Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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2. Cinematic Fictions as Configurations of Philosophical Thought

2.1 Philosophical Narratives

If cinema is one of the possible configurations of the radial phenomenon of philosophy, then not only do the ‘properties’ – the range of expressive powers – of the medium define its specific kind of philosophicality. This ‘transcendental’ possibility of a philosophical cinema must also be put to practice by specific films, which in turn rely on the expressive potential of their medium. In particular, there is still the question how narrative fiction films can be conceived of as configurations of philosophical thought. Nussbaum’s account of the philosophicality of literature suggests that narrative possess a philosophical value of its own. But how can narratives – and narrative fiction films in particular – be understood as being philosophical?

To begin with, it is helpful to look at Richard Rorty’s distinction between systematic philosophy and edifying philosophy. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty introduces both as legitimate albeit incommensurable forms of philosophical discourse:

“Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. [...] Great systematic philosophers, like scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. [...] Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is not an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.” (Rorty 2009 [1979]: 370)

Like Nussbaum, Rorty links the non-conventional approach to philosophy to a sense of wonder which the other apparently lacks. The edifying approach, in particular, wants to “see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately” (Rorty 2009 [1979]: 378), and tries to “enlarg[e] our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions” (Rorty 2007: 124).48

48 Hans-Georg Moeller discusses Rorty’s understanding of philosophy as a kind of cultural activity which “cannot be essentially distinguished from literature. Both disciplines produce texts and stories. They provide models for looking at oneself and at the world, and they invite a comparison with other such models. Philosophical ‘tales,’ just like literary ones, are not so much interesting because what they say is true, but because what they say matters to
From a Rortyan, pragmatist perspective, philosophy becomes “just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.” (Rorty 2009: 367) One can thus understand cinema as “something new under the sun” of philosophy, something that does not provide “accurate representation[s] of what was already there” but new cinematic perspectives on this. The question, however, is whether these approaches to doing philosophy are mutually compatible. Rorty thinks not. Using the notion of “incommensurable discourse” (Rorty 2009: 370), he describes the incompatibility between, for instance, pragmatism and logical positivism. Consequently, whatever form a ‘truly philosophical’ film might assume, it likely will be incommensurable with the philosophical discourse represented in academic philosophy journals like Erkenntnis or Philosophical Review.

I will now discuss the idea that narratives are one of the forms of philosophical reflection, or at least capable of assuming a function in philosophical arguments. This allows a clearer understanding of the degree of incommensurability between doing philosophy conventionally, and doing philosophy cinematically.

2.2 Many Ways of Being Philosophical: Narratives as Philosophical Arguments

2.2.1 Narrative, Fiction, Knowledge

Narrative, Edward Branigan claims in Narrative Comprehension and Film, is “one of the fundamental ways to think about the world” (Branigan 1992: xi) because “making narratives is a strategy for making our world of experiences and desires intelligible. It is a fundamental way of organizing data.” (Branigan 1992: 1) Experiencing the world narratively, or rendering one’s experience of the world narratively, is a way of “making sense and significance” (Branigan 1992: xi), “a way of projecting an explanation for our experiences” (Branigan 2006: 32). In short: Narrative is a tool of thought used for making intelligible our experience of the world. From such a cognitive-conceptualist perspective, narrative is closely connected to philosophy and thereby indirectly confirms Rorty’s and Nussbaum’s general position.

Branigan distinguishes four basic types of texts (see fig. 2.1): narrative fiction (novels or Hollywood films), narrative non-fiction (history books), non-narrative fiction (some kinds of poetry), and non-narrative non-fiction (scholarly essays, or Muybridge’s short horse race films).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative fiction</th>
<th>Non-narrative fiction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Narrative nonfiction</td>
<td>Non-narrative nonfiction</td>
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Fig. 2.1: Four basic types of texts according to Branigan 1992

While narrative involves the organisation of information (of any type), “fiction” and “nonfiction” are categories that describe the “relationships between data and world” (Branigan 1992: 192). It is important to bear this distinction in mind, since “[n]arrative and fiction are quite different things even if they often appear together in public. Narrative involves such processes as creating a scene of action, defining a temporal
progression, and dramatizing an observer of events.” (Branigan 1992: 192). From the outset, such a conception of narrative avoids all-too-easy equations of narrative with the ‘fictional’. Stories use elements derived directly from the (our) world, but sometimes their elements do not bear a ‘direct’ relation to the world out there. Consequently, narrative can be a property of fictional as well as non-fictional texts.

Indeed, in the way Branigan understands narrative, it is not something confined to the world of the fiction novel or Saturday night theatre performances or weekly movie screenings. Rather, it is conceived of as a general strategy or tool for organising and, in the first place, assembling our knowledge of the world – or of what we think of as being the things we know. In Branigan’s terms, “perceiving the world narratively is intimately tied to our ways of arranging knowledge (schemas), to our skills of causal reasoning, and hence to our judgements about temporal sequence.” (Branigan 1992: xiv). In short: the ability to construct narratives is a cognitive capacity, and constructing a narrative is a “cognitive activity” (Branigan 2006: 32).

According to this definition narrative is intimately tied to the human experience of causality and time. If related to “causal reasoning” or “judgements about temporal sequence,” narrative becomes a kind of glue that conjoins events and phenomena we perceive in the world. Inasmuch as narratives organise our experience of and data about the world, they are related to scholarly enterprises in the natural sciences and the humanities. As soon as, for instance, experimental psychologists try to extract conclusions from a set of research questions and empirical data collected through surveys and other experimental tools, they are forced to organise their data into a certain coherent and consistent order. In that respect, they share properties with narrative.

Narrative, then, is a way of ordering and establishing causal correlations between experiential data. Thereby, narrative – and narrative films as well – provide a form of knowledge, even though it is not clear whether they provide the kind of knowledge appreciated by traditional philosophers. Cinematic modes of expression have been put to scientific use, but it remains to be seen how they can be used for treating the rather general, abstract questions asked by philosophy. A philosopher is not so much interested in Eadweard Muybridge’s discovery that at some points a horse has all its hoofs off the ground while running. Philosophers could rather be interested in the philosophical implications of the phenomenon that time-lapse or slow-motion cinematography can speed up or slow down time and motion, of recorded objects in space, thereby changing the correlation between space and time in the perceived space-time continuum as well. A philosopher could also be interested in the philosophical implications of the phenomenon that time lapse or slow motion apparently refine our (mediated) sensory perception of the world to such a degree that it enables re-seeing it from hitherto unknown perspectives.

2.2.2 The Epistemic and the Artistic, the Philosophical and the Literary

Narrative fiction films differ in many respects from works of philosophy or philosophical arguments. One strand of philosophical criticism frequently launched against the philosophical relevance of narratives maintains that they are entertainment vehicles, or pursue artistic concerns, while arguments are brought forward for advancing knowledge. Philosophical insights, the argument goes, must be extracted from
narratives, and brought into a ‘proper’ philosophical form. Even though narratives as well as philosophical considerations rely on specific structures, philosophers of the ‘constructive’ tradition are rightly wary of assimilating the formal structure of philosophical arguments to the dramaturgical structure of a film or stage play.

Murray Smith expresses this alleged tension between narrative and philosophical aims by maintaining that narratives subordinate the epistemic to the artistic, while philosophical arguments work the other way around (see Smith 2006: 39). However, as Smith recognises as well, the distinction between narratives and arguments is a gradual rather than categorical one: “since philosophy has freely conjured up fictional counterexamples and thought experiments throughout its history […] it cannot without contradiction deny that fictional narratives may deliver knowledge” (Smith 2006: 35).

Philosophical investigations or texts are thus linked with epistemic concerns. How, then, should one understand this gradual confluence between the philosophical and the narrative, between the epistemic and the artistic? Analytic thinkers like Smith try to formalise the results of their investigations in arguments that consist of a number of (hopefully) well-founded premises, a pattern of inference, and a conclusion that (necessarily) follows from these premises (see Smith 2006: fn8, and section 1.4.1). Philosophers such as Mulhall propose alternatives to such a ‘formal’ understanding of philosophical practice. He assigns to films the capacity to offer new ways of looking at philosophical topics, for instance by reorienting “a shared space for thinking” (Mulhall 2007: 8) within which a given philosophical problem is addressed. Nancy Bauer’s discussion of DEAD MAN WALKING in section 1.3.2 is one example for this.

Reorientation of the shared space of thought is supposed to allow discovering hitherto unnoticed philosophical problems in a traditional way. This is what the later Wittgenstein does: Instead of opting for one of the sides of a philosophical controversy, he looks at their pre-assumptions. This can result in the disappearance of the philosophical problem if it turns out that it arises out of erroneous pre-assumptions:

> “The [philosophical] problems are solved, not by reporting new experience, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language.” (Wittgenstein 2005: §109)

Wittgenstein coins the notion of an “übersichtliche Darstellung” (perspicuous representation):

> “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. […] A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. […] The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung’?)” (Wittgenstein 2005: §122)

For Wittgenstein, a lack of orientation is closely linked with the simplicity and everydayness of whatever we are thinking about philosophically: “The aspects of things that are most important to us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.)” (Wittgenstein 2005: §129)

If it is (one of) the tasks of philosophy to provide perspicuous representations of philosophical problems, then cinema might be an apt candidate for such an activity. The history of film theory is full of claims about cinema’s ability to present (things in) the
world in their “virginal purity” (Bazin 1967 [1945]: 15); to show them as they are independently of the erroneous ways of human world-making, or to ‘redeem’ reality from the human gaze (Kracauer 1960). Indeed, remarks made by the realist film theorist Siegfried Kracauer are strikingly similarity to Wittgenstein’s line of argument. He complains that the “truly decisive reason for the elusiveness of physical reality is the habit of abstract thinking we have acquired under the reign of science and technology” (Kracauer 1960: 299f). Insofar as human beings ‘indulge’ in abstraction, they do not grasp reality, or the things in the world, as they are: “Strange as it may seem, although streets, faces, railway stations, etc., lie before our eyes, they have remained largely invisible so far.” (Kracauer 1960: 299) Cinema can help in such a reorientation of philosophical problems – even though this potential is not exclusively owned by cinema but a feature shared by other art forms as well.

Still, the question remains why one should understand a mainstream narrative fiction film not only as a work of art, but as a work of philosophy, too. Even if cinema bears a philosophical potential, trying to assign the label ‘philosophy’ to a mainstream narrative fiction film raises the stakes: Prima facie, there is as little reason to understand THE NAKED GUN 33 1/3 (Segal, 1994) as a work of philosophy as there is to regard a novel written by Rosamunde Pilcher as one. Not every work of literature is a work of philosophy, or deemed ‘worthy’ of philosophical investigation. Why should it be different in the case of film? Put more generally, the question asked here is whether even typical instances of film – mainstream films – are capable of being works of philosophy, of being expressions of philosophical thoughts. Can a big-budget moneymaking production elaborate on issues of a philosophical nature? And, can it do so in a way that justifies labelling it as philosophical?

Mulhall says so. He insists that there is “no essential break between the natural, inherent reflectiveness of human life-forms and the inveterate reflectiveness of philosophy” (Mulhall 2008b: 12), which means that “the advent of philosophizing can occur within any and every mode of human existence” (Mulhall 2008b: 12). This echoes Stanley Cavell’s formulation in “The Thought of Movies” that he understands philosophy

“as a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape.” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92)

That is to say, philosophy is not reserved to the academic specialist. Even though philosophical problems are addressed with the help of specifically developed methods and argumentative tools by trained academic philosophers, many of these problems concern the ‘common man’ as well.

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49 Mulhall is also very Wittgensteinian in claiming a potential for cinematic self-reflexivity. He maintains that films cannot only reorient thinking about philosophical problems, they are also able to reflect on their “own conditions of possibility” (Mulhall 2008b:3), i.e. about what makes a film a film in the first place. What these conditions of possibilities are, however, can only be answered by “allowing [one’s] experience of particular films to teach [oneself] what film might be” (Mulhall 2008b: 3). Mulhall thus calls for a careful interpretation of particular films.

50 The notion of thinking “undistractedly” about what one cannot help thinking about echoes Kracauer’s account of cinema’s redemption of reality and Wittgenstein’s call for a conspicuous representation of things in their simplicity and everydayness.

51 Mulhall provocatively invokes the philosophical relevance of a number of scientific problems and questions: “[I]f
2.3 The Philosophical Significance of Thought Experiments

2.3.1 Thought Experiments as Philosophical Narratives

It should be now clear that being a narrative does not \textit{a priori} preclude a text from (potentially) being of philosophical value. The present section will now elaborate on Smith’s insight that philosophers “cannot without contradiction deny that fictional narratives may deliver knowledge” (Smith 2006: 35). Narrative actually plays a central role for the process and progress of philosophical investigations – even analytic ones. This becomes most clear if one considers an argumentative device which is an integral part in all philosophical traditions: philosophical thought experiments.

Thomas Wartenberg defines thought experiments as “imaginary narratives” (Wartenberg 2006a: 132):

“...In a thought experiment, the reader is instructed to consider a certain possibility that she might not have considered before, a possibility that is often at odds with her established patterns of belief and action. Once this possibility is entertained as a real possibility, then the reader is confronted with the question of what justifies her customary belief rather than the possibility put forward in the thought experiment.” (Wartenberg 2005: 275)

For example, philosophers thinking about philosophical skepticism tend to develop “[s]keptical possibilities [...] according to which the world is completely different from how it appears to us, and there is no way to detect this” (Nagel 1986: 71), as Thomas Nagel puts it in \textit{The View from Nowhere}. Like claims about the reliability or limits of our beliefs and sensory-cognitive capacities, skeptical possibilities are often hypothetical. If then it turns out that these hypothetical possibilities cannot be excluded by line of argument, they are regarded by skeptics as contributing more evidence to their line of reasoning.

The parallels between philosophical thought experiments and narratives are evident: Thought experiments ask the reader (or spectator) to imagine a specific counterfactual setting, usually introduced by the phrase ‘imagine that ...’ They are often used as test devices for philosophical theories and designed in such a way that they either express core assumptions of a given theory or thesis or present borderline cases and counterarguments against a given theory or thesis. Philosophers tend to introduce thought experiments in order to support their claims. They also use them for showing that their theories are able to withstand hypothetical counter-scenarios. Predating on Popper’s principle of falsification, philosophers also use thought experiments for falsifying competing theories, by claiming that these theories are not able to cope with the counterexample posed by the thought experiment. Films as thought experiments might be able to arbitrate between rivalling theories, “playing the role of an experiment in scientific theory by allowing us to have a field in which to judge which of two theories is more successful in helping us understand the film.” (Freeland and Wartenberg 1995: 8)

In short, thought experiments assume various roles in philosophical investigations. If a thought experiment is used in order to establish or support a given theory, then it is
constructive. If it is used for undermining a theory, then it functions as a destructive thought experiment, i.e. as a (falsifying) counter-example.\(^5\) Philosophical thought experiments are embedded into a larger argumentative context as soon as they are used to support or reject certain theoretical positions, and hence are not autonomous from their philosophical context (see Wartenberg 2007: 57).

If films are understood as thought experiments, they can assume a function as a stage in a philosophical argument (see Freeland and Wartenberg 1995: 7). For instance, they can be used for stage c) or d) of Yanal’s philosophicality scale (see Yanal 2005: 4; and chapter 1.4.1). In fact, film philosophers broadly agree that films-as-thought-experiments can become part of philosophical investigations, even though they value the potential of this possibility to different degrees.\(^4\) Clearly, however, films-as-philosophical-thought-experiments are an example for a more than minimal way of doing philosophy.

Wartenberg distinguishes several roles of philosophical thought experiments. In all of them, they assume an assistive function – they support or counter given theories or philosophical assertions (the following descriptions, examples as well as their wording follow Wartenberg 2007: 58-65):

- Counterexamples to philosophical claims (e.g., a skepticist scenario counters knowledge assumptions);
- Establishing possibility (e.g., establishing the possibility that we do not know anything about the external world);
- Failed thought experiments as demonstrating impossibility (e.g., demonstrating the indeterminacy of translation via a failure to imagine a linguistic anthropologist who can successfully compile a dictionary that correctly translates the language of a hitherto unknown Native tribe into English);
- Establishing necessary connections (e.g., using an imaginary example for justifying a conceptual or necessary connection);
- Confirming a theory (e.g., using a thought experiment to adding further confirmation to a given theory);
- Theory building through idealisation (e.g. building an idealised abstract version of reality, e.g. an ideal state).

The main reason for a film’s potential as a philosophical thought experiment is that thought experiments possess a narrative structure, even though often of a rudimentary sort. As noted already, philosophers tend to introduce their thought experiments by formulaic expressions such as ‘imagine that ...’. Many famous philosophical thought experiments read like stories or story outlines. Compare the acuity with which Plato describes his allegory of the cave (Plato 2006: book VII [514-517]), or Saul Kripke’s lengthy discussion in Naming and Necessity of how extreme imagined counterfactual worlds can become before the concepts we use for describing them lose their initial

\(^{53}\) In an entry on thought experiments, James Brown lists functions of thought-experiments-as-counter-example: by refuting it because of inner contradictions, by showing that the theory conflicts with other established theories, by showing that at least one premises of a given argument conflates two possible meanings of a term, by functioning as a counter thought experiment to another thought experiment. See Brown 2007.

\(^{54}\) See Noël Carroll’s Theorizing the Moving Image (Carroll 1996: 280f.). See also Mullall 2007; Smith 2006; Wartenberg (2006a); and Wartenberg 2006b.
meaning and reference (Kripke 1980: 26f. and 29ff.); or Hilary Putnam’s different versions of the brains-in-a-vat thought experiment (Putnam 1981: chapter 1).\footnote{These variations will be addressed in chapter 4.}

Even though these thought experiments only have a rudimentary structure, they could already serve as treatments for getting a film (or book) project started. Putnam’s brain-in-a-vat scenario is a kind blueprint for the basic situation in MATRIX (A. and L. Wachowski, 1999): Imagine people unknowingly plugged into a gigantic computer simulation of the world. Descartes’ idea that the people outside of his window could possibly be only automatons (Descartes 1904 [1641]: II, 13) figures in E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “Der Sandmann” (Hoffmann 1982 [1816]). And VANILLA SKY (Crowe, 2001) as well as ABRE LOS OJOS (Amenábar, 1997), films in which the main character is unknowingly only dreaming his life, are configurations of Robert Nozick’s thought experiment of the experience machine (see chapters 4 and 11).

Identifying similarities and parallels between film narratives and philosophical thought experiments does not imply that the filmmakers actually know these thought experiments (or, the other way around: that a philosopher is inspired by a film he has seen or a book he has read). It only means that there are structural similarities. Wartenberg insightfully points out that

“[a]lthough philosophical texts are the origins of many ideas, theories, and positions, they acquire a life of their own within a culture and all that is necessary for a creator-oriented interpretation [which tries to understand a film’s content in relation to the intentions of the creators of the film, PS] to be acceptable in this regard is that the creator might have been acquainted with the philosophical ideas, etc., because of, for example, their general circulation within a culture.” (Wartenberg 2007: 91)\footnote{This is another variation of the Cavellian idea that philosophy pervades everyday life and vice versa.}

This is to say that being philosophical does not require specific knowledge of the related (academic) philosophical debates. But it requires a grasp of the philosophical problem that is at stake, an understanding of its underlying structure. This is possible without intimate knowledge of a specialised debate. Philosophical ideas circulate within a culture independently of such specialised debates. One need not be familiar with Descartes, Berkeley or Putnam for grasping the idea underlying external world skepticism.

Another reason for the similarities between films and philosophical thought experiments is that thought experiments as well as narratives rely on a diegesis. Both are introduced as taking place in an actual, fictional or counter-factual world, which is the setting for the events taking place in the narrative or the thought experiment. The diegesis, in a way, determines the narrative preconditions, the scopes and limits of the story that is about to be told. Thought experiments and fictional narratives, then, are explorations of things that happen to characters of the imagined scenario. Thought experiments are narratives because they usually describe a series of events with spatio-temporal extension.\footnote{Here, I freely borrow from Edward Branigan’s description of narrative as a patterned organisation of spatiotemporal data in Projecting a Camera. Language-Games in Film Theory (see Branigan 2006: 28-33; and Branigan 1992: 3).}

Their similarities notwithstanding, philosophical thought experiments and films differ in several respects: While thought experiments usually play a role within a
philosophical argument’s logical structure, a film usually is a ‘free-standing’ thought experiment that only subsequently might be incorporated into explicitly philosophical considerations.

As already remarked, Murray Smith recognises the structural analogy between films and philosophical thought experiments, but he is nevertheless skeptical of Mulhall’s claim that films can think “seriously and systematically” about philosophical views and arguments (Mulhall 2008a: 4). He does not deny that films can allude to philosophical issues or that the medium of film can in general be used for making philosophy, but he objects against the idea of mainstream, typical, films, or even artworks, as being philosophical. According to Smith, artworks generally have different priorities as compared to works of philosophy: While the latter establish a primacy of the epistemic, the former are primarily concerned with artistic considerations. Instead of trying to find the explicitly philosophical in films, then, Smith proposes to take films seriously as artworks in their own right, artworks which have goals that differ from explicit philosophical activity:

“[T]he point is not to deny the evident possibility of overlap between a philosophical and an artistic […] project, but to ask whether there is not some tension between the goals of philosophy and the goals of art, and that for this reason we find that, typically, a film or a text will organize these goals hierarchically.” (Smith 2006: 40)

Smith notes that there is a contrast between the “concreteness and particularity of art” and “the abstract, conceptual character of philosophy,” in particular because the “meaning and experience that works of art typically create is one characterised by sufficient complexity and indirection that it resists restatement – or ‘paraphrase’ – in clear and unequivocal terms” (Smith 2006: 40).

Smith argues for an “overarching contrast” (Smith 2006: 41fn2) between philosophical thought experiments and narratives: A philosopher, in order to make his point, only needs to establish the core facts and most important contextual factors of a thought experiment. In contrast, narrative films explore the world of their topic extensively, they are, “relatively speaking, immensely detailed and elaborate” (Smith 2006: 35). But Smith does not deny that this contrast need not apply in each single case (see also Smith 2006: 39). He correctly observes that

“a work of philosophy and a work of art will, typically, rank [their] priorities differently; philosophical insights and the creation of comedy are facets of both [Bernard] Williams’ essay [about personal identity, PS] and All of Me [which Smith discusses in order to clarify his arguments, PS], but they are weighted quite differently, and thus function differently, in the two cases” (Smith 2006: 39).

To sum up, Smith’s main objection against the idea of film as philosophy is that films, as artworks, tend to value artistic concerns over epistemic ones, such that the “subordination of the epistemic to the artistic is […] the main reason why narrative

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58 A number of Williams’ articles on personal identity and bodily continuity can be found in the collection Problems of the Self (see Williams 1973).
films based on philosophical themes [...] will often compromise the ‘logic’ of the philosophical problem that they dramatize” (Smith 2006: 39). He borrows from Richard Moran and draws a contrast between dramatic and hypothetic imaginings: Dramatics imaginings are attempts to flesh out how it would be like to actually live in the imagined world. They “involve[...] something [...] like genuine rehearsal, ‘trying on’ [a] point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it” (Moran, quoted in Smith 2006: 39). By contrast, hypothetic imaginings “pose the possibility of some counterfactual in a spare and abstract way. Dramatic imagining involves elaborating and ramifying the bare counterfactual in one or more ways.” (Smith 2006: 39)

I want to argue that skepticism films are dramatic imaginings of skepticist thought experiments in exactly that sense: They elaborate on hypothetical philosophical thought experiments, and by way of elaborating contribute to the philosophical discourse at stake. While not all dramatic imaginings are philosophical, some of them are. Being a dramatic imagining does not preclude philosophicality, even though Murray Smith implies something like this in the article discussed here. Smith is right in maintaining that typical films, such as ALL OF ME (Reiner, 1984), usually tend to compromise story logic in favour of dramatic effects even if they otherwise address a philosophical topic quite intelligently. MATRIX is another such example where philosophical thoughts about skepticism are brought up and then quickly dismissed in order to make way for a conventional action plot. In other words: philosophical thought experiments in film are conventionally subjected to what I would term the narrative dynamics of the story. But these observations notwithstanding, I see three points in favour of the idea of ‘narrative films as works of philosophy’. Firstly, there are films that do not compromise the ‘logic of the philosophical problem’ in favour of story logic. One example of such a film is, as will be shown later, THE TRUMAN SHOW (Weir, 1998).

Secondly, films can contribute to philosophy by exposing un-thought implications and consequences of the thought experiments they rely on. Films can, for instance, expose potential psychological effects on persons that are in a deception situation (see Yanal 2005: 2 and 14). (Analytic) philosophical arguments tend toward the abstract and the conceptual while paying less attention to, for example, what it actually means to inhabit a simulated world. Philosophers tend to not accurately imagine the consequences and implications of the thought experiments they use. If this is so, then narratives can provide a corrective to a one-sided way of thinking about thought experiments, because they usually deal with them in greater detail.

59 In this context, it is interesting to look at Edward Branigan’s concept of narrative: “In general, the basic elements of narrative are not to be found on the screen, as if they had been tacked up on a bulletin board, but instead are inside us as a way of thinking, as a way of projecting an explanation for our experiences; including the experiences we have of our Self. As a cognitive activity, narrative appears in the form of a process or procedure (a procedural schema) that organizes data into a special pattern that seeks to represent both causal structure (i.e., to show what may follow what on local and global scales) and causal efficacy (i.e., to trace the possibilities for the being/ becoming of an object)” (Branigan 2006: 32 – all emphases except the last two are mine, PS). I believe that Branigan here mentions many factors (see italics) which could also be part of philosophical investigations or of formal philosophical arguments.

60 See chapter 10. James Walters also argues against the idea that dramatizing runs counter to story logic. The films he analyses in his study Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema “balance the ambition of their storytelling structures with an ability to preserve the internal logic of the worlds they present [instead of compromising the one in favour of the other, PAS]” (Walters 2008: 218). Thus, film versions of philosophical thought experiments will try to preserve the logical, and hence philosophical, implications of the thought experiment they rely on. Chapter 7.2 elaborates on Walters’ categories in more detail.
While this statement is also valid for literature, I think that films can contribute to a philosophically inspired understanding of the world that in at least some crucial respects differs from a purely verbal or oral form. The audiovisual dimension of cinema and its ability to manipulate space and time by means of montage, the use of specific camera strategies or other ways of juxtaposing image and sound track, and, in particular, the mixture of all these elements with the performative and curiously experiential character of film spectatorship, can create, or offer, a new outlook on the world, might reveal new insights into the world that have not been noticed before.

Thirdly, Smith underestimates the value of ambiguity for philosophical investigations. While philosophical arguments demand specific, unambiguous answers, this non-ambiguity might not be what actually is required for the solution or proper understanding of a given philosophical problem. Narratives might simply be better suited for dealing with ambiguity than proper philosophical arguments, as Daniel Shaw points out in Taking Movies Seriously: He argues that a “film need not unequivocally answer the philosophical questions that it raises in order to properly considered as such.” (Shaw 2008: 109) For Shaw, raising more questions than answers can under certain conditions even be of philosophical merit: “The fact that a movie raises more questions than it answers is, to my mind, a point in its favour, both philosophically and aesthetically (especially given the demand for closure in traditional Hollywood films).” (Shaw 2008: 108)

Shaw invokes BEING JOHN MALКОVICH (Jonze, 1999) for making his point. That film exploits the (admittedly crazy) idea that a hidden door in an office building leads directly and literally into the head of famous actor John Malkovich, allowing other people to inhabit Malkovich’s body and sensory point of view for a certain amount of time, seeing the world through his eyes. Who is that version of Malkovich, then? Shaw writes: “From my perspective, Being John Malkovich is a more philosophical film because its position on the issue is unclear, and it does not serve to simply illustrate a common theory of personal identity” (Shaw 2008: 108). This is because, instead of suggesting a definite answer to the question of personal identity, the film willingly ends on an unclear note: While Malkovich (or rather, Malkovich’s body) continues to be the temporary host to many different people, his master puppeteer Schwartz “is [later in the film] trapped in the mind of a young girl and can neither speak nor have any effect on her actions.” (Shaw 2008: 108). What BEING JOHN MALКОVICH does, then, is to raise the possibility that it might be elusive to search for a unique philosophical definition of personal identity. Shaw himself takes the film as suggesting “a Nietzschean theory of human being, which identifies the core person with the will that moves his or her body” and describes “the individual as a collection of drives, with each seeking control of the entire organism” (Shaw 2008: 109).

The lesson from the preceding considerations, then, is that films such as BEING JOHN MALКОVICH suggest that films can expand or reorient philosophical debates by, for instance, making it clear through well-developed narratives that answers to philosophical questions might not be as non-ambiguous (analytic) philosophers want them to be.

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61 On personal identity films as a sub-category of skepticism films, see chapter 7.5.2.
2.3.2 Being an Illustration: Thought Experiments as Philosophy

Even though the preceding sections outline a range of examples of how films can contribute to philosophical investigations, one could still object that films present “ideas of revelation and suggestion rather than argument,” a position which Wartenberg and Smith attribute to Jinhee Choi (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 8). Since, the objection goes, films do not explicitly articulate insights, it is up to the philosophically inclined film spectator to articulate the film’s alleged philosophical propositions. It is, then, the philosopher who imposes his philosophical interpretation on the film, not vice versa. Thomas Wartenberg calls this the “imposition objection” (Wartenberg 2007: 25ff.): Whoever is in favour of the idea of ‘film as philosophy’ imposes his own philosophical arguments on the film, arguments that the film itself does not state in this form.\(^62\)

Wartenberg’s counterstrategy is to develop a range of possibilities according to which a film can nevertheless be said to be doing philosophy. He is most innovative when he closely examines the illustrative role that film can play for philosophical ideas, something that even philosophers critical of cinema’s philosophical potential agree on. Such critics tend to raise a kind of ‘illustration objection’, according to which films can only ‘merely’ be illustrations of philosophical ideas, therefore nothing more than illustrations without genuine philosophical content. Against this, Wartenberg attempts to show that being an illustration does not automatically disqualify the example in question as an independent contribution to philosophical discourse.

By discussing illustrations of children’s books such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and illustrations of birds in birding books, Wartenberg shows that “certain ‘illustrations’ are essential to the texts they illustrate” (Wartenberg 2007: 43), and that they are more than mere illustrations. The Alice sketches by John Tenniel, for instance, were part of the original publication of Lewis Carroll’s Alice novels and since then have become an integral part of them, determining to a great extent the way in which the little girl Alice has entered public imagination (see fig. 2.2). Wartenberg claims that illustrations, if done in the right way, can shape the role of an original text in public imagination to such an extent that it becomes an indispensable part of it.\(^63\)

![Fig. 2.2: John Tenniel, Illustration from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland](image)

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\(^62\) Patricia Pisters also expresses disapproval of the film-as-mere-illustration thesis: In her book The Neuro-Image, she writes that “[r]ather than working as illustrations, films are instead acknowledged as actual seeds of thought: important encounters that create new brain circuits (new perceptions, new feelings, new thoughts) and that connect to or resonate with philosophical reflections and scientific findings.” (Pisters 2012: 18)

\(^63\) This phenomenon is well-known in popular literary film adaptations. For an entire generation, Harry Potter looks like film actor Daniel Radcliffe, and Frodo Baggins like Elijah Wood.
While in these examples illustrations assume a contingent role in our public imagining of a certain text, Wartenberg’s birding example points at another functional feature of illustrations: They might enable a user to identify what is described in and by a text in the first place. As Wartenberg claims, flying birds are best – and sometimes exclusively – recognisable by their jizz, “their appearance as they disappear from view” (Wartenberg 2007: 42). Mere written descriptions of this jizz, however, are inadequate for recognising it while birding out in the field, and at the same time it is very difficult to produce photographs that display a bird’s jizz. Consequently, illustrations of a bird’s jizz are necessary in order to provide birders with hints for identifying flying birds. Wartenberg concludes that “without the presence of illustrations, birding guides would not achieve their purpose of helping people recognize birds with which they are not familiar” (Wartenberg 2007: 43) and thus are no “mere supplement” (Wartenberg 2007: 43) to the birding book texts. Wartenberg therefore rejects the illustration objection by establishing that “illustrations need not be subordinated to that of which they are the illustration, so that a work’s status as an illustration cannot in itself justify denigrating it” (Wartenberg 2007: 44). There is at least the possibility that an illustration can be “original or illuminating” (Wartenberg 2007: 44).

Having established the potential independence of illustrations from their originals, Wartenberg turns to the role of illustrations for understanding philosophical theories. He discusses Charlie Chaplin’s film MODERN TIMES (Chaplin, 1936) as an illustration of core aspects of Karl Marx’ philosophical criticism of capitalism, especially Marx’s remarks on the exploitation and Entfremdung of the worker in a capitalist society (see Wartenberg 2007: 52ff.). Through a careful discussion of several scenes of the film Wartenberg shows how MODERN TIMES “provides its viewers with concrete illustrations of Marx’s abstract claims” (Wartenberg 2007: 53). For instance, Marx explains his theory of alienation by claiming that the machines in industrial factories turn the worker himself into a machine since they require of him “labor that is external to the worker”; labour of such a nature that he or she “denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind” (both quoted in Wartenberg 2007: 50). Wartenberg subsequently shows how MODERN TIMES screens several scenes that can be understood as very precise elucidations of Marx’s rather general assertions. For instance, at some point Charlie continues to perform the tightening motion required for fastening the bolts on the assembly line even when he is off duty – the mechanized work required of him has turned him into a “veritable bolt-tightening machine” (Wartenberg 2007: 51) or “mechanized human being”. Wartenberg claims that this specification of a more general philosophical theory is a philosophical contribution, and he supports this argument by pointing at the vast percentage of the annual turnout in academic philosophical papers that are nothing but attempts at a proper exegesis of other philosophical theories of canonical philosophical thinkers (see Wartenberg 2007: 53), which nevertheless are regarded as being philosophical enough to appear in a philosophy journal.

It is worth emphasising that specification is not identical to illustration, as Wartenberg’s jizz example and the MODERN TIMES example show. While each specification is also an illustration, not every illustration is also a specification. Specifications respond to stricter standards of specificity than illustrations.
Wartenberg’s examples are helpful for, first, recognising the potentially philosophical value of illustrations and, second, countering the imposition objection. In fact, MODERN TIMES provides so concrete and vivid an illustration of the work conditions of workers in industrial capitalism that it is implausible to deny its having a relevance for a philosophical discussion of said problematic. Filmmakers need to be able to find concrete situations that bring these work conditions, and their consequences, to the point. Such a kind of reduction of a topic or problem to its core constituents, or – formulated differently – the discovery of specific situations that highlight the general problem or topic they are part of, can be understood as a philosophical activity. By using MODERN TIMES, Wartenberg shows “how a film that illustrates a philosophical theory can actually make a contribution to the philosophical discussion of that theory by providing specific concrete interpretations of some of the central claims of the theory.” (Smith and Wartenberg 2006: 4).

In a later essay “On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” Wartenberg expands his position on the illustrative philosophical potential of film (see Wartenberg 2011). He introduces a distinction made by Richard Eldridge between interpretive and cartoonish illustrations and argues that he understands the latter “as genuine instances of cinematic philosophy” (Wartenberg 2011: 17). Wartenberg exemplifies interpretive illustrations with the help of Michel Gondry’s ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004). This film, Wartenberg claims, makes a certain (historical) philosophical theory understandable or plausible in contemporary contexts: ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND “has presented Nietzsche’s theory [of the eternal recurrence of the same] in a way that makes it plausible in our contemporary context.” (Wartenberg 2011: 18). More specifically, it applies Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence to a specific situation – a couple which eventually resumes their love affair even though they know they will have to go through traumatic relationship problems again and again. Thereby the film “shows exactly what Nietzsche intends our acceptance of that idea to accomplish, namely to foster the realization that even the most painful features of our lives are part of our own identities, things that we must be able to will, to acknowledge as if chosen” (Wartenberg 2011: 18).

According to Wartenberg,

“there are increasingly more films that develop such interpretive illustrations of philosophical positions and […] these should be credited with doing philosophy, just as we credit the historian of philosophy with doing philosophy when she comes up with a new interpretation of a philosopher’s view.” (Wartenberg 2011: 17)

In such ways, cinematic philosophy can apply philosophical theories to specific situations or events, and it can do so by ‘updating’ philosophical theories to our contemporary contexts.

The philosophical update function of film plays a major role in the discussion of skepticism films in the subsequent chapters, since it is obvious that films such as MATRIX, WELT AM DRAHT (Fassbinder, 1973), THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR (Rusnak, 1999), VANILLA SKY and, by contrast, older films such as RASHOMON (Kurosawa, 1950), BLOW UP (Antonioni, 1966) or SHERLOCK JR. (Keaton and Arbuckle, 1924)
dramatize the skepticist hypothesis in relation to their current dominant media for manipulating our representations of the world.\(^4\)

After having established the possibility that even being an illustration of a philosophical theory can contribute to a philosophically relevant increased understanding of this theory, Wartenberg expands the list of variations on the topic of film as philosophy by one more step: He argues that several films can screen philosophical arguments or thought experiments, and that this is something that philosophy done in the traditional way cannot do. The example he uses is MATRIX, and this brings us one step closer to the main topic of this book: skepticism films. While, according to Wartenberg, philosophical thought experiments as well as fiction films “present non-existent events and/or worlds to their audiences” and “their audiences have to imagine the reality of a certain non-actual state of affairs” (Wartenberg 2007: 66), MATRIX even achieves something more: the film gets “its viewers to see the world of the Matrix as (fictionally) real when it is (fictionally) only apparent” (Wartenberg 2007: 72), since the opening sequence of the film takes place in the Matrix but is presented to the audience as if (fictionally) real. Only later in the film does the main character Thomas Anderson (and the audience) learn that he has been living in a computer-simulated world. This, Wartenberg argues, gives a “new twist” (Wartenberg 2007: 72) to René Descartes’ deception hypothesis by which Descartes wants to make plausible his (initial) radical doubt about the possibility of knowledge. Wartenberg writes:

“What’s unique about The Matrix, however, is that it deceives viewers about their perceptual beliefs, for, while watching the initial segment of the film, they believe themselves to be perceiving a real, albeit fictional, world when all they are perceiving is the illusory world of the Matrix” (Wartenberg 2007: 72).

Screening philosophy, in this case, has to do with playing with our perceptual beliefs as spectators, with showing to us what we conceptually can only describe inaccurately. For Wartenberg the film succeeds in making plausible, if only initially, the otherwise outrageous skepticist hypothesis that our world might not be real. By doing so, a film such as MATRIX supposedly lends a different credibility to the skepticist thought experiment than a description in a philosophy book.

The screening function of filmic thought experiments is related to the medium’s ability to draw its audience into its representations of fictional world, leading to a temporary ‘suspension of disbelief’ about the reality status of the fictional representations on screen.\(^5\) In MATRIX, the state of disbelief is heightened to a meta-level. Not only are we told to keep in mind that a fiction film is only fiction, and thus

\(^4\) In The Neuro-Image, Patricia Pisters contrasts films as illustrations from films as “actual seeds of thought: important encounters that create new brain circuits (new perceptions, new feelings, new thoughts) and that connect to or resonate with philosophical reflections and scientific findings” (Pisters 2012: 18). She bypasses the discussion of this chapter by indicating that it is only possible to “truly comprehend the richness, layeriness, and immense complexity of human experience in contemporary digital media culture” (Pisters 2012: 20) by synergizing different fields of thought (philosophy, art and science, following Deleuze and Guattari). While the accounts in this chapter depart from a determinedly philosophical point of view, Pisters’ approach is more culture-centred. The Neuro-Image concentrates on how what she calls the “neuro-image” represents as well as forms contemporary screen culture, and how the concept can be understood from a Deleuzian film-philosophical perspective, and is thus focused on a specific aspect of understanding film as a way of (philosophical) thinking.

\(^5\) The suspension of disbelief hypothesis has been debated controversially throughout the history of film theory. See, for instance Carroll 1990 and Ferri 2007.
the world it presents to us no part of the ‘real’ world, but there is also the possibility that the film world itself is (fictionally) non-real. MATRIX cleverly exploits this double layer and, according to Wartenberg, makes plausible the skepticist hypothesis. In this way, a film can become a contribution to philosophical discourse about the value of thought experiments. While MODERN TIMES carefully and concretely exemplifies an abstract philosophical theory and makes the ‘real-world implications’ of this theory more palpable, MATRIX involves the film audience into its cinematic thought experiment by using the means available to the medium, by exploring the possibility of screening events and the immediate affective reactions of the audience to the events on screen.66

The MATRIX example suggests, then, that the philosophical power of film lies in its ability to make one experience something which a traditional, written philosophical theory only can describe with the concepts it uses. Films, such as the exposition of MATRIX, put one into an experiential situation similar to our everyday experience, and they proceed by subverting or unmasking the beliefs derived from this everyday experiential situation. Films make perceivable, or even ready to grasp, illusions of reality. As aestheticized story worlds which become part and parcel of their audience’s Lebenswelt, films create their own screened reality – and this is one of the most extraordinary philosophical powers of the medium of film.

However, there is something peculiar about the MATRIX example: While the film certainly succeeds in experientially motivating the plausibility of the skeptical hypothesis, the diegesis of the exposition is already codified as being illusory, even though this codification is only recognisable in retrospect, on subsequent film viewings. As chapter 10 elaborates in more detail, each level of reality in MATRIX is codified with specific aesthetic patterns. For instance, each reality level is designed according to a pre-established colour grading scheme: The world of the Matrix represented on screen is green-tinted; the ‘real’ world comes across in cold blue colour tones, while the colours on the level of the ‘Construct’ are neutral, with a dominating white background. Even the use of camera lenses is strategically adapted to each reality level. In other words: The filmmakers have already decided on a specific representation of reality levels which only becomes apparent under closer scrutiny.

2.4 Outlook: Films as (Con-)figurations of Philosophical Thought

The present chapter outlined some of the fundamental discursive threads that run through the contemporary Anglo-American debate about the philosophical potential of film. Following Wartenberg, Mulhall and Nussbaum, I opt for a pluralistic understanding of philosophy that, even though grounded in an analytic philosophical perspective, recognises the legitimacy of a number of different approaches to thinking about philosophical questions.

The most important suggestion to be distilled from the discussion in this chapter is to regard the medium of film as a potential (con-)figuration of philosophical thought. Such a conception assumes that doing philosophy on film is not some kind of extra or alternative way of doing philosophy the way it is usually done. It does also not suggest

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66 Catherine Constable critically discusses Wartenberg’s extended conception of illustration (Constable 2009: 158ff., 15, and 29ff.)
that cinema simply ‘transforms’ the way in which philosophy should be done. The latter assumption is certainly valid if one assumes that philosophy has always been what it is supposed to be in the philosophical tradition that regards Plato and Aristotle as their epitomes. But this conception, I argue, is eventually wrongheaded: There has always been a plurality of ways of doing philosophy – in writing, on the theatre stage, in painting, even though academic discourse has not always recognised this dimension of these forms of discourse. Doing philosophy qua cinema, according to this conception, becomes one of the possible ways of doing philosophy alongside the established ones, and in these terms one possible configuration of philosophy.

In order to better understand this suggestion, I will pick up the idea that the media of thought influence the expression of thought in the next chapter. In order to understand better how the relation between different media of thought can be conceptualised, I turn to concepts used in intermedia studies and argue that philosophical thought is a transmedial phenomenon, i.e. an activity that is always already conducted with the help of various media of expression. Each of these media of expression has its own conditions of expression which may be better or worse suited for thinking in specific ways. While the writing and verbal expression are the historically dominant media of conduct of philosophical inquiry, there is no intrinsic reason why audiovisual media should not be a potential medium of philosophical expression. That is: Even though written philosophy is, historically speaking, the original to its filmic adaptation, from a theoretical point of view there is no such inherent ancillary relation of film to ‘real’ philosophy. One of the recurrent terms used for this phenomenon in recent film-philosophical scholarship is the concept of figuration. This will be the conceptual point of departure of the next chapter.