com/the_garden_of_forking_pat/2007/01/so_a_mysteriani.html
- ²¹ The literature on this topic is vast and highly controversial. Readers looking for an extended discussion of the relationship of reason and the emotions should see: Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (MIT, 1987). For a more general discussion of the role of emotions and knowledge see Robert Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us* (Oxford, 2006). Related, for a discussion of the apparent evidential import of desire, see Denis Stampe, "The Authority of Desire" *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (Jul., 1987), pp. 335-381.
- ²² Bruce Russell, a critic of the film as philosophy thesis, thinks that film can do little more than present counter-examples. Contra Russell, I offer examples that demonstrate how one can argue

with a film. Volume 12 of *Film and Philosophy* features an exchange between Russell, Carroll, and Wartenberg. See: Bruce Russell, “Film’s Limits: The Sequel” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 1-16), and “Replies to Carroll and Wartenberg” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 35-40); Noël Carroll, “Philosophy in the Moving Image: Response to Bruce Russell” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 17-26); Thomas Wartenberg, “What Else Films Can Do: A Response to Bruce Russell” (*Film and Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2008, pp. 27-34).

23 See Brian Leiter’s *Nietzsche on Morality* (Routledge, 2002) and “Nietzsche and the Morality Critics,” *Ethics* (vol. 11, no.2, 1997, pp. 250-285).

24 For an excellent interpretation of the film, see: David Bordwell, *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Routledge, 2005), pp. 79-96.

25 Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form” in *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977) p. 62.

26 Vance Kepley Jr., “Eisenstein and Soviet Cinema” in *Defining Cinema*, ed. Peter Lehman (Rutgers UP, 1997), p. 43.

27 Noël Carroll, “For God and Country” in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 88.

28 Sergei Eisenstein, “A Dialectical Approach to Film Form”, p. 61. I thank [REMOVED FOR REVIEW] for pointing out that my interpretation of the sequence is highly similar to Eisenstein’s in this passage.

29 I thank [REMOVED FOR REVIEW] for pointing out that cinema may have actual limitations on what contributions that it could make that would be historically unique.

30 Wartenberg, “What else Films can do”, p. 30.

31 I thank [REMOVED FOR REVIEW] for pointing out that a linguistic rendering would lose the force of the original.

32 Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, trans. Ronald Levaco (U California Press, 1975). Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, trans. Kevin O’Brien (U California Press, 1985).

33 For example, Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine* (1917), describes what it is like to experience the presence of what one takes to be awe inspiring greatness.

34 Whether Goya is responsible for “The Colossus” is in dispute.

35 This shows that Bruce Russell’s claim is wrong.

- ³⁶ For a more thorough examination of “The Little People” see my [REMOVED FOR REVIEW].
- ³⁷ Here, I'm echoing a point made by Wartenberg in “Beyond *Mere* Illustration.”
- ³⁸ I thank [REMOVED FOR REVIEW].