Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema

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3 Remediating Philosophy, or: The Media of Philosophical Thought

3.1 Films as Food for Thought

As the first two chapters outlined, it is all but obvious “to grant film the status of a subject that invites and rewards philosophical speculation, on a par with the great arts” (Cavell 1979a: xvi). Even Cavell who reflects on many films as “instances manifesting a dimension of moral thinking [or of other forms of thinking, PS] traceable through Western culture” (Cavell 2004: 15) cannot shake a certain paternalistic philosophical attitude For instance, he cautions semi-ironically that he does not “wish to give the impression that philosophy left to itself requires compensation by revelations within the medium of film. These films are rather to be thought of as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of, but which, perhaps, it has cause sometimes to turn from prematurely, particularly in its forms since its professionalization from roughly the time of Kant” (Cavell 2004: 6f., my emphasis).

For Cavell, philosophically interesting films seem to be a corrective for philosophy, they remind the profession of issues it has forgotten or neglected. But such films merely explore what the traditional philosopher could have reflected on independently of them. Cavell implicitly works with a hierarchy: First philosophy, then film.

This becomes apparent in the context of Cavell’s claim that reflecting on the question why film should be philosophically important includes asking “what makes philosophy philosophy” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 91, original emphasis). As already outlined in chapter 1.2.2, Cavell’s own answer addresses the connection between philosophy and what he calls the “everyday” or the “ordinary”:

“I understand [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, my emphasis).
This attitude inspires Cavell’s philosophical interest in film (and other forms of art). It is a reminder that philosophy, even in its professionalised form, shares a common culture with these art forms. From this position Cavell asks, according to the philosophers Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer,

“that 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.” (Cohen and Guyer 1993: 6f.)

Cavell judges films from the vantage point of the philosopher, who is the one who uses a variety of forms of reflections to “think [...] about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about” (quoted above). Consider also Cavell’s autobiographical remarks that his starting impulse for writing about films, and for writing *The World Viewed* in particular,

“was to demonstrate that movies may be written about, and that some are worth thinking and writing about, with the same seriousness that any work of art deserves, with the same specificity of attention to the significance of the work at hand and to the formal devices of the work by means of which this significance is achieved.” (Cavell 1979a: 163, my emphasis)

The present chapter reflects on this peculiar subject-object relation. It tries to understand films “as differently configuring intellectual and emotional avenues that philosophy is already in exploration of” (see above) without the paternalistic attitude. It tries to understand philosophy as a transmedial phenomenon; an activity which is in principle can be expressed in more than just one medium, even though historically (academic) philosophy has developed as a verbal and scriptural activity.

I will use the concept of the figural for re-theorising the expression of philosophical thought across media. The present chapter uses conceptions of the figural as proposed by the film theorists David N. Rodowick and Catherine Constable. As a result, doing philosophy will be regarded as an activity that can be performed across media, i.e. as an activity which is not dependent on verbal or written expression alone.

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67 In his article “Der Rosarote Panther Lebt,” the media philosopher Frank Hartmann praises Vilém Flusser’s communicologist work as an approach which allows philosophising with media rather than philosophising on media. See Hartmann 2001: 142.

68 In *Vertrauen in die Welt*, Josef Früchtl interprets the Cavellian version of the relation between film and philosophy as one of partial mutual interdependency: For film, philosophy presents the opportunity to render the medium as more than mere entertainment; for philosophy, film is one of the necessary sites of philosophical self-understanding. More specifically, of “all forms of art, film offers the highest challenge for this philosophical and existential concern” (Früchtl 2013: 201, my translation). Früchtl shows that Cavell’s philosophy of film is “not simply essentialistic but culturalistic” (Früchtl 2013: 205, my translation). As far as Cavell is concerned, film naturally assumes a “role of cultural self-reflection [in US-American culture, PS] which in the European context is and has been carried out by philosophy and – another assumption – literature” (Früchtl 2013: 199, my translation).


70 See Rodowick’s study *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media* (Rodowick 2001: preface and ch. 1).
3.2 Thinking with Hands

The critical attitude of traditional philosophy against alternative ways of doing philosophy suggests a certain degree of philosophical media blindness: not so much against reflecting philosophically on media – it is rather an unwillingness to acknowledge other media as potentially expressive of philosophical thought.\footnote{There actually exists a flourishing sub-discipline of media philosophy in the wake of the so-called medial turn in cultural theory. The accusation of media blindness therefore does not apply to philosophy as a whole. For instance, in the social-culturalist German philosophy community, scholars such as Lorenz Engell, Frank Hartmann, Gertrud Koch, Sybille Krämer, Alexander Roesner, Mike Sandbothe, Martin Seel and Matthias Vogel are representative of this tendency (see the bibliography). These scholars are, roughly, very much influenced by pragmatism and sociological theories and theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann and Villem Flusser. Specifically, Sandbothe is a major representative of a pragmatist media philosophy, while Hartmann’s point of departure in his textbook Medienphilosophie is Villem Flusser’s Kommunikologie (see Hartmann 2000; see also Hartmann 2001). The edited volume Medienphilosophie: Beiträge zur Klärung eines Begriffs by Münker, Roesler and Sandbothe provides a valuable overview of the various directions of current media-philosophical research (see Münker, Roesler and Sandbothe (eds.) 2003). The most nuanced philosophical account of the concept of a medium is perhaps Matthias Vogel’s Medien der Vernunft (Vogel 2001a). Expanding on Donald Davidson’s interpretationalist philosophy and various critical theory philosophers, Vogel attempts to integrate media concepts in an extended concept of rationality which incorporates non-linguistic forms of communication as parts of processes of signification (see Vogel 2001a: Vorwort; Einleitung). Vogel understands non-linguistic communication as a particular case of mediated action, and language therefore as one medium amongst others (see Vogel 2001a: 12). This attempt at widening the area of (potentially philosophical) rational signification is closely related to the concept of (co)figuration of philosophical thought across media in the present chapter. Another extended study on (written) language and philosophy can be found in Werner Konitzer’s Medienphilosophie (Konitzer 2006).}

This is perhaps not all too surprising: Reflection on the media in which philosophical thought is expressed confront the more basal metaphilosophical question of the characteristics of philosophical thought as contrasted with other ways of thinking.\footnote{The philosopher in the armchair is a cousin of the brain without a body, and thereby reminiscent of a sort of embodied version of Descartes’ res cogitans, a thinking substance which is disconnected from the world of spatial extension – a ‘brain in the armchair,’ so to speak, a less radical version of Hilary Putnam’s brains in a vat. De Rougemont’s aphorism finds surprising expressions in contemporary digital screen culture, in which the manufacturer has been replaced by the desk worker who repairs things by hitting specific hot key combinations on a computer keyboard, or by using touchscreens and gesture recognition. Gesture recognition famously features in MINORITY REPORT (Spielberg, 2002) or STAR TREK episodes years before Microsoft’s Kinect system introduced that technological fantasy into everyday life. MINORITY REPORT and other science fiction films such as TOTAL RECALL (Wiseman, 2012) exemplify Hollywood’s ability to sell off as their own visionary imagination technological innovations which are already tested behind the closed doors of high-tech laboratories.} Denis de Rougemont’s aphorism at the beginning of this chapter provides an elegant back entrance to the issue. De Rougemont proposes that “think[ing] with hands” is “man’s true condition,” as opposed to thinking in and from the armchair – which is, as stereotypes have it, the favourite place of reflection of armchair philosophers, or “[c]erveaux sans mains” (de Rougemont 1936: 147).\footnote{De Rougemont’s call for reuniting action and thought was influential for the French existentialist movement. De Rougemont’s “pensée engagée” also aptly described the activities of committed intellectuals who tried to influence political processes (see Theofanidis 2013).}

De Rougemont’s essay “Penser avec les mains” substitutes an alleged dichotomy between thinking and action with the diction that “la vraie condition de l’homme, c’est de penser avec ses mains” (de Rougemont 1936: 147).\footnote{De Rougemont uses the “thinking with hands” metaphor differently for emphasizing dominant figures of thought in modern philosophical aesthetics: “Thinking, or the ‘play of ideas’ in Kant’s account, shows and thickens if expressed by the hand and absorbed by the eye. Yet it soars weightlessly if released by breath to enter the ear.” (Rodowick 2001: 34). Rodowick describes how aesthetics since Schelling contrasts the “more material and gravity-laden” arts such as painting and sculpturing against rather “spiritual” arts such as poetry.} He describes thought as an activity which is always expressed with specific means of expression, and therefore is (always already) mediated.\footnote{Richard Raatsch calls metaphilosophy “Philosophiephilosophie”. See Raatsch 2000. This might appear banal at first, but it is the starting point for a non-hierarchical conception of the media of philosophical thought which allows media of philosophical thought imply questions about the nature of philosophy}
exploring the philosophical potential of film without relying on a hierarchical notion according to which traditional, written philosophy is the original source against which ‘philosophical film’ must live up to.

The debate on the philosophical potential of film is at heart a debate on the possible media of philosophical expression. This shifts the burden of proof from film to philosophy. Instead of justifying the idea that films can be philosophically valuable, one can ask: What would be reasons against that claim? De Rougemont and Godard suggest that the conduct of thought requires operative tools. Using the written or spoken word then can be seen as one among many possible tools for philosophical thought, and claiming that they are the only adequate ones would require further argument.

3.3 Thinking Philosophically with Film: Terminological Obstacles

So if thinking with hands can be praised as being man’s true condition, what about thinking philosophically with or through film? How does one think with film? What is philosophy, or perhaps philosophical thought, through audiovisual media?76 Traditional philosophy rejects film (or, for that matter, literature, theatre, or painting) as an inadequate expression of philosophical thought.77 Historically, philosophy’s media blindness is concerned with the expression of philosophical thought rather than with its genesis. Especially philosophers with literary or at least cultural-social inclinations have repeatedly written about the effect of their bodies and of the world in general on the genesis or character of their philosophical thoughts.78

The most influential reflection on the genesis of philosophical thought can perhaps be found in Plato’s “Seventh Letter”: Philosophical insight

“does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself. [...] And if I had thought that these subjects ought to be fully stated in writing or in speech to the public, what nobler action could I have performed in my life than that of writing what is of great benefit to mankind and bringing forth to the light for all men the nature of reality? But were I to undertake this task it would not, as I think, prove a good thing for men, save for some few who are able to discover the truth themselves with but little instruction; for as to the rest, some it would most unseasonably fill with a mistaken contempt, and others with an overweening and empty aspiration, as though they had learnt some sublime mysteries.” (Plat. L. 7.341c-e)

Plato’s account of doing philosophy involves continuous dialogic interaction. In the Dialogues, philosophical insight or knowledge comes to fruition through a dialogue

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76 This varies Rodowick’s question “[w]hat is history, or perhaps historical thought, through visual culture?” (Rodowick 2001: 171)
77 Filmmakers and theorists of film have thought about the relation of film (or moving-image media) to thought since the early phases of the medium. The question is thus not a new one (see the remarks on Stimmerberg and Papini in chapter 1.1) A comparatively new development is that professional philosophers, i.e. those academics affiliated with philosophy departments, seriously reflect on the philosophical merits of non-linguistic media of expression.
78 Examples are Walter Benjamin’s flaneur discovery of the shock effects of the modern metropolis on traditional world views (see Benjamin 1996 [1929] and Benjamin 1996 [1935/6]), Michel de Montaigne’s complaints that “[m]y thoughts sleep if I sit still; my fancy does not go by itself as when my legs move it” (quoted in: Scheller 2010: 62), or Nietzsche’s philosophical wanderings in the mountain ranges of Sils-Maria.
between philosophers. For Plato, written philosophy is not an adequate form of philosophising because it a fixed and therefore inferior record of philosophical insights. Interestingly, however, the dialogues exemplify the process character of philosophical knowledge acquisition through dialogues between a philosophical teacher and his pupils. So, in a way, the amount of interaction within Plato’s thought as we know it could be used to turn around claims against the philosophical character of film by insisting that written philosophy itself does not live up to imposed (Platonic) standards. Indeed, there is a certain irony throughout Plato’s repeated arguments against the arts (which he put even further in the *Politeia*). As John Mullarkey puts it in his book *Philosophy and the Moving Image*, “Plato banished the poets, yet he wrote like a poet.” (Mullarkey 2009: xi)

Current talk about the relation between film and philosophy regularly suffers from a number of imprecisions. The first one concerns exactly this correlation of “film” with “philosophy”. More precisely, film-philosophy aims at contributing to the question whether films can be (audiovisual) *expressions* of philosophical thought. In contrast, philosophy is *prima facie* predominantly expressed by the written or spoken word. According to this, film is a medium, while philosophy – or rather, philosophical thought (or discourse) – is expressed in (or with the help of) a medium. Therefore, strictly speaking, the direct comparison “can films be philosophy” – often found in film-philosophical discourse – should rather be formulated as the question: can films be expressions of philosophical thoughts?

This does not mean that whatever is considered as being traditional philosophy exhausts the expressive *potentiae* of its preferred medium of thought. On the contrary, expression of philosophical thought in the medium of the written or spoken word uses specific ‘formal frameworks’ which are passed on and slightly modified from generation of philosopher to generation of philosopher. Among these traditional (academic) forms are (mainly non-narrative) academic papers, book-long treatises and conference presentations which all adhere to sets of rules which in turn again determine the form in which philosophy is done.

This leads to a second inadequacy of direct comparison: As addressed in chapter 2, in the current discourse on film philosophy, it is often *narrative* fiction films which are compared to ‘philosophy’ – and philosophy is predominantly a non-fictional written (academic) discourse. But direct comparison of philosophical insights gained from these two is not possible, because both belong to – borrowing freely from Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* – different discursive formations. What is needed is a comparative mechanism which allows comparing these two. In principle such translations already happen when, say, one tries to adapt insights gained from a treatise on modal logic for the formulation of (ordinary-language) philosophical insights.

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79 See Plato, *Phaidros* 276bff.
80 This counters Constable’s remark on “the differences between the two media, philosophy and film.” (Constable 2009: 82). For Constable this concept use is rather a convenient short-hand than a full-fledged medial position.
81 See also chapter 2. Mike Sandbothe suggests that writing-based kinds of philosophy encourage a dominance of theoretical, contemplative philosophical questions about reality, time, and man’s place in the world, while modern forms of discourse sort of intrinsically combine such questions with their moral implications, with – as Sandbothe says in the tradition of Aristotelian philosophy – the question of which insights make one a better human being (see Sandbothe 2004, first section).
Looking at philosophical literature on film, one usually can detect some ‘extraction mechanism’ at work: a theorist/philosopher extracts whatever philosophical ‘content’ she finds in a given narrative film and compares this extract to whatever philosophical argument, idea or position she has found elsewhere.83

If these two objections are correct, the comparison at stake in the shorthand expression “film and/as philosophy” is one between ‘philosophical films’ and ‘philosophical academic texts,’ where both expressions serve as shorthand expressions for ‘films which express philosophical thoughts’ and ‘academic texts which express philosophical thoughts’. What is needed, then, is a theoretical framework that more precisely allows the comparison of, or at least correlation of, these different media for the expression of philosophical thought.

3.4 Media of Philosophical Thought

But why is it so important to reflect on the media in which philosophical thoughts are expressed? If one adheres to a simple container-content metaphor, then media are only the package in which the essence of philosophical thought is delivered. Philosophical thought would be an immutable essence which is simply packaged in different ways.84 But if one subscribes to a contrasting conception, the choice of a specific medium of thought has consequences not only for how thought is expressed, but also changes the character of such thought: When thought is dependent on its expression via a medium, the choice of medium retroacts on and therefore shapes the expression or form of thought. This allows understanding the traditional form of academic philosophical discourse as one possible form of philosophical expression – another one being philosophising via film.

Rodowick also argues against the container metaphor in a Deleuzian fashion. In The Virtual Life of Film he writes:

“Neither thought nor creation occurs without a medium. A medium in this sense is not a passive or recalcitrant substance subject to artistic will. It is itself expressive as potentiæ, or powers, of thought, action or creation. But these powers are variable and conditional. In exploring their potential we discover the conditions of possibility of a medium; in exceeding or exhausting them we may in fact create a new medium, and new powers of thought and creation.” (Rodowick 2007a: 45, original emphasis)

In another passage, Rodowick concludes that a “medium, then, is nothing more or less than a set of potentialities from which creative acts may unfold.” (Rodowick 2007a: 85). Media thus shape the expression of thought, they even express “powers” of thought in the sense that a given medium expresses certain aspects of what human thinking is able to express. Expressive possibilities retroact on the actual expression of thought. One needs to explore the expression of thought in a given medium to discover its possibilities and limits.85

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83 As Constable shows, Thomas Wartenberg establishes such a comparative mechanism in conceptualising films as thought experiments as parts of philosophical arguments. See chapter 2.3.2 and Constable 2009: 15.
84 For a critique of such container metaphors, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s influential Metaphors we Live By (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).
85 This echoes Stanley Cavell, who for Rodowick encourages to “rethink the notion of a medium as a horizon of potentialities” (Rodowick 2007a: 84).
If the expression of philosophical thought varies across media, and if (academic) philosophy’s predominant form of expression is only historically contingent, then the exploration of the philosophical potential of film gains an additional value, also because the character and function of discourse in the contemporary world changes profoundly, as Rodowick argues, echoing Kittler: “Formerly, discourse was considered a linguistic activity; now it is a multimedial activity.” (Rodowick 2001: 212) The rise of new media from the invention of photography to contemporary multimodal and multicodeal media such as the internet significantly shapes and changes forms of discourse, and those new media give expression to “powers” or “potentiae” of philosophical thought which have not found expression (through the historically older media of expression) before.

Current film-philosophical literature acknowledges the importance of assessing film’s potential as a medium of expression of philosophical thought. For instance, Robert Sinnerbrink aims at film-philosophy as “an aesthetic, self-reflective, interpretative approach that puts philosophy in dialogue with film as an alternative way of thinking.” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 5, my emphasis). This approach fits into the framework sketched in chapter 1 of this book. For Sinnerbrink, film-philosophy “questions the common tendency to philosophically privilege conceptual theoretization over film aesthetics” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 7), and the film-philosophical involvement with film “prompts philosophy to reflect upon its own limits or even to experiment with new forms of philosophical expression” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 7, my emphasis). Thus, Sinnerbrink sketches an approach of “thinking with film” (Sinnerbrink 2011: 8) in at least two ways: First, using film to explore new ways of (conceptual) thinking and therefore as an inspiration for writing philosophically, and, second, using film as a means of expression of thought. But narrative films in particular predominantly consist in constellations of actions and events - where does the conceptual enter here?

The trick is to turn the issue upside down: Instead of trying to find ways of aligning film to philosophy, one should rather try to reconceptualise philosophy in such a way that the cinematic becomes one of the natural possible ways of expressing philosophical thought. This is also, in principle, the feminist film philosopher Catherine Constable’s approach. In Adapting Philosophy, she proposes a “reconceptualisation of philosophy as thought in figuration” (Constable 2009: 154). In the tradition of feminist philosophy, she challenges a definition of philosophy as “general, abstract, rational and reliant on logical arguments” and as “ahistorical and universal” (Constable 2009: 153), and replaces this definition with the notion that philosophy is “the place where thought is figured” (Constable 2009: 154):

“Philosophy is to be found wherever figuration forges imaginary pathways, creates new concepts and opens up new perspectives, it can take any form or combination of forms: visual, verbal and/or aural, and occurs everywhere and anywhere.” (Constable 2009: 154)

Differences notwithstanding, Constable’s position shares many traits with two other theorists who invoke the notion of figuration in reflecting on the philosophical

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66 Kittler is interesting in this respect: As the literary critic Philipp Goll writes in a review of two new volumes on Kittler’s work: “Kittler directs his attention exactly on those things that stand in the way of thinking. More precisely: what makes thought present in the first place.” (Goll 2013, my translation).

67 For a concise yet theoretically inspiring introduction to media history, see Jochen Hörisch’s introduction Eine Geschichte der Medien. Vom Urknall zum Internet (Hörisch 2004).
merits of film (or the arts). One of them is D.N. Rodowick, whose book *Reading the Figural* is an extensive meditation on Lyotard’s use of the same term (see below). The other is the German art theorist Gottfried Boehm, who sees that part of the justificatory pressure put on the intellectual and cognitive potential of film is grounded in the long history of the supremacy of language over the Iconic. Boehm attempts to expand the language-centred conception of *logos* by adding the ‘logos of the image’ to the ‘logos of language’. For him, “logos no longer dominates the potency of the image but rather admits its dependence on it.” (Boehm 2007: 36, my translation)88

3.5 Adapting Philosophy, Transmediality and Remediation

The problematic film-and-philosophy relation can be better understood by looking at adaptation, a concept used for conceptualising the transition between a literary text and its use in other media. The concept of adaptation traditionally describes an intermedial relation: a text in medium A is adapted in medium B. But the term already also inscribes a hierarchical normative relation: the text in medium B is an adaptation of a text in medium A which sort of provides the raw material for the adaptation. It is a post-text of a pre-text both temporally as well as hierarchically (because without the original text there would not be an adaptation). This echoes the hierarchy often found in academic film-philosophy literature: philosophy in film as something that comes after the fact, or that is only another version of what has already been said and thought (remember Mulhall’s criticism of seeing film as “philosophy’s raw material” and “source for its ornamentation” (Mulhall 2008a: 4. See the discussion in chapter 1.1).

Intermediality is here understood as a process involving the migration of narrative or non-narrative content from one conventionally distinct medium to another – e.g. from literature to cinema, audio play, theatre, or video game –, where the initial medium is also the pretext.89 Similarly to processes of adaptation, this pretext functions as a point of reference for the analysis or assessment of the post-text. The relation between both can be (but need not) be understood as being normative, insofar as the pretext can set the standard for the (qualitative) evaluation of the post-text.90

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88 Specifically, Boehm writes that there exist spaces of meanings beyond the logos of language which do not stand in a justificatory relation to the logos of language: “It is a *non-predicative meaning* which is not preceded by *linguistic* logos […]. *Beyond language* there exist enormous spaces of meaning, unexpected spaces of visibility, gesture, facial expression, and movement. *They do not need any improvement or retroactive justification through the word.* The logos is not one of predication.” (Boehm 2007: 492, my translation and emphasis). For Boehm, the image has, or is a *logos* in its own right, on the same footing as the *logos* of language.

89 This concept of media follows Werner Wolf’s account of intermediality (see Wolf 2008). The academic discipline which provides the concepts for such a framework is the study of intertextuality, intermediality and transmediality. Intertextuality became one of the dominant terms in literature studies in the late 60s, when the poststructuralist thinker Julia Kristeva used the work of Russian formalist Michail Bakhtin in order to postulate her delimited concept of intertextuality, according to which every text is an intertext, i.e. related to at least one other text. For an encompassing systematic and historical account of intertextuality and intermediality studies, see Irina O. Rajewsky’s introduction *Intermenialität* (Rajewsky 2002). Encyclopedic overviews can be found in Schmerheim 2012 and Wolf 2005b. On the concept of intertextuality, see Julia Kristeva’s original article on Bachtin (Kristeva 1996 [1967]); and Kurwinkel 2012a.

90 This was the dominant position in scholarship on the relation between film and literature until to the 1990s, since most scholars evaluated film adaptations of literary pretexts in terms of whether they could be regarded as ‘faithful’ adaptations of the original text. Contemporary scholarship on film adaptation is close to unified in its opposition against fidelity theories. See, for instance, textbook introductions and anthologies such as Timothy Corrigan’s *Film and Literature* (Corrigan 2011); Brian McFarlane’s *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (McFarlane 1996); or Kamilla Elliott’s *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Elliott 2003). Other standard books: Stam and Raengo 2005, Stam 2004, Chatman 1980, MacCabe, Warner and Murray (eds.) 2011.
The present investigation, however, wants to conceptualise the relation between pretext and post-text as non-normative, i.e. the dissertation forgoes concepts of fidelity: instead of asking whether a given adaptation is ‘faithful’ to its pretext, the interest is in describing the way in which the analysed films configure philosophical ideas prior to asking questions about an alleged adaptive process from a philosophical pre-text to film.

Like Constable, I am contrary to a “view of adaptation as a form of concretisation that is necessarily literal” (Constable 2009: 87). Even if a given film is ultimately analysed as an adaptation of a specific philosophical text or position (say, because the philosopher in question wrote the screen play or because, as WITTGENSTEIN TRACTATUS [Forgács, 1992], the film title openly invites the idea that it is an adaptation of a work of [written] philosophy), this does not mean that the evaluation of the film is necessarily subject to normative standards of adaptation (as represented by fidelity theories). Of course, the adaptation aspect is one element of film-philosophical analysis, but it is not the only one, and it is clearly not the deciding one. Even a filmic adaptation of a work of written philosophy should be analysed as a potentially independent work of filmic philosophy with its own standards of philosophicality.^[91]

For Constable, the concept of adaptation is a mechanism for “linking philosophical and filmic text” (Constable 2009: 41) that is effected by the “symbolic and conceptual aspects of figuration” (ibid.). Her main concern is not to fall back into dichotomies such as perceptual/conceptual when discussing the relation between a filmic and a ‘philosophical’ text (see Constable 2009: 46). She is also against conceptualising adaptation as a kind of ‘direct translation’ under a “verbal-to-visual model” (Kamilla Elliott; quoted in Constable 2009: 47) which is impossible anyway because of the different modal characteristics of both. Instead, like the model presented in this dissertation, Constable uses the concept of figuration in order to understand film texts as adaptations of philosophical texts while simultaneously doing justice to the specific characteristics of both: “focusing on the figural offers common strategies for reading both types of texts.” (Constable 2009: 63)

Consequently, one should be cautious in conceptualising philosophical films as mere adaptations of philosophical ideas or texts. The expression of philosophical thought in different media certainly involves transitional processes such as the migration of ideas found in non-fictional philosophical literature to film. However, specifically philosophical films are rarely simple adaptations of single texts; they rather incorporate or (re-)configure philosophical ideas which might also have been expressed in philosophical treatises without necessarily being tied to a given expression in a prior text.

By way of example: The idea of film as adaptation stands behind the assumption that the MATRIX films are adaptations of the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard (see Constable 2009). Constable’s concept of adaptation is very specific, since she tries to “think of philosophy itself as a form of adaptation” (Constable 2009: 64). But understanding the films in such a way still steers attention dominantly to the question whether they are...

^[91] A good exemplification of this position is, perhaps, the use of philosophical ideas or characters in literary fiction: For instance, Irvin D. Yalom’s fictional novels When Nietzsche Wept, The Schopenhauer Cure and The Spinoza Problem by their own standards depart from the philosophical works or biographies of named philosophers, and they certainly aspire to give a somewhat accurate representation of some of these philosophers’ philosophical positions. Still, however, they can (and should be) read as fundamentally autonomous literary-philosophical reflections on their themes. See Yalom 2012; Yalom 2005; Yalom 1992.
accurate renderings of Baudrillard’s ideas, instead of simply considering the ways in which the films examine topics addressed by Baudrillard as well. Constable explicitly approaches the question of the philosophical merits of the MATRIX films through a thorough and critical discussion of the idea of film-as-adaptation. Indeed, Constable eventually concludes that “The Matrix Trilogy takes up and transforms Baudrillard’s work, thereby creating its own postmodern position.” (Constable 2009: 150).

Here I propose to evaluate philosophical ideas in films as parts of transmedial processes while reserving the term ‘philosophical adaptation’ to films which obviously or even intentionally adapt specific ideas (e.g. WITTGENSTEIN [Jarman, 1993], WITTGENSTEIN TRACTATUS, THE ISTER [Barison and Ross, 2004] or the direct and indirect references to Baudrillard in the MATRIX films). That is, like so many other ideas generated by human beings, philosophical ideas should be understood as phenomena of the human mind which can be – and actually are – expressed in different media, each of which has at its disposal specific means of expressing these ideas. Even though thoughts and ideas are always already expressed (i.e., uttered) in a specific medium of thought, from the theoretical point of view of this dissertation the idea comes first, not its expression in a specific medium.92 Such an approach has two advantages: One is not forced to understand philosophical thought as being tied to its oral or written expression and it is possible to talk about the philosophicality of a film without constantly having to recur to existing works of philosophy.

One last remark: Even though systematically written philosophy should not be granted any hierarchical priority over filmic philosophy, there is a historical sense in which the former comes first: Philosophy qua film does not replace philosophy qua written or spoken word – it supplements it as a form of remediation of traditional philosophy. Remediation describes a “formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 273). Philosophical films make use of certain forms of the expression of philosophical ideas, and they refashion them by using the expressive potentiae available to their medium.93 But how exactly does the “medial logic of film” (Sandbothe 2004) shape the expression of philosophical thought? In what ways does film, as John Mullarkey writes in Refractions of Reality, “challenge what we mean by philosophy and thought itself; in our case, not only might film be philosophical but, even worse, philosophy might be filmic.” (Mullarkey 2009: vxii)

92 According to Irina Rajewsky, transmediality signifies “media-unspecific phenomena, which can be applied in various media with the means of expression available to each medium, while the assumption of a constituting original medium is impossible or not important.” (Rajewsky 2002:13, my translation). The notion of transmediality allows for discussing the specific figuration of philosophical ideas expressed via films sans the necessity of (but with the possibility of) evaluating them in relation to their written counterparts in the first place.

93 Jochen Hörisch remarks that already at the time of Gutenberg’s invention of movable type printing, the content of new media most often consists of old media; his specific example is that the new post-Gutenberg books of the 15th century were often ‘reprints’ of hitherto hand-copied books such as the Bible or Plinius’ Historia Naturalis (see Hörisch 2004: 144). Remediation is thus not a new phenomenon.