Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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Citation for published version (APA):
Schmerheim, P. A. (2013). Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema

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“We take most films seriously, as we take most other forms of art seriously, not just because they demonstrate or manipulate aesthetically intriguing formalisms but because they are about life, the same life that our philosophies and our day-to-day thought is about. And what this life is about is the problem of knowing and acknowledging its own limitations.”

1. Films as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

1.1. From ‘Film as Art?’ to ‘Film as Philosophy?’


These remarks on the artistic potential of film open the first chapter of Rudolf Arnheim’s landmark treatise Film als Kunst, and it immediately establishes a bold thesis: like other forms of human expression such as literature, painting, music, or dance, films can be works of art, but they are not necessarily so. (Note that Arnheim writes: “Und Kientopp is not film,” reserving the designation ‘film’ only to its rather artful instances while preliminarily leaving open the question whether film is art.) A similar relation holds between film and philosophy, as this dissertation will claim: Films can be philosophical, but they are not necessarily so. The means of expression available to the medium of film allow films to be expressions of philosophical thought, but only a number of them actually are.

The disputes about the artistic potential of the medium of film which troubled Arnheim and his contemporaries have been settled, even though the status of film as art was the predominant topic of early film theory. Theorists like Arnheim, Béla Balázs, or Sergei Eisenstein tried to establish film as a new art form which, as Eisenstein and Sergei Yutkevich claim, has “taken the eight seat in the council of Muses” (quoted in Smith 2001: 464). Instead of defending the very possibility of film as art, contemporary film

Disputes about film as art have been settled

12 Translation: “Film resembles painting, music, literature, and the dance in this respect — it is a medium that may, but need not, be used to produce artistic results. Colored picture post cards, for instance, are not art and are not intended to be. Neither are a military march, a true confessions story, or a striptease. And the movies are not necessarily film art.” (Arnheim 1957: 8)
aesthetics centres on questions such as “when is film art?” \(^{13}\), on the specific relation of film to other forms of artistic expression, or on the selection of adequate aesthetic criteria for thinking about film.\(^{14}\) While the question of the artistic potential of film has been answered affirmatively, the debate on the philosophical potential of cinema, however, has just begun, at least in professionalised academic philosophy, as the increasing output of film-philosophical books and articles in the first decade of the 21st century indicates.

The interest of philosophers in film-philosophical topics is a rather recent tendency; there also is a kind of temporal disjunction within the film-philosophical discourse of Western philosophy: While “Euro-culturalis[t]” (Mullarkey 2009: 8) philosophers, i.e. French philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière and even Jacques Derrida, early on incorporated film as a topic of their philosophical works, Anglo-American philosophers or philosophically interested film scholars who can be associated with “Anglo-cognitivism” (Mullarkey 2009: 9) only recently intensified their attention to matters of film as a philosophically interesting phenomenon.

Moving within and outside of this rather rough distinction between two allegedly opposing camps is Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose reflections on the ontology of cinema in *The World Viewed*, first published in 1971, constitute the first book on film by a major philosopher trained in the Anglo-American tradition (see Cavell 1979a).\(^{15}\) Cavell is also one of the first Anglo-American philosophers to devote a

\(^{13}\) This is the title of an article by Jesse J. Prinz (Prinz 2010). See also Bordwell’s article “But What Kind of Art?” (Bordwell 2007).

\(^{14}\) Murray Smith shares this judgment (see Smith 2001: 473). Robert Sinnerbrink shifts the focus and argues that the “aesthetic question still persists: granted that film is a (mass) art, what is it that qualifies a particular film as art?” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 43). Sinnerbrink formulates a variant of my claim that the question of the artistic potential of the medium has been answered affirmatively, and that the attention of philosophical film aesthetics has turned to the discussion of the specific criteria that qualify a given film as art.

In the introductory section of his article “Eisenstein’s Philosophy of Film,” Noël Carroll outlines how “film as art” was the preeminent topic of early film theory. See Carroll 2003: 127ff. Also compare Carroll’s chapter on film as art in *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Carroll 2008: 7-34). Arnheim’s book was written at a time when silent cinema reached its artistic peak and had developed unique styles and forms of storytelling. The advent of sound film and the corresponding turn away from a ‘formalistic’ kind of cinema to a more ‘realistic’ one caused major turmoil among theorists of cinema. Apart from Arnheim, early reflections on film as art include essays by Eisenstein (see Eisenstein 2006); Balázs’ *Der sichtbare Mensch* (Balázs 2001 [1924]); or Vertov’s writings on film (Vertov 1973). A collection of early film theory texts has been assembled in Diederichs (ed.) 2005.

In 1981, the philosopher Roger Scruton provoked a renewal of the debate on film’s artistic potential in his article “Photography and Representation” (Scruton 1981) which, however, mainly served other theorists for clarifying the reasons for defending the claim to film as art (see Sinnerbrink 2011: 42). For a compact overview of arguments for and against the ‘film as art’ thesis, see Carroll 2006; Carroll 2008 and Stecker 2009.

\(^{15}\) One could also reserve this title for Hugo Münsterberg’s landmark film theory book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (Münsterberg 2002 [1915]). However, even though Münsterberg was philosophically trained, his work as a professor of psychology at Harvard University focused on experimental psychology. The Italian philosopher Giovanni Papini published a newspaper article with the title “La Filosofia del Cinematografo” as early as 1907 (Papini 1907). Another exemption from the rule that Anglo-American philosophers discover film philosophy comparatively late is sociologist-philosopher Ian Jarvis, who in 1987 published a book with the title *Philosophy of the Film: Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics* (Jarvie 1987), preceded by *Towards a Sociology of the Cinema* (Jarvie 1970). Like Cavell, Jarvis broadens the scope of philosophical investigation into film beyond the aesthetic, while his method of inquiry is distinctly more systematic and closer to the conventions of analytic philosophy (see his article with the telling title “Is Analytic Philosophy the Cure for Film Theory?” [Jarvie 1999]).

Even though Cavell is the first major Anglo-American philosopher to write extensively on film, even traditional philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (in *Mysticism and Logic*; Russell 1933) and Ludwig Wittgenstein occasionally remarked on the new medium. Russell draws on Bergson’s analogy that “the mathematician conceives the world after the analogy of a cinematograph” (Russell 1953: 123) in the context of a discussion of “the impermanence of physical entities” (Russell 1953: 123). I owe this quotation to its discussion in Littau 2011. Richard Gilmore elaborates on Wittgenstein’s rather non-philosophical relation to the movies in Gilmore 2005: 1.
large portion of his philosophical work to film, and to think about film not only in relation to problems of philosophical aesthetics, but in relation to ontological and epistemological issues as well. His approach to philosophy, however, is “out of school” (Cavell 1988b) in that Cavell willingly, in the style of a ‘post-analytic’ philosopher, addresses and uses the works of thinkers from both camps, and additionally derives a large part of his philosophical inspiration from American writers who have never been part of the canon of either philosophical camp: Ralph Waldo Emerson and David Thoreau.16

Parallel to the constantly growing importance of Cavell’s philosophical work, the late 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the 21st century witness a constant rise in the number of publications on film and philosophy. Film philosophy now begins to institutionalise itself, as is evident, for instance, in the growing number of conferences (such as the annual film philosophy conference) and journals (such as the online and print journal Film Philosophy or Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image). Contemporary philosophers increasingly accept Stanley Cavell’s willingness to “grant film the status of a subject that invites as well as rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts” (Cavell 1979a: xvi) – and that means: not only to accept cinema as a form of art, but also as a form of art that invites philosophical reflection.

Strikingly, film philosophers particularly attempt to uncover cinema’s philosophical potential by examining narrative fiction films, while rather neglecting non-narrative experimental cinema. At first sight, this seems to be a strange choice, as Thomas Wartenberg and Murray Smith remark in their introduction to their edited volume Thinking through Cinema:

“A paradoxical feature of a great deal of recent work on film as philosophy is that the films that most philosophers have taken to be candidates for making a distinctive contribution to philosophy are the ones that appear least likely to have philosophical content: popular narrative films.” (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 4)

Of course, writing about popular films is likely to attract a wide circle of readers, and film philosophers might also be inclined to focus on films that have been an important part of their own intellectual-emotional upbringing. The current generation of established philosophers has predominantly received its cinematic education in the 1970s and 80s, decades in which the cinematic experiments of the Nouvelle Vague and Post-Classical New Hollywood Cinema were succinctly replaced by the surge of high concept blockbuster movies by the likes of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and, in his own way, Francis Ford Coppola (see Carroll 2008).

But there are two deeper reasons for the philosophical appreciation of popular narrative films. Both of them are closely related to insights expressed by Cavell: First, appreciating the medium of cinema from a philosopher’s point of view entails appreciating typical instances of cinema, since “in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don’t even know what the highest are instances of unless you know the typical as well.” (Cavell 1979a: 6). Cavell sees a “requirement for a certain indiscriminateness in the

16 Until philosophers such as Arthur C. Danto (in The Transfiguration of the Commonplace) and Monroe Beardsley published their works, analytic philosophers tended to regard aesthetics as a philosophical discipline of inferior interest compared to e.g., ontology, epistemology, or ethics (see Danto 1981).
accepting of movies” (Cavell 1979a: 13) and links it to similar attitudes towards classical music, since “anyone who is too selective about the classical composers whose music he likes doesn’t really like music” (Cavell 1979a: 13). So, the first reason for the popularity of mainstream cinema among film philosophers is an attempt to assess the philosophicability of typical films.

The second reason is that Classical Hollywood Cinema in particular is a distinctly American art form which engendered an “ability to move between high and low [culture, PS], caring about each also from the vantage of the other” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 91). Unlike music or even literature, popular cinema generally disregards established barriers between so-called high culture (for the educated elite) and low culture (for the uneducated masses), between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’. Even though European art house cinema tends to form an own category of high-brow films, one can still safely to claim that cinema as a whole does not uphold barriers between high and low in the same way as classical and popular music do.

Film philosophers thus face two challenges when they try to incorporate popular narrative fiction films into the philosophical universe: They must show that cinema’s peculiar blend of high and low does not preclude philosophical significance, and if they focus on narrative fiction film they must show how being a narrative is in accordance with being of philosophical significance.

But what does the notion of ‘philosophical significance’ mean? Something can be of philosophical significance because it is a relevant object of philosophical thought or because it is an expression of philosophical thought. Following this distinction, taking films seriously as objects of philosophical thought does not entail that they must be taken seriously as expressions of philosophical thought. Films can be philosophically significant without contributing actively to philosophical topics.

In sum: Philosophers can “find in movies food for thought” (Cavell 1983: 7) without having to attribute an autonomous philosophical potential to the films they reflect on.\footnote{As early as 1916 Hugo Münsterberg finds in the photoplay “food for serious thought” (Münsterberg (2002 [1916]): 57).} For instance, one can imagine a metaphysics or aesthetics of cinema which does not attribute any independent philosophical value to the content or expressive potential of films but only regards them as a source of inspiration, as “philosophy’s raw material” and “source for its ornamentation” (Mulhall 2008a: 4), as the Oxford philosopher Stephen Mulhall critically describes it in his book On Film.

This, then, is the set of questions an investigation of the philosophical potential of cinema revolves around: Can films be expressions of philosophical thought, not only objects of philosophical thought? Is there not only a philosophy of film but also film as philosophy? There are films which are works of art – but are there films that are works of philosophy?

1.2. Why Justifying the Philosophical Significance of Film?

The question of the philosophical significance of film can be posed in at least two ways: firstly, is the medium of film open to ‘philosophicality’, i.e. philosophical relevance?
Secondly, exactly what kind of philosophical potential do narrative fiction films have, if any? Both questions ultimately ask about the nature of philosophy since they want to know how philosophy can be done audiovisually. And, since films can be art, they also are variants of the question whether art can be philosophy, and whether narrative arts such as literature and film can be philosophy.

That there is a need for justifying the philosophicality of film and other arts is, arguably, historically rooted in the arguments of Plato’s Socrates against the arts. In the second, seventh and tenth book of Plato’s Politeia, Socrates describes the arts (mostly discussed through the example of poetry) as a merely mimetic practice, a mere “perception of shadows” (534a, my translation). The denigration of the arts culminates in the famous conclusion that “there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (607b5–6).18

According to the literature theorist Markus Gasser in his elaborated study of the complex relation between philosophy and literature, Die Sprengung der Platonischen Höhle, the platonic inheritance until now “positions philosophy as a way of gaining knowledge in opposition to literature” (Gasser 2007: 21, my translation).19 Gasser provocatively talks of the “Straftatsbestand Literatur” (Gasser 2007: 15), the criminal offence of literature, and argues that philosophy constituted its claims to significance through this very opposition to literature:

“Narrative literature is confusing and could mislead to the worst things: That was the basic accusation which philosophy used for justifying itself against literature and which opened the battle between literature and philosophy. In the earliest theories of literature we know of, it is a degrading riddle. Its value is categorically put into question. For Plato, literature is simply not true. Only those who leave the cage theatre of literature break out of the Matrix on their way to reality. This, Plato says, is how it always has been: the battle between philosophy and literature was there forever. The success of his ideal state depended on banning literature […] For Aristotle it could, at least, be of some therapeutic value […]. Whenever it was not self-explanatory, literature now was in need of justification, a justification which, however, was only able to grant her a function which in turn was to be determined by philosophy.” (Gasser 2007: 15, my translation)20

Gasser sees a “Legitimationslast” (Gasser 2007: 16) — philosophy is the instance that lends legitimacy to literature. While this legitimacy applies to the very status of literature as an intellectual but not necessarily philosophical enterprise, the question of the philosophicality of literature follows a similar pattern: Philosophy judges the

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18 While the denigration of the arts is a logical outcome of Plato’s theory of ideas (see Hub 2009: §17), it is simultaneously strangely paradoxical: their literary qualities mark Plato’s dialogues as outstanding instantiations of (poetic) art. Secondly (since the criticism in the Politeia is directly directed against poetry), the fragments of pre-Socratic philosophers such as Parmenides were written in verses rather than prose.

19 German original text: “formiert die Philosophie als Erkenntnissweg in Gegenerschaft zur Literatur”.

philosophical value of literature and not vice versa. Analogously, philosophy judges the philosophical value of film.\footnote{\textsuperscript{21} Gasser indicates that at least Romanticist aesthetics tried to reverse the literature-film relationship: It “turned […] the need for the legitimation of literature against philosophy itself; in the awareness that the meaning of human existence was less owed to Plato than to Shakespeare.” (Gasser 2007: 23, my translation). German original text: “kehrte […] die Legitimationsbedürftigkeit der Literatur gegen die Philosophie selbst: in dem Bewußtsein, daß weniger Platon als Shakespeare der Sinn menschlicher Existenz zu danken war.”}

This justificatory structure is, of course, also a result of the fact that usually philosophers reflect on the philosophicality of film. It is no surprise, then, that the “interrelation [between philosophy and film] takes place under conditions that are entirely set by philosophy” (Constable 2009: 5), as Catherine Constable puts it in her book \textit{Adapting Philosophy}. But this need not necessarily be so, since one can ask the question of film’s philosophical ‘value’ with or without the burden of a “Legitimationslast” against philosophy. The question then is transformed from the question whether films can be philosophical in analogy to traditional, academic philosophical texts to the question whether they might be philosophical in ways hitherto unimagined, unnoticed or unacknowledged by traditional academia; ways which redefine the conventional understanding of what philosophy is, can or should be. Film could be philosophical in new ways – and therefore philosophical investigations of film’s philosophical potential should meet with the latter on the same hierarchical level. Film should be taken as seriously as philosophy, regardless of whether it eventually should be taken seriously as philosophy.

This, by the way, includes an awareness that methods and tools of film studies fundamentally contribute to an adequate understanding of films. A philosophical study of film cannot be undertaken from an entirely conceptual philosophical position. Research in the field of film philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary. In the context of her study on the \textit{M\textsc{atrix}} trilogy, Catherine Constable criticises that current film-philosophy is largely ignorant of scholarship in film studies:

“Most of the philosophical writing on the trilogy is not interdisciplinary and does not make use of the available literature in Film-Philosophy. It operates with the tacit assumption that philosophy is a universal form of meta-critique that can be applied without modification to any field.” (Constable 2009: 5)

Pace Constable, I believe that an increasing number of film philosophy scholars are aware of both sides of the academic discourse even though philosophers still tend to neglect the film-analytic methodological spectrum of film studies (but note that Constable’s criticism is mainly aimed at scholarship on the \textit{M\textsc{atrix}} trilogy). However, her idea that the concepts of philosophy are supposed to be “a universal form of meta-critique” is valuable: What is in fact required in thinking about film (and with film) philosophically is a kind of conceptual common ground, a set of concepts which range across both cultural phenomena.

Taking into account the different possible hierarchical relations between film and philosophy, I want to suggest a basic distinction between films as an \textit{object} of philosophical thought and films as an \textit{expression} of philosophical thought. According to this distinction, films are entities which can be \textit{thought about} philosophically on various levels of abstraction, and they are entities which might actually \textit{do} philosophy, in the
sense that they are expressive of philosophical content. It is possible to affirm the former while denying the latter option, but it is not possible to affirm the latter option while denying the former option: If films are entities that can do philosophy, they are also entities that can be thought about philosophically. Thus, the distinction between films as objects and films as expressions of philosophical thought is not a dichotomy. Since, as the following sections show, there are various possibilities of understanding each relation, the distinction is also a gradual rather than categorical one.

This distinction provides the basis for one of the main arguments of the following chapters: While traditional film-as-philosophy accounts conceptualise selected films predominantly as a kind of adaptation of philosophy and thereby maintain the traditional hierarchical relationship, it is more fitting to conceptualise philosophical films as (con)figurations of philosophy. This puts the philosophical potential of films on the same level as literature and other forms of human expression, instead of subordinating them, and it allows conceiving of traditional academic philosophy as just one of several possible ways of mediating philosophical thought. Even though historically, (Western) philosophy has been predominantly passed on in writing and in conversation, this does not mean that, apart from historically established conventions, these are the only appropriate ways of doing philosophy. Film might suggest other, ‘novel’ ways of doing philosophy. In order to develop this idea further, the following sections of the chapter conceptualise in more detail various ways of relating film and philosophy.

1.3. Philosophy of Film

1.3.1. Films as Objects of Philosophical Thought

In both correlations of film and philosophy — film as an expression or object of philosophical thought —, the term ‘film’ can denote different phenomena: single films, a set of films, or the medium of film. For example, a set of films can constitute genres such as the action film, Cavell’s comedy of remarriage, Thomas Elsaesser’s cinematic tendency of the mind-game film, or the meta-genre (German: Gattung) of the (non-fictional) documentary film.

Each emphasis necessitates different modes of analysis. For instance, a focus on the medium of cinema shifts attention to general, overarching (expressive) features of the medium, such as its simultaneous appeal to different senses, its peculiar spatiotemporal organisation, the role of montage, and so on. Here, film philosophy clearly overlaps with film theory. But the first focus on single films rather concentrates on specific strategies of expression employed by the film under analysis.

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22 I follow Thomas Wartenberg’s terminology in *Thinking on Screen*: The phrase ‘films do philosophy’ serves as a “shorthand expression for stating that the film’s makers are the ones who are actually doing philosophy in/on/through film.” (Wartenberg 2007: 12). See also Wartenberg 2011.

23 Similarly, in *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* Robert Sinnerbrink suggests that “the most productive way of exploring the idea of film as philosophy is as an invitation to rethink the hierarchical relationship between philosophy and art. The encounter between film and philosophy invites us to explore novel ways in which our conventional understanding of philosophy — and aesthetic receptivity to new kinds of experience — might be renewed and transformed.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 117f.)

24 See Cavell 1981; Elsaesser 2009a; Elsaesser 2009b. On the notion of metagenre, see Kurwinkel and Schmerheim 2013: chapter 1.2.
Based on the tripartite definition of the term ‘film’, it is possible to distinguish three ways of understanding film as object of philosophical thought: philosophising about the medium of film (cinema); philosophising about films or sets of films; philosophising through the conditions of cinema.\(^\text{25}\)

1) **Philosophising about the medium of cinema.** Cinema as a medium can become an object of philosophical thought. Philosophers can reflect on the conditions of cinema or the fundamental properties of the medium. Like Cavell, Kracauer or Bazin, they can consider the nature of the transformative process that takes place during the recording and projection of objects (see Cavell 1979a; Kracauer 1960; Bazin (1967 [1945])); like Deleuze in the *Cinema* books they can focus on the peculiar interplay of cinematic space and time, image and sound (see Deleuze 1986; Deleuze 1989). Even though philosophising on the medium of cinema is often based on exploring single films, it aims at identifying general properties of the medium. The question of film as art outlined in chapter 1.1 falls into this first category, as does the so-called “ontology of film” (see Jarvie 1987, Cavell 1979a).

2) **Philosophising about films.** Single films or sets of films with their specific way of handling themes, characters, and aesthetic elements can become the object of philosophical thought. For instance, a philosopher can identify philosophically relevant elements in *Dead Man Walking* (Robbins, 1995), or use the film *Matrix* (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999) as an illustration of external world skepticism (see Litch 2010). Exploring a set of films under a specific philosophical perspective can expand the scope of philosophical investigations. Mulhall, for example, explores the “underlying logic” of the “alien universe” (Mulhall 2008a: 3) of the four *Alien* films, which have each been directed by a different director.\(^\text{26}\) Mulhall reads the four films as inquiries into philosophical questions of human nature or human identity. In every *Alien* film, the series’ heroine Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is confronted with a dangerous alien species that threatens to kill or destroy her and her team. Mulhall is particularly interested in how the various film directors navigate the film world, aesthetics, characters and themes they have inherited from the first film’s director Ridley Scott. Mulhall does so by also including each director’s oeuvre into his considerations, showing how each one of them explores specific aspects of human existence throughout his body of work.\(^\text{27}\)

3) **Philosophising through the conditions of cinema.** A third avenue for the philosophical study of film is to regard traditional philosophical problems in relation to the ‘conditions’ of cinema, hoping for alternative perspectives on hitherto established philosophical topics. Here, the medium and the perspectives it offers becomes a guide to new aspects or avenues for the solution or improved understanding of given philosophical problems, a source of inspiration for the philosophically inclined film

\(^{25}\) A note of caution: The following typology of the relations between philosophy and film is not supposed to impose a philosophical meta-structure on films which are deemed philosophical, or philosophically relevant. It rather presents a model of a range of possible ways of relating film to philosophy. How a single film specifically is of philosophical interest is a matter reserved for detailed attention to and analysis of single films. The typology also does not suggest or presuppose that filmmakers always actually and intentionally pursue a kind of filmic philosophising which is inspired by academic discourse on the chosen matter.

\(^{26}\) *Alien* (Scott, 1979); *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986); *Alien²* (Fincher, 1992), *Alien: Resurrection* (Jeunet, 1997).

\(^{27}\) Wartenberg 2011 criticises a lack of precision and detail in Mulhall’s work on the *Alien* quadrilogy.
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spectator. Here, the study of film inspires reflection on the nature of (or alternative ways of doing) philosophy, especially due to the focus on the relation between thought and the media of thought, i.e. the ways in which means of expression frame the way we think.

Stephen Mulhall presents a similar tripartite distinction of what Robert Sinnerbrink calls “philosophically sophisticated films” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 122): firstly, films as philosophising, i.e. films which reflect on traditional philosophical problems and “are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action” (Mulhall 2008a: 4). Secondly, films that explore the “nature of the cinematic medium” (Mulhall 2008a: 5) are part of the philosophy of film. Thirdly, films “in the condition of philosophy – of film as philosophy” (Mulhall 2008a: 7) reflect on their own condition of possibility. Mulhall exemplifies this claim by analysing the ALIEN film series and the character of sequels in general. Sequels need to incorporate and reflect on the choices and conditions of their predecessors; in the case of the ALIEN films it is the specific diegetic, narrative and aesthetic universe established by Ridley Scott’s first film from 1979. In this third condition, films are explicitly self-reflexive (see Mulhall 2008a).

Mulhall’s tripartite distinction is particularly aimed at the peculiarities of philosophically understanding sets of films. In contrast, my own tripartite distinction is supposed to distinguish different levels of abstraction in relating film and philosophy.28

Answers to the third option decide about the legitimacy of traditional philosophy’s claim to be the only and proper way and medium of philosophical thought. Consequently, the philosophical potential of cinema can only be understood by assuming a specific position on the proper medium of philosophical thought. Generating, conducting and expressing thoughts depends on the use of tools – and these can differ considerably. Looking at the historical, material genesis of the thoughts of noted philosophers, it is apparent that they generated and organised the genesis of their thoughts in different ways.29

Historically, (academic) philosophical thought is mainly expressed and fixed in print, or developed in the context of lectures and verbal discussions. This is hardly surprising, since until the invention of audiovisual recording mechanisms in the 19th and 20th century, manuscripts (and other forms of fixing written testimony) were the most reliable and endurable means of fixing and storing intellectual ideas.30 Hence, reservations against the very idea of film as philosophy rely on the assumption that the historical reasons for the predominance of written and spoken philosophy express essential characteristics of philosophy proper.

28 In Philosophy and the Moving Image, John Mullarkey neatly distinguishes “three basic modes in which film and philosophy can form a more or less productive relationship – philosophy through film, philosophy of film, and philosophy as film: ‘through’ (where film illustrates philosophy as a pedagogical tool); ‘of’ (where philosophy offers an ontology for film); and ‘as’ (where film offers us its own philosophy)” (Mullarkey 2012: 13). Mullarkey calls the third way the “holy grail” (ibid.). My own distinction here, though slightly more complicated, is supposed to explicitly capture the interactions between single films and the medium in general, understanding single films as sorts of actualisations of the general (philosophically) expressive potentiae of their medium.

29 For instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that he was only able to think (philosophically) while writing. Friedrich Nietzsche developed his thoughts while he was wandering the mountain ranges of Sils Maria, writing into a small notebook. These examples apply to the different circumstances of the genesis of thought, but they also hint at the different media in which thought is eventually expressed.

30 For a history of media as storage devices see Jochen Hörisch’s Eine Geschichte der Medien. Vom Urknall zum Internet (Hörisch 2004).
If one accepts the above explanation for the historical predominance of a particular medium of philosophical thought, the idea of philosophising qua film becomes less exotic. In fact, it gives rise to the question how media of thought not only “carry and encapsulate” but also frame “the mind’s labours” (Littau 2011: 154), as the media theorist Karin Littau puts it. She builds on the Nietzschean observation that “our writing tools also work on our thoughts”31, and raises the question how media “work on our thinking” (Littau 2011: 167).32

Littau distinguishes “between conception and perception” (Littau 2011: 163):

To say [...] that media, such as print or film, have shaped our thinking about thinking, and have even shaped our conceptual apparatus, is not the same thing as saying that media can and have significantly shaped and altered our sense perceptions. (Littau 2011:163)

This distinction is important for the purposes of the present book: New media potentially introduce new modes of generating ideas by using alternative sensory channels. This raises the question formulated in the preceding sections: Does philosophy’s mode of conception include not only a certain way of writing and speaking but other forms of expression (such as film) as well?

1.3.2. Experiencing Philosophy: The Philosophical Significance of Cinema

Part of Stanley Cavell’s importance for film philosophy lies in the fact that he puts an emphasis on the third possibility of correlating film and philosophy. In an interview, he stresses the relevance of cinema for thinking about philosophical problems:

“Film […] is made for philosophy; it shifts or puts different lights on whatever philosophy has said about appearance and reality, about actors and characters, about skepticism and dogmatism, about presence and absence.” (Cavell 1999: 25)

For Cavell, cinema in general and films in particular not only contribute to a better understanding of philosophical topics but also can “shift[…] or put[…] different lights on” the terms of a philosophical debate. Films can reorient philosophical thinking by redrawing the “shared space of thought” (Mulhall 2008a: 137), the implicit presumptions of traditional philosophical discourse. As Nathan Andersen writes in a review of Mulhall’s book On Film: If understood in this way, cinema provides “new modes of organizing and making sense of experience and knowledge” (Andersen 2003).33

These “new modes” need not be medium-specific ways of doing philosophy, as noted above. Films might simply be well-suited for discovering (hitherto undiscovered?) avenues of thinking about philosophical problems. For instance, cinematographic techniques like time-lapse, slow motion and reverse speed have provided completely new perspectives on the relation between space and time, between human beings and their spatiotemporal environment. Cinematography allows experiencing the flow of time in time.

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31 Quoted in Kittler 1999: 200. See also Hörisch 2004: 144.
32 The history of literature also exemplifies how the advent of the then new medium of cinema influenced the use of “older” media. Writers such as Alfred Döblin in Berlin, Alexanderplatz (Döblin 1965 [1929]) or James Joyce in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake (Joyce 2008 [1922]; Joyce 2012 [1939]) experimented with “filmic writing,” for example by imitating cinematic montage strategies. See Paech 1997: ch. 7.
33 Philosophical discourse does not only require a shared space of thought, but also different positions within it, as the philosopher Jean Grondin remarks: “Ein philosophisches Gespräch setzt ja nicht nur einen gemeinsamen Boden, sondern auch den Unterschied der Denkansätze voraus.” (Grondin 2001: 10) (my translation: “A philosophical conversation does not only presuppose a share ground, but also different intellectual approaches”).
reverse, or to experience patterns of movement which happen across extended stretches of time in time-lapse, such as the flow of traffic or the blossoming of a flower, or to witness events which happen rapidly in extreme slow motion (see fig. 1.1 and 1.2).

**Fig. 1.1: KOYAANISQATSI**

**Fig. 1.2: FILM IST. 1-6**

Such new modes of experiencing the world can inspire new avenues for philosophical thinking. But it does not mean that the new avenues can only be discovered through film. Consequently, even someone critical of any claims to cinematic medium-specificity could accept a philosophically innovatory potential of cinema.

In a mailing list discussion in the *Film-Philosophy Archives*, the film scholar Henry M. Taylor discusses a film example which, he claims, literally shifted his perspective on a philosophical problem:

“Trying to find instances of philosophical content in films seems to be [...] still the easier task than to find films or filmic moments which in themselves provoke and generate innovative philosophical insight. [...] I had an ‘epiphany’ of sorts [...] while watching the documentary Winged Migration (Le peuple migrateur, Jacques Perrin et al., France 2001) about migratory birds. As we follow a flock of seagulls over the Pacific ocean, with *the camera virtually aligned with the birds at their eye level*, a ship is seen from high above. The gulls descend [and] the camera stays with and follows the birds. Right then it struck me that for the gulls the ship was just as much part of nature and of their natural habitat as anything else. From a *truly animal point of view*, the ship was not the product of human industry and hence alien to or in some ways in contradiction to nature, but part of their one, indivisible environment, no less or more natural than anything else. And that all the stereotypical images we see when there is an oil spill [...] typically provoke highly moralistic and ideologically self-serving sentiments from a *human perspective*. From the dying birds’ point of view, from the *animal point of view*, the lethal oil is just part of the one unitary environment that is inherently dangerous. [...] [T]he birds suffer, but they don’t distinguish morally between man-made dangers and all the others they face from predators and nature [...]. So this little example might help us to appreciate animals and their needs from an *animal and not human perspective*.” (Taylor 2011, my emphases)

Taylor claims that the distinctly non-human points of view on the world in *WINGED MIGRATION* provided him with a different *philosophical* perspective on the relation between nature and culture, and with a different, non-anthropocentric vantage point from which to think animal philosophy. However, Taylor’s example does not introduce innovative concepts for environmental or animal ethics since he draws on well-established distinctions. It is no wonder, then, that Mullarkey writes that the “compare-
Films are vehicles for experiencing philosophy

Extending philosophical debates through film

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and-contrast industry between philosophy and film is a one-way-street for a simple reason: there has yet to be an idea identified as philosophical in film which bears no resemblance with any current written philosophy.” (Mullarkey 2009: 16)

But WINGED MIGRATION indeed provides innovative justificatory grounds for maintaining or discovering a non-anthropocentric position because the various travelling shots of the flocks of birds allow the film spectator to experience the point of view of animals to a certain extent. This is something which mere conceptualising cannot do. One can therefore claim that films can make the spectator experience what traditional philosophy merely conceptualises. Films, then, allow experiencing philosophy.

While Taylor’s example suggests how films might provoke new philosophical perspectives (without necessarily changing the terms of the debate), the US-American philosopher Nancy Bauer uses DEAD MAN WALKING, a drama about the relationship between a murderer-rapist on the death row and a nun who, as an example for how a film can change the set of concepts used for conducting philosophical debates. In her article “Cogito Ergo Film: Plato, Descartes, and Fight Club,” Bauer argues that the “philosophical interest” (Bauer 2005: 42) of DEAD MAN WALKING “lies not in any support or condemnation it might lend to the idea of a death penalty, [but in drawing] our attention to features of state-sanctioned killing that have been scarcely articulable in the current death penalty debates.” (Bauer 2005: 42f.) According to Bauer, the film steers awareness to the carefully designed routines involved in the execution of a death penalty: These routines, a highly developed division of labour in which, for instance, one officer is responsible for strapping the prisoner’s arm to the electric chair while another pushes a button, are meant to keep the involved state employees protected “from the fact of their own participation in these killings.” (Bauer 2005: 42). While not directly contributing to the core question of the death penalty debate – is there a justification for state-sanctioned killing? –, the film instead broadens the debate because it directs awareness to effects that death penalty has on the people involved in carrying it through. Like Taylor, Bauer does not suggest that this is something only films can do, but she concludes that the “potential power of even Dead Man Walking to change the terms of our conversation points to at least one reason not to regard films as in principle inferior to written philosophical works.” (Bauer 2005: 43).

As a preliminary result, it is a mainstream position in film philosophy to grant cinema the status of an object which at least provokes philosophical thought and which is at least worth philosophising about.35 There is, however, still scholarly disagreement about the philosophical potential of the medium in at least two respects: Firstly, there is disagreement about the medium’s means of expressions’ general ability to contribute in any relevant or even significant way to philosophical discourse on matters of aesthetics, ethics, ontology or epistemology. Secondly, even on the assumption that the medium can make philosophically significant contributions it is unclear whether genuinely cinematic philosophical contributions are not shared by any other medium of philosophical expression.

34 As Josef Früchtl weighed in in personal correspondence, an ability to change the terms of a philosophical debate is not unique to film, but shared by other forms of art. Since the focus of this book is on film, this issue will not be pursued further at this point.
The following sections draft a more nuanced picture of how films can be regarded as being philosophically significant. The question whether film(s) can be philosophy cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” because there are various ways of understanding something as being philosophical or philosophically significant; and there are various ways of establishing a relevant relation between what is called “film” and what is called “philosophy”. Consequently, one needs a more detailed account of possible relations between philosophy and film. There is a welcome side-effect of such a nuanced picture of film-and/as-philosophy: It allows a minimum position which proponents and skeptics of the idea of a philosophical significance of film can agree on.

1.4. Film as Philosophy

1.4.1. Films as Expressions of Philosophical Thought

Section 1.3 argued that even critics of the notion of film as philosophy can agree on a minimum position that films can provoke philosophical reflection and insights, even though these might not be called “philosophical”. Chapter 1.4 starts from here and looks for ways of conceptualising film as more than objects of philosophical thought.

Another variation of the idea that films can provoke philosophical insights is the illustration thesis: Like other forms of art and human expression, films can illustrate philosophical problems. They are thus at least good at “popularizing philosophical issues” (Wartenberg 2007: 2), as Thomas Wartenberg, who himself champions a stronger idea of film as philosophy, puts it. Just like many scholars agree that films can provoke philosophical insights, there is what I would like to call an ‘illustration consensus’ on the philosophical potential of cinema.36

From such a perspective, MATRIX is at least an illustration of skepticist thought experiments; A SHORT FILM ABOUT KILLING (Kieslowski, 1988) and DEAD MAN WALKING illustrate philosophical debates on the justifiability of death penalty. SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (Spielberg, 1998) can be seen as an illustration of the tensions between deontological and consequentialist theories, since the film’s plot revolves around the almost suicidal attempt of a group of US soldiers during the Invasion of the Normandy in World War II to save the life of Private James Ryan (Matt Damon), who was captured by the Germans and is the last surviving of four brothers. The science-fiction film BLADE RUNNER (Scott, 1982) raises questions about the personal rights of androids or, more generally, about the criteria for personhood (see Mulhall 2008a: 29ff.). ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (Jonze, 2004) and GROUNDHOG DAY (Ramis, 1994) are generally regarded as illustrations of Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence.37 BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966) questions the reliability of photographic representations of the

36 For literature affirming the illustration consensus, see, for instance: Wartenberg 2007, Shaw 2008, Smith 2006; Livingston 2006, and Yanal 2005. The illustration consensus and the popularity of (Hollywood) films among students also explain the growing number of textbook introductions to philosophy qua film example. See, for example, the titles Faith, Film and Philosophy (Geivet and Spiegel [eds.] 2007), Philosophy Goes to the Movies (Falzon 2003), The Philosopher At the End of the Universe: Philosophy Explained Through Science Fiction Films (Rowlands 2004), Classic Questions and Contemporary Film: An Introduction to Philosophy (Kowalski 2005), or Introducing Philosophy Through Film (Fumerton and Jeske [eds.] 2010).

37 See Christopher Grau’s anthology Philosophers on Film: Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Grau [ed.] 2009).
world; RASHOMON (Kurosawa, 1950) illustrates the (distorting) human role in describing and interpreting events in the world. And so on.

The short list underscores the presence of philosophically relevant topics in films, especially of issues related to moral philosophy. This is hardly surprising, since films usually address the consequences and motifs of their characters’ actions. But whoever affirms the illustrative potential of film need not commit to the stronger claim that films can be expressions of philosophical thought, e.g. that films are actually able to offer own contributions to the philosophical problems they deal with. There are various possibilities to establish that claim.

The first option is to reconceptualise the very notion of “illustration”. Thomas Wartenberg argues that “being an illustration” can itself be considered as a way of doing philosophy (see chapter 2.2.2). The second and more fundamental option is to establish criteria for philosophicality for measuring the philosophical potential of film (illustration reconceptualised would be one possibility amongst others). Such a strategy runs in danger of – again – judging the philosophical value of film according to standards derived from what is traditionally regarded as ‘being philosophical’. But in turn it provides a systematic framework and makes transparent these criteria.

As Wartenberg puts it, for “many contemporary philosophers, especially those working within the analytic tradition, logical argumentation is the hallmark of philosophy” (Wartenberg 2007: 76). Independently of each other, Murray Smith and Robert Yanal propose sets of criteria for measuring the philosophicality of a film. Both scholars build their scheme on an appreciation of logical argumentation.

Smith, who is more skeptical of attempts to align film with philosophy than Mulhall, proposes a multiple-staged catalogue of criteria that allows identifying a film’s philosophical credentials (see Smith 2006). He asks whether a given film can

a) establish the problem under discussion;

b) present a conclusion or position concerning this topic;

c) present arguments that sustain the conclusion;

d) establish or explicate a pattern of inference that leads to this conclusion

Like Wartenberg, Smith singles out arguments as the hallmark of philosophy: A proper philosophical argument and mutatis mutandis a filmic candidate for presenting a philosophical argument, meets all or at least most of Smith’s criteria. But even within the narrow confines of analytically influenced philosophy, there are more ways in which a work of philosophy or art can be philosophically significant in the sense of doing philosophy. Also, according to such rigid standards, few works which belong to the canon of philosophy would make it on the list – a list that would probably only consist of philosophers trained in the intricacies of higher-order formal logic. Actually, the scale of philosophical works ranges from the deliberately obscure writings of Derrida and the often enigmatic fragments of the Pre-Socratics to the ostentatively scholarly works of analytic philosophers such as Schlick, Frege, or Russell. Consequently, even though argumentative standards are certainly a necessary condition for something being an example of good philosophy, in praxi they are not sufficient conditions for something being an example of philosophy. Meeting argumentative standards is no sine qua non requirement for something being philosophical. If this were so, then Nietzsche o Wittgenstein would not belong to the canon of philosophy.
However, Smith’s criteria indicate two important minimal elements of philosophicality: The attempt to establish a philosophical problem in the first place – criterion a) –, and the attempt to present a position and argue for it – criteria b) and c) –, that is, the attempt to make explicit one’s reasons for supporting a specific position.\footnote{38 If there is no solution, or if one does not want to commit to a solution, this is a position as well.}

Robert Yanal proposes a similar yet not identical scale of criteria for assessing the philosophicity of films, which ranges from “minimal philosophy” to “maximal philosophy” (see Yanal 2005: 4). The more criteria a film meets, the higher its degree of philosophicity:

i) \( x \) raises a problem that is considered as being of philosophical interest;
ii) \( x \) solves such a problem (e.g. by showing that the problem is stated in the wrong terms);
iii) \( x \) defends its solution;
iv) \( x \) refutes other solutions

Yanal’s scale uses different terms, and Smith insists on the explication of patterns of inference while Yanal simply distinguishes between defending a solution and refuting alternative solutions. In turn, Yanal explicitly presents the idea that films may be philosophical to a higher or lesser degree. While Mulhall sees enough philosophical value in the very attempt to shift the terms of a debate, Yanal thereby follows orthodox analytic philosophical venues. Where Yanal and Smith see (argumentative) problem-solving as a hallmark of philosophy, Wittgensteinian philosophers would include problem-dissolving as another kind of venerable philosophical activity (e.g. by showing that a philosophical problem is already stated in the wrong terms). However, even a Wittgensteinian paradigm-shifter fits into the broad categories established by Yanal: She will still present reasons in favour of her position, and she will try to refute other solutions; or at least try to present her own solution in the best light possible.

Yanal’s and Smith’s basic schemes are not designed for addressing the manifold ways of doing philosophy but to capture essential stages or elements of (a certain kind of) philosophical activity. Because of that they can be used for supporting the position the assumption that films can be expressions of philosophy – and can be so without having to compete with highly elaborated instances of philosophy. One need not compare Derek Jarman’s \textit{Wittgenstein} (Jarman, 1993) or \textit{MatriX} to David Lewis’ \textit{Counterfactuals} (Lewis 1973). They constitute different ways of doing philosophy. Using Smith’s and Yanal’s criteria enables a compromise between competing camps of film philosophers by maintaining the philosophicity of films without assigning them the ‘full’ measure of philosophicity. In these terms, films which are understood as (traditional) illustrations of philosophy are at least doing minimal philosophy.

But can films do more than minimal philosophy? Can they be more than traditional illustrations? I want to propose an answer to this question by expanding its scope: Are films able to contribute to philosophical discourse in a medium-specific, cinematic way? “Medium-specific” does not necessarily mean a way of doing philosophy that is in the exclusive possession of the medium of cinema (or audiovisual media in general). It simply refers to a way of doing philosophy that exceeds standard means of doing
36 Films as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

philosophy via the written word, but leaves open the question whether philosophical thoughts can be reiterated in other media of expression (e.g. painting, dance, etc.).

Even if a film is doing maximal philosophy in Yanal’s sense, this would not say anything about the way in which the film performs this task. It would be possible that the film simply puts a philosophical paper from the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* on screen, expanding screen time by embedding the statements made in the paper in a narrative context (let us assume that the film is about a philosopher giving a lecture, similar to the sub-sequences in *Waking Life* [Linklater, USA, 2001] where Robert Solomon and David Sosa give lectures and extensive monologues about philosophical problems).

One obvious candidate for a cinematic way of reasoning philosophically is the combination of visual and aural elements, and the use of montage, i.e. of cinema’s ability to juxtapose and manipulate (audio-visually filmed) space and time in specific ways. In his article “On Montage”, Vsevolod Pudovkin discusses an example of how a film can express (philosophical) thoughts: by contemporaneously correlating an abstract thought to a specific example. This is a use of the temporal dimension of the medium of cinema. According to Pudovkin, montage expresses a correlation in two senses: on the one hand single shots must blend into another seamlessly; on the other hand they have to make sense, i.e. stand in an identifiable correlation to each other:

“This correlation can be deeply intended as meaningful, based on the wish to convey an abstract thought. An example – a court room: the unjustly accused person listens to the cruel sentence; all of a sudden on the screen there appears a representation of the true circumstances of the crime, which completely absolve the accused. The truth of the facts unfolds simultaneously with the resounding words of the false judgement. The obvious contradiction between these linked-up pieces establishes the abstract thought of the bias of the court.” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation39)

Pudovkin calls this kind of combination “ideal-philosophical concatenation” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation). It is a way of conveying abstract thoughts or ideas via sound-imagery. The described scene is exemplary for a cinematic way of expressing thoughts: Two conflicting thoughts are not only logically but temporally presented simultaneously (the judge made a wrong verdict; the condemned man is treated unjustly in the name of the law). The visual track presents one piece of information, while the audio track contradicts it. The example explores a variant of a paradox. This exemplifies how cinema can play with ideas in different ways as compared to written texts.

Such considerations imply that cinematic philosophical films can extend, or propose alternatives to, the means by which philosophers conduct their inquiries. The abstracted content of philosophical thought might be the same on screen and on paper, but the way in which it is presented is clearly different. Unless one claims that style does not matter in philosophical discourse (a position which is highly unpromising, looking at the

history of philosophical thought), one can justifiably claim that films can – but need not – present an alternative to written philosophy.

1.4.2. The Philosophical Significance of Style

Martha Nussbaum argues for the philosophical significance of style. She not only claims – like Stephen Mulhall – that “the advent of philosophizing” (Mulhall 2008: 12) can occur in modes of human existence other than academic philosophical inquiries but argues that some philosophical issues can only be expressed adequately in non-standard philosophical prose. In her essay collection Love’s Knowledge (Nussbaum 1990) she attempts to dissolve the barriers between philosophical prose and apparently non-philosophical prose such as literature. She maintains that a text not written in academic philosophical prose is not automatically disqualified as a philosophical text. On the contrary – style can be an integral part of what one attempts to say:

“Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.” (Nussbaum 1990: 3)

Nussbaum suggests that there are “thoughts and ideas, a certain sense of life” that “reach toward expression in writing that has a certain shape and form, that uses certain structures, certain terms” (Nussbaum 1990: 4). She argues that

“there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it – views, especially, that emphasize the world’s surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty – that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder – but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.” (Nussbaum 1990: 3)

Tellingly, Nussbaum talks of a “language lacking in wonder” – a harsh judgement on an academic profession claiming to have its inspiring impulse in a sense of wonder (Greek: \( \text{thaumázein} \)) about the world.40 Nussbaum effectively argues that standardised academic philosophical prose can be insufficient for some philosophical purposes. For her, the choice of philosophical

“style makes, itself, a statement: [...] an abstract theoretical style makes, like any other style, a statement about what is important and what is not, about what faculties of the reader are important for knowing and what are not.” (Nussbaum 1990: 7)

Stylistic choices amount to foregrounding certain aspects while neglecting others. And indeed, within the academic philosophical community there are manifold varieties of (mutually incompatible) ‘philosophical prose’. The frictions between, for example, so-called French postmodernist philosophy and US West-coast analytic philosophy derive to a large extent not so much from differences in content, but from the chosen philosophical style. Quasi-scientific prose, for instance, reflects pre-assumptions about what qualifies as being philosophical, such as philosophy as a ‘conceptual foundation of the natural sciences’ versus philosophy as a predominantly culturalist or historicist enterprise.

40 See Plato, Theaetetus 155d and Aristotle, Metaphysics I 2, 982b12.
For Nussbaum, then, stylistic choices are the point of departure of philosophical projects: “How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?)” (Nussbaum 1990: 3) Cavell as well identifies literature as philosophy’s other form of appearance. In his essay “The Fantastic of Philosophy,” he discusses the opening paragraph of Thoreau’s Walden, a book that according to him situates itself “in terms of a range of dualities [...] between philosophy and literature” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 147), and which he interprets as “a book of imaginary travel” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 147). Cavell writes:

“People may call such a description literary as a way of dismissing it, but it is no more or less literary than, say, Rousseau’s vision of the human with which he opens his Social Contract, as born free and everywhere in chains. That is a vision, as Thoreau’s is, essential to the theorizing that follows it, one that identifies the audience of the writing (as well as its author) and that defines the harm it means to undo.” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 148)

Here, Cavell identifies works that ‘situate’ themselves between philosophy and literature; works which contain elements of both worlds. For Cavell, philosophical writing is inspired, or informed by a “vision” which determines the problems and scope of writing (“the harm it means to undo”). This “vision” establishes the perspective of the philosophical writing that is about to follow, it establishes the set of problems and ideas it is meant to untangle.

Since a vision can be “essential to the theorizing that follows it” (Cavell 2005 [1986]: 148), it can be an integral part of philosophical topics. A literary vision can establish and structure a topic, highlight certain aspects while neglecting others. Such pre-structuring can be regarded as being part of what is deemed philosophical.41

1.4.3. Philosophy as Sketches of Landscapes

Wittgenstein, the unofficial saint of analytic philosophers, was self-critically aware of stylistic questions in philosophy. In the preface to his Philosophische Untersuchungen he writes:

“I have written down all these thoughts as remarks, short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject, while I sometimes make a sudden change, jumping from one topic to another. – It was my intention at first to bring all this together in a book whose form I pictured differently at different times. But the essential thing was that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks. After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I would never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. [...] The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeyings. The same or almost

41 Stanley Kubrick’s comment on the cinematic art of Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski are close to Nussbaum’s focus on the proper forms and structures of philosophical endeavours. In a foreword to screenplay edition of DECALOGUE (Kieslowski, 1988-89), Kubrick writes that Kieslowski and his co-writer Piesiewicz reveal “the very rare ability to dramatize their ideas rather than just talking about them. By making their points through the dramatic action of the story they gain the added power of allowing the audience to discover what’s really going on rather than being told. They do this with such dazzling skill, you never see the ideas coming and don’t realize until much later how profoundly they have reached your heart.” (Kubrick 1991, vii, my emphasis)
the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new
sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the
defects of a weak draughtsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones
were left, which now had to be arranged and sometimes cut down, so that if you looked at
them you could get a picture of the landscapes. Thus this book is really only an album.”
(Wittgenstein 2005: ixf.)

Wittgenstein’s language is remarkably metaphorical and visual – the same
Wittgenstein who earlier in his life wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a book
structured around seven propositions that are further explained and elaborated by
paragraphs numbered with decimal expansions.42 His wording could even be called
‘cinematic’: Wittgenstein describes his philosophical project as one of compiling
“remarks,” “short paragraphs,” sometimes making “a sudden change, jumping from one
topic to another”. He compares his efforts as a thinker to those of a painter who draws
“a number of sketches of landscapes” while “journeying[…]” through intellectual
landscapes. Only if selected, arranged and “sometimes cut down,” Wittgenstein writes, it
is possible to get a “picture of the landscapes” he was looking at from this written
“album”. Here, Wittgenstein describes a book that is not a neat, cleaned-up, detailed
philosophical treatise, but rather an (allegedly incoherent) arrangement of single
thoughts the readers needs to put into an order himself, because the writer was unable to
arrange them. These sketches are supposed to establish new theoretical frameworks or
paradigms which are then in need of further refinement.43

The main metaphor employed by Wittgenstein is ‘the philosopher as a painter of
intellectual landscapes,’ but cinematic rhetoric sneaks in: the *Investigations* “jump” from
topic to topic, making “sudden changes” like in a philosophical parallel montage; “the
same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different
directions” just as the film camera can approach the same scenery from different vantage
points.44

Wittgenstein’s writing style seems open to ‘cinematic’ ways of doing philosophy:
Even though he advertises the *Investigations* as inferior to full-fledged philosophical
enterprises, he does not call them ‘unphilosophical’45. The *Investigations* suggests
different possible ways of approaching philosophical topics, sometimes more, sometimes
less systematic. Here, Wittgenstein is in accordance with Nussbaum’s approach. The late
Wittgenstein exemplifies non-rigid philosophicality, since one cannot ‘measure’ his
philosophical merits by applying Smith’s or Yanal’s criteria.46

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42 But, then again, even the *Tractatus* is dominated by visual analogies, starting with its basic assumption that
language mirrors the logical structure of the world.
43 I owe this thought to Josef Früchtl.
44 Avrum Stroll terms the later Wittgenstein’s way of doing philosophy a “philosophy by example” and designs an
entire book around Wittgenstein’s metaphor of “sketches of landscapes” (see Stroll 1998).
45 During his time at Cambridge, Wittgenstein was a notorious moviegoer, albeit no cinéphile. It seems that he
used the movies as a way of relaxing from hard days of philosophical reflection. In his memoir of Wittgenstein,
Norman Malcolm remarks that “[o]ften [Wittgenstein] would rush off to a cinema immediately after the class
ended. As the members of the class began to move their chairs out of the room he might look imploringly at a
friend and say in a low tone, ‘Could you go to a flick?’ On the way to the cinema Wittgenstein would buy a bun or
cold pork pie and munch it while he watched the film.” (Malcolm 1958: 26)
46 On Wittgenstein and film, see the anthology *Wittgenstein at the Movies* (Szabados and Stojanova [eds.] 2011).
1.5. Conclusion

To sum up, I am sympathetic to Mulhall’s position that films can be philosophical in a Wittgensteinian (and Cavellian) fashion. Films can, firstly, shift the ‘landscape’ of philosophical debates by changing the perspectives as well as ways of investigating them. Secondly, films can be philosophical as “sketches of landscape,” i.e., less systematic and more audiovisual and metaphorical than conventional philosophy.

Borrowing a term used by Edward Branigan in his re-evaluation of the language of film theory, ‘doing philosophy’ can then be understood as a “radial” phenomenon, as a set of established cultural practices unified by a certain common set of topics, interests, problems and traditions (see Branigan 2006). But then ‘philosophy’ is a cluster concept for a multitude of not always homogenous cognitive activities that are mediated through varying forms of expression (verbal, audiovisual, gestural etc.) and categorised as ‘philosophy’ in a kind of family resemblance. As I will claim in the next chapter, the family resemblance approach to philosophy does not exclude the introduction of new practices of doing philosophy, such as ‘film as philosophy’. If one assumes that one way of doing philosophy is providing sketches of landscapes, then films can – but need not – be philosophical as well.47