Skepticism films: Knowing and doubting the world in contemporary cinema
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9 Tools for Philosophical Film Analysis

In preparation of the case studies in chapter 10 and 11, the aim of the present chapter is to reflect on the methodology and analytic tools needed for properly analysing (rather than merely interpreting) films from a philosophical perspective. Section 9.1 outlines basic challenges to philosophical film analysis, and proposes a simple three-step procedure for philosophically approaching single films. Section 9.2 exemplifies some of the problems an analytically under-informed philosophical investigation of films can encounter. The chapter concludes with a short overview of the cinematic means of expression under analysis in the case studies (section 9.3).

9.1 Philosophy and Film Analysis

The “hybrid nature of cinematic expression – which combines moving photographic images, sounds, and music, as well as speech and writing” (Rodowick 2001: 35f.) poses the most complex challenge to a systematic analysis of film. More precisely, the medium’s hybridity derives from three characteristics: Films are multimodal as well as multicodal, and they invoke extra-textual contexts which influence the understanding of a given film’s ‘meaning’.

Films are multimodal because, when screened, they address different senses at once, i.e. the sense of hearing, the sense of vision, and indirectly (and in some cases directly) the senses of smell and touch. They are multicodal because they employ a multitude of different semiotic systems, such as writing, numerics, language, gestures, mimics, or graphic elements. Nevertheless, spectators usually experience a film as an “organic unity” (Gast 1993: 53, my translation) – and not as a discontinuous conglomerate of random sign systems.

Adding to this complexity, the multimodal and multicodal character of films generates overarching structures which are not directly ‘perceivable’ but rather inferred. Examples are the dramaturgic structure of a film, and extra-filmic references, such as allusions to other films and pop-cultural phenomena. The latter can only be detected and understood by spectators which are in command of culturally specific background knowledge. For instance, filmmakers can create a film as a homage to other, earlier films.

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288 Throughout the history of cinema, there have been attempts to incorporate smells and haptic elements into the film experience. See Schmerheim 2013: 115f.
289 This paragraph follows Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013: chapter 2.1.
290 Following this basic insight, the film scholar Helmut Korte distinguishes between product analysis (Produktanalyse), reception analysis (Rezeptionsanalyse), and context analysis (Kontextanalyse) of a film. Only the first category of analysis can go along without addressing extra-textual references of a film (see Korte 2010: 28). The inclusion of context and reception is most important for film-historical studies.
Filmmakers can play with the different degrees of background or cultural knowledge in the members of an audience. This is perhaps most evident in so-called “family entertainment films” – films that explicitly address multiple audience groups, in this case: children as well as adults. Family entertainment films tend to play with the phenomenon that members of an audience will understand a given film scene in different ways, depending on their cognitive and cultural competence. For instance, in the Pixar family entertainment film FINDING NEMO (Stanton and Unkrich, 2003) there is a film scene in which the piscine main characters come across a group of jaws who invite them to join their “Fishaholics” self-help group, which is supposed to help the latter to become or stay vegetarian jaws. For an adult spectator, this scene is an obvious reference to “Alcoholics Anonymous,” while children without such background knowledge will simply enjoy the (quite funny) film scene.

The methodological challenge does not so much consist in identifying specific instantiations of aesthetic or narrative strategies. As the plethora of introductory textbooks shows, film studies is in command of well-established tools for analysing the uses and effects of camera strategies, sound strategies, or montage strategies. Rather, the challenge is to grasp the interplay of these elements, and to unify all these divergent elements into a coherent written (or, for that matter, spoken or audiovisual) analysis of the film in question. Since it is obviously impossible to exhaust all aspects a film raises, a case study needs to focus on selected aspects while neither unduly imposing analytic pre-assumptions onto the film nor neglecting other potentially important elements.

In the philosophical analysis of films, the standard challenges of film analysis are heightened by the need to explicate a given film’s philosophical ‘merit’ or ‘content’ without imposing, from the outset, a distorting philosopher’s perspective. Philosophical film analysis should try to approach its films as neutrally as possible, and not with a predetermined wish to find philosophy in it.

Philosophical film analysis is also challenging because, as Gilles Deleuze maintains, philosophy is a discipline of human thought which tends to deal in the creation of and reflection on concepts, not percepts. But the multimodal and multicodal entity we understand as being a film is, prima facie, a percept, something which works on our senses and on our higher-level cognitive capacities rather than on the latter alone. If this
is so, one needs a routine for extracting the philosophical-conceptual from the perceptual – or one needs to understand how the perceptual ‘in itself’ is already philosophical, i.e. a perhaps alternative but hierarchically equal way of expressing philosophical thought. Chapter 3 outlined a conception of philosophical thought which basically agrees with John Mullarkey’s position that “the power of film [is] simultaneously perceptual and conceptual” (Mullarkey 2009: xiii). Constable, invoking Michele Le Doeuff’s work, also raises awareness to the “conceptual role played by imagery within philosophy” (Constable 2009: 6) – that is, even traditional philosophy is not entirely conceptual.

Methodologically, film-philosophical analysis as understood in this dissertation consists of three steps: The first step formulates guiding research questions which are based on a first, speculative assessment of the philosophical issues addressed in the film(s) which is based on a first, intuitive understanding of the narrato-aesthetic design and intentions of the film. The guiding question for the analysis of skepticism films is, of course, is how these films address the varieties of the problem of knowing. Chapter 7 has already presented speculative assessments of selected films as skepticism films. It is important to keep in mind that such an assessment cannot exhaust the analytic and expressive potential of a film: While, for instance, the play with philosophical ideas is an integral element of the MATRIX films, one can also analyse them as action vehicles which are adorned with philosophical issues. As with every product of human culture, there is always a multitude of possible perspectives on them. As Mullarkey puts it in Refractions of Reality, “[t]here are more effects in film than can ever be captures by textual ‘philosophy’ (so-called), for more is produced on screen and in the audience than simply representations of stories, of gender, or even of philosophy.” (Mullarkey 2009: 3)

Secondly, the chosen research questions inform the focus of subsequent in-depth analyses. The analytic results should be verifiable by independent readers of the analysis. Visualisations facilitate such a task (for examples, see chapter 7.5), as does the use of screenshots, film clips and precise references to sequence protocols of the film. The sequence protocols are a basis for short plot summaries, which, together with background information about the production of the films in question, initiate the written film analysis. Sequence protocols are also an indispensable tool for understanding and visualising the dramaturgic structure of a film and for visualising the use of a film’s various means of expression. In addition, screen plays of the films,
which often contain directions concerning the setting and the behaviour of the characters, provide useful further information.

This second step is supposed to explicate the narrato-aesthetic structure and strategies of a film. Even if the penultimate result of the overall analysis is that the film cannot properly be regarded as having “philosophical merits,” it will have explicated how philosophical ideas influence the aesthetic and narrative design of films. Even though not many films are philosophical in the sense of being a contribution to philosophically serious discourse, they can exemplify the ways in which philosophical issues and ideas pervade contemporary (pop-) culture, and are therefore, in Cavell’s words, reflections “about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about” (Cavell 2005 [1983]: 92).

Thirdly, on the basis of in-depth analysis one can explicitly correlate the film to philosophical issues, to philosophical ideas, specific discourses in philosophical literature, etc. The separation of these two steps reduces the danger of imposing a predetermined philosophical perspective on the film under analysis, even though it does not entirely eliminate it. One example: An analysis of the MATRIX films typically explicates the films’ plot and story and the films’ ways of aesthetically presenting its diegesis. It is possible to do this without invoking subsequent questions about the philosophical plausibility or stringency of the films.

Proceeding from the second to the third analytic step, however, one should avoid what Simon Critchley calls in a Husserlian fashion describes as a “hermeneutic banana skin”:

“To read from cinematic language to some philosophical meta-language is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated. […] Any philosophical reading of film has to be a reading of film, of what Heidegger would call der Sache selbst, the thing itself. A philosophical reading of film should not be concerned with ideas about the thing, but with the thing itself, the cinematic Sache.” (Critchley 2005: 139)

The aim of the case studies here is indeed to pay attention to “the thing itself” before moving on to elaborated philosophical evaluations. The methodological distinction between analysis and evaluation is supposed to support this aim, even though it is clear that analysis always already includes evaluative elements.

9.2 The Status Quo of Philosophical Film Analysis

As flourishing as contemporary film-philosophical literature is, there is no real discourse on the problem of analysing specific films from a philosophical perspective. Put bluntly, a surprisingly high amount of current film-philosophical case studies still mostly focuses on an exegesis of the films’ content and dialogues, enriched with a rather eclectic attention to single aesthetic details of the films. Rarely do philosophically motivated books on filmmakers or single films include an extensive reflection on the aims, powers and limits of philosophical film analysis. All too often they still treat film as a kind of literature by other means. But film is not merely literature by other means. Even books which take pride in analysing the particular in films, such as Stephen Mulhall’s *On Film* or Robert Sinnerbrink’s *New Philosophies of Film*, do not include explicit reflections on
the way in which a philosopher is supposed to find the philosophical in the films under scrutiny (see Mulhall 2008a and Sinnerbrink 2011).299

A paradigmatic example for film-philosophical eclecticism is Gilles Deleuze’s film-philosophy:300 The Cinema books invoke a myriad of aesthetic or narrative examples which are derived from the entire history of film until the late 1960s, often highlighting certain striking aesthetic features of the films discussed. But Deleuze rarely devotes more than one or two paragraphs to the discussion of the film.301 This is also true of Cavell’s writings, which reveal a high aesthetic competence of their author, a former jazz musician. But nevertheless, in the discussion of single films, Cavell tends to focus on exegeses of narrative and dialogue.

Films are not moving images and sound – films are structured kinetic audio-visions, structured audio-visions in motion. Film-philosophy still is highly infested with an outdated use of terms like “motion pictures” or “moving images”. One major film-philosophical example for this is the work of Noël Carroll – a highly precise philosopher who has devoted a lot of intellectual energy to attempts at defining films as essentially being moving images (see Carroll 2008). Visualistic parlance is even noticeable in Deleuze’s terms image–movement and image–temps, even though he is highly aware of cinema’s audio-visual nature (see for instance chapter 9 on “The components of the Image” in the second Cinema book).

Put differently: Sound is never the mere auxiliary or addition to a visual medium. Even so-called silent film is nowadays defined through the absence of sound (and the era of talkies is, tellingly, nowadays defined through the advent of sound).302 Understanding film as a merely visual medium means missing its philosophical potential. Film is, of course, from early on highly defined by the dominant presence of visuality. But it is impossible to grasp the impact of contemporary screen culture without being aware of the indispensable role played by sound in the audio-visual fusion we experience in the movie theatres.

In Adapting Philosophy, Catherine Constable points out one of the pitfalls that awaits film-philosophers who are not aware of the integral role of sound in film, or of the effects of its interactions with the visual track and other filmic means of expression. It is particularly problematic to regard dialogues in films in direct analogy to the expression of philosophical positions: “The use of dialogue as a surrogate for philosophy

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299 It is telling that none of the major compendiums on the philosophy of film include single entries or articles on “analysis” or similar methodological topics. This is, of course, the result of film philosophy’s origins in the area of philosophy rather than film or media studies: Most of the early major film philosophers were and are philosophy or literature professors rather than specialists in the field of film studies, a tendency that only changes now. Philosophers such as Cavell even flirt with their status as non-specialists (see Cavell 1979a: xvi and 12f.). This parallels the development of the field of adaptation studies: The first theorists to focus on these topics, such as Seymour Chatman, came from literature studies and implicitly imposed the methodology they learned there to film, without paying proper attention to the fact that the narrative media of literature and film rely on different sets of expressive possibilities. Nowadays few film scholars would treat film adaptations as a mere instantiation of literature-by-audio-visual means.

300 Even though Deleuze himself objects against this label (see Mullarkey 2009: 78), this is essentially what he is doing: It is a philosophy of film as well as a philosophy of film as philosophy.

301 John Mullarkey makes the same point in Mullarkey 2009: 128.

302 See Rick Altman’s extensive study on Silent Film Sound (Altman 2004). Altman shows that even early silent filmmakers tried to find ways of integrating or at least adding sound elements to their soundless film reel projections. Silent films such as METROPOLIS (Lang, 1927) even could only be restored because the film score gave exact cues for the film’s original cut, revealing that Gottfried Huppertz’ score was intended as an integral rather than additional element of the film’s design and effects on its audience.
involves the editing out of elements that might undermine the representation of the speaker as the disembodied Word.” (Constable 2009: 82) What is said in a film should always be interpreted or analysed in relation to what else is simultaneously heard and seen. Constable exemplifies this by an on-the-spot analysis of the verbally uttered philosophical positions of Morpheus in the first MATRIX film: She criticises that many analyses of the MATRIX films tend to take whatever one of the main characters, Morpheus, says at face value, in effect establishing him as “the voice of truth […]”, his dialogue presented as pure philosophical exposition” (ibid.). However, as Constable points out, the “interplay of visual, verbal, and aural elements” (Constable 2009: 85) positions Morpheus as an ambivalent figure whose declarations and beliefs should not be taken by the spectator as constituting the unanimously ‘official’ position of the film. The question of the ‘philosophical position’ of the MATRIX films will reappear again in chapter 10 – at this point it is simply important to keep in mind that in film-philosophical analysis should not base its exegesis on more than just one expressible dimension. To quote Constable again:

“Rather than simply privileging the dialogue as the closest analogue to the written word, successful philosophical analyses of film texts have to pay attention to the verbal, visual and aural dimension of filmic figuration.” (Constable 2009: 157)

9.3 Dimensions of (Philosophical) Film Analysis

While chapter 9.1 outlines the three basic elements involved in the kind of philosophical film analysis proposed here, the present section will discuss the importance of paying attention to the specific means of expression used by the films under analysis.

As outlined in chapter 7, the case studies in the subsequent chapters will investigate groups of films rather than single films will focus on one of the varieties of skepticism which are derived from Davidson’s tripartite distinction of varieties of knowledge: knowing the world, knowing oneself, knowing others (see chapters 4 and 7). Analysing more than one film at once strengthens the position that skepticism, in one or more of its several varieties, is a recurring issue in contemporary screen culture. It also allows showing how contemporary filmmakers creatively play with skepticist thought experiments, and how these variants affect philosophical perspectives on these films. The subsequent comparative case studies are supposed to reveal in more detail how such films work, and how changes to basic skepticist models affect their philosophical evaluation.

The case studies will address the narrato-aesthetics of their films, based on a traditional distinction of four basic areas of film analysis (see fig. 9.1):

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303 The dimensions of film analysis sketched here follow Kurwinkel/Schmerheim 2013: chapter 3; see also Korte 2010, Mikos 2008, and Bordwell and Thompson 2013 for similar approaches.
One focus area is narration and narrative, particularly the overarching dramaturgic structure and character development of the films. As chapter 7 already showed, skepticism films play with different levels of reality, with multiple diegeseis. These multiple diegeseis are revealed to and concealed from the film characters as well as the film audience in different ways – and this affects the overall evaluation of how a given film can be understood as a cinematic skepticist thought experiment. For instance, skepticist thought experiments generally are based on (self-)deception scenarios. In the film, these sooner or later will be revealed or not. A further complicating factor is the multiple audience address of these films. There are always two groups of persons which can be discoverers of a deception situation: On the one hand characters of the film which are situated within or outside of the deception situation. On the other there are the spectators in the movie theatre or home cinema, which try to decipher the ‘real’ events of the film. Sometimes filmmakers may also decide to directly present their audiences with the fact that there is a deception scenario at play in the film (or not) from the outset. (In mainstream cinema, there will most likely always be answers to these film-ontological questions since Hollywood strongly relies on the principle of closure in its rendering of stories.) These ways of dealing with deception situations are interesting because they can be compared to variations of philosophical thought experiments.

Consequently, philosophical implications are not understood as mere by-products of a film’s narrative. Instead, it is argued here, such plot elements can and should be understood as integral parts of a film and be discussed as such. As a consequence, the logical structure, and coherence of a given skeptical possibility in a film should be examined, in part because the narrative structure of a skepticism film is influenced by the logical structure of skepticist thought experiments, as claimed in chapter 7. One could say that skepticism films follow a “narrative mode of reasoning” (Poulaki 2011:13).

Narrative affects the visual dimension, the second area of analytic focus, for instance the choice of camera strategy and the mise-en-scène. Mise-en-scène is here pragmatically understood as the staging of everything that happens in front of the camera: “setting, costume and lighting; second, movement within the frame” (Hayward 2013: 239).

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304 I here follow Wollen’s distinction between single and multiple diegeseis (see Walters 2008: 29).
305 The following definitions follow Sinnerbrink 2009: 46ff. Plot is the ordered structure of what is narrated; story is the narration of what happens chronologically. Style is the historical evolution of norms and cinematic technique used to order and structure (that is, to plot) the manner in which the story is narrated. So, style pertains to how plot is articulated.
Camera and sound strategies are then the way in which the mise-en-scène is orchestrated.307

The third analytic focus is on aurality, i.e., on film sound as the fusion of dialogue, sound design, and music. All elements of sound can assume a narrative function: Apart from conveying basic information about story and plot, dialogue contributes to the characterisation of characters; sound elements contribute to the flow of events as well as to the characterisation of the environment the film characters are located in; and music can shape the mood of the film as experienced by the spectators. Music also is frequently used as a narrative device for the development of the story.308

The fourth and final focus of analysis is on montage as the ordered temporal arrangement of the audio-visual material. Of course, montage is interrelated with all the other foci of analysis but is the crucial expressive strategy of film which allows, for instance, entangling different plot lines.309 In skepticism films, this is relevant because the way in which the film switches between plans of reality, between scenes with deceiving characters and scenes with deceived characters (or not) reveals details about the film’s narrative mode of reasoning. Also, montage is the quintessential tool for juxtaposing the other expressive dimensions of film and thereby bears a high philosophical potential. Chapter 1.4.1, already introduced Pudovkin’s idea of an “ideal-philosophical concatenation” (Pudovkin 2001: 76, my translation) which works with the expressive potential of contradictory information on the image and sound track of a film.

This fourfold distinction, even though facilitating analysis, again bears the pitfall of underestimating the complex fusion of all these elements of a film. For instance, sound is part of mise-en-scène because it allows including diegetic and non-diegetic sources which are not (yet) visible on-screen; montage is already an element of camera strategy due to decisions about what is visible or audible when in a given scene; camera strategies can be influenced by sound, for instance when they track the source of a sound heard off the frame; and dramaturgy as well as character development are co-dependent on the film’s entire audio-visible spectrum and vice versa. In short, even though the categories of film analysis are supposed to facilitate the process of analysis, they should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Analytic results in each dimension need to be brought into dialogue with each other.

307 Bordwell and Thompson 2013: chapter 4 and 5 extensively summarise common cinematographic strategies.
308 The film-historically best-known example perhaps is the scene in CASABLANCA (Curtiz, 1942), when the former lovers Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Elsa (Ingrid Bergmann) meet each other again after years when Sam (Dooley Wilson), the pianist in Rick’s bar in Casablanca, plays their common song "As time goes by" at Elsa’s request, inciting an infuriated Rick to come down to the bar from his office (timecode 00:32:08-00:36:15).
309 For an overview of editing techniques and styles, see Bordwell and Thompson 2013: chapter 6; and Kurwinkel and Schmerheim 2013: chapter 3.2.4. Béla Balázs nicely circumscribes some of the possibilities of montage: “Das Eigenartige an den rhythmischen Gebilden der Montage ist, daß die Elemente der verschiedensten Sphären zueinander kontrapunktiert werden. Nicht, wie in der Musik, nur Melodie zu Melodie, nicht, wie in der Architektur, nur Form zu Form. In der Montage werden Tempi und Formen, Bewegungen und Richtungen und inhaltliche Akzente noch dazu aufeinander abgetönt und zu einem ornamentalen Bewegungsgebilde komponiert. Die Elemente gehören also fünf verschiedenen Sphären und Dimensionen an. Das, was in der Synthese entsteht, ist etwas sechstes, ganz Neues und Besonderes. Ein rhythmisches Gebilde, das optisch erlebt wird und doch nicht sichtbar ist. Eisenstein nennt diese Wirkungen die ‘Obertöne der Montage’, die wie Quinten in der Musik für feine Ohren zuweilen hörbar werden, ohne zu klingen.” (Balázs 2001 [1930], S. 53)