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Film as Philosophy

A Hegelian Projection

There can be no doubt that philosophy is an academic discipline worth honouring. For many people it is even the most impressive form of thinking there is.¹ Unfortunately, however, it cannot always purport to belong to the intellectual avant garde. One example of this embarrassing situation is its link to popular culture. In simple terms, a Platonic-Christian culture of idealisation spanning two thousand years has once again left its mark. Whether or not there will ever be (or ever be able to be) a philosophy of pop music is uncertain, but since the mid-1990s philosophy has most definitely and comprehensively included the study of film, just as, in turn, the academic discipline Film Studies has been broadened to include philosophical theories.

Initiated by two very different philosophers, Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze, a bold theory is currently entertained within the philosophy of film whereby film itself is (a kind of) philosophy. As so often happens when philosophy makes a proposal in the genitive case – its most famous being the “critique of (pure) reason” – interpretation can waver between the *genitivus subjectivus* and the *genitivus obiectivus*. With the latter, philosophy of film is understood as philosophy about film; film is the object of philosophical contemplation; it is *philosophy of* (the medium) *film*. With the former, on the other hand, a philosophical quality is attributed to the film itself, not only in the sense that there are some films which have a philosophical quality, a sense which is barely controversial anymore, but also in the stronger sense that there are some films which themselves practise philosophy, and indeed in an even stronger sense that the *medium*

1. Incidentally, and quite trivially, as a philosopher – as a philosophy professor – one can repeatedly observe this in the reactions of those one happens to meet, even in the present day. When asked about one’s profession, if the answer is a history professor or a biology lecturer, the reaction of others usually involves a certain degree of respect. If the answer is a mathematician, that respect is likely to increase, albeit accompanied by a look of scepticism commonly reserved for eccentrics. In our secularised and democratically egalitarian society, mathematicians, like musicians, come across as relics of genius, the fallible human spirit seemingly able to participate in the beauty of an infallible abstract world (cf. Shaw 2013, pp. 6–8). If, however, the answer is that one teaches philosophy, that respect mingles with a childlike admiration. People will tell you that this is a very difficult, and yet at the same time very interesting subject; very abstract, and yet at the same time true to life. They will also tell you either that they have attempted to study it themselves, however sketchily, or that they wish they had studied it.

of film constitutes this intrinsic type of philosophy; in this sense film is understood as philosophy; it is *film as philosophy* (cf. Liebsch 2005, pp. 11–14; Smith & Wartenberg 2006, pp. 1–4; Falzon 2007, pp. 3–13).

Against this background, the theme of my contribution will be the stance of Robert Pippin regarding the film as philosophy theory. Or, somewhat vaguer and broader, what our stance regarding this theory could be drawing upon Pippin's film- and art-philosophical theories. Underlying my assertions will be two of Pippin's books.

The first is *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, in which Pippin defends several theories as follows (Pippin 2010, pp. 15–16). Firstly, Political Philosophy is concerned not only with the question of legitimacy, with clarifying the issue of when human beings within a social context legitimately have to obey, or must be permitted to command; in other words when the exercising of authority may be transferred to a certain group. In fact, for Political Philosophy the emotional and passionate dimension, in other words psychology, is equally essential. Secondly, this psychology is not appropriately comprehended as an empirical social science, but has to have recourse, thirdly, to the subjective empirical knowledge of the human race, to that dimension of the political which can only be conveyed from the 1st person singular/plural perspective. "We need to know what matters for people at a place and time, why it matters, what matters more than other things [...], what they are willing to sacrifice for, what provokes intense anger, and so forth." In order to find this out, narratives, films and other works of art are, fourthly, essential; they fulfil more than just an illustrative function. But that means, fifthly and most controversially of all for Pippin, that the interpretative work conducted by narratives, films and other works of art is itself philosophical work. Art would then be philosophy because it – art – is vital to the interpretation of (historical and circumstantial) empirical knowledge, which in turn is vital to Political Philosophy. Admittedly, Pippin can be observed to waver between whether art is essential to philosophy, or (merely) important. (The subtitle of his *Westerns* book only mentions importance.)

Articulated somewhat more generally, the context of his assumption would be as follows. If it is true that philosophy has to take seriously the human dimension of empirical knowledge, that dimension in which human beings narrate from their lives in the 1st person; and if it is true that films, like works of art, essentially help human beings to formulate their empirical knowledge and to understand themselves (albeit only ever temporarily) better, i. e. in a more differentiated manner; if, therefore, it is true that, on the one hand, philosophy relies on such artistic formulation of empirical knowledge and that to this extent artistic work can be termed philosophical work, then the question arises of whether artistic formulation of empirical knowledge is not, on the other hand, also reliant on phi-

losophy, in that one cannot (let us say: appropriately) interpret a film or a work of art without bringing philosophy into play. We then face the quandary of how exactly film/art and philosophy are related. Is there a *primacy* between the two? Is philosophy located above art; conceptual interpretation located above graphic, or more precisely empirical interpretation? Or is it quite the reverse? Is art located above philosophy? Or is there a *parity*, with art and philosophy located in a state of mutual reflection? This could be in a positive sense – with them requiring each other in equal measure – or in a negative sense – with them tending to be in conflict with each other. The prevailing opinion amongst philosophers is – of course – that philosophy is located above art, and that it has been since Plato. Very few philosophers view the situation in reverse. In his *System* from 1800, Schelling is one of the few. In his *Philosophy of Art* from 1803/04, however, Schelling is also one of those who argue in favour of an equal relationship, as do Adorno and Heidegger. So what does Pippin think in this context about art – in particular film – and philosophy?

This question leads me to my second literary approach to this theme. Within the framework of his Adorno lectures held at the University of Frankfurt, Hegel expert Pippin presented a new book on Hegel entitled *After the Beautiful*. In this book, Pippin describes his own standpoint as an "imaginative 'projection into the future' of the position defended in Hegel's lecture courses" on aesthetics. Pippin therefore projects into the future what we know historically as Hegel's aesthetics from the 1820s onto a visual art form which did not emerge until after 1860 and the innovations introduced to painting by Edouard Manet. Such a projection has to draw upon the famous hermeneutic distinction between the letter and the spirit in order to clarify whether it is possible in the spirit of Hegel – or more precisely: against the background of his theory of the absolute, in other words a jointly attained self-awareness, a successful cultural self-understanding – to comment on the modern visual arts. Within this context, then, Pippin specifies the relationship between philosophy and art by maintaining that works of art are not philosophy, but that they embody what he calls "aesthetic intelligibility", a readability and interpretability which is distinct from the conceptual intelligibility of philosophy (Pippin 2014, p. 2). Art is not philosophy because its intelligibility is not conceptual, but aesthetic or, in Hegel's language: sensible embodiment.

But what is the relationship between these two intelligibilities? Is their orientation one of primacy or parity? This question remains to be answered. Pippin refrains from addressing it directly, but clearly does not plead in favour of a primacy of art in the sense of an early Schelling or a postmodern theorist (cf. e. g. Welsch 1990, pp. 46 & 57: The aesthetic has to "touch the very core of thinking itself", and is "at present the only realistic type of thinking", for "it alone" is able to come to grips with our reality). It is not Pippin's style to make a claim as strong

as this (cf. Pippin 2014, p. 3, fn. 5). Conceptual thought does not attain fulfilment in sensible embodiment or aesthetic thinking. It is not the case that the "time" or cultural epoch which philosophy is supposed to "comprehend", according to Hegel's famous definition, is ultimately and best comprehended by art, or that the intelligibility of art could transcend cognitive and scientific statements (cf. Pippin 2014, p. 3–4 & 17).

On the other hand, neither does Pippin use Hegel to plead for a primacy of conceptual intelligibility. He actually rejects Hegel's notorious hypothesis about the end of art due to it being based, firstly, on a "premature assessment" that modern society has principally reconciled the oppositions and contradictions which uphold it and, secondly, on the assessment that art has to surrender its truth function to (scientific or discursive) philosophy since under modern conditions – that means under the conditions of an increasing abstractness and inconsistency of social relations – the aesthetic medium of sensible embodiment is principally unable to cope (Pippin 2014, p. 97).

What ultimately remains as an appropriate definition of the relationship between philosophy and art is therefore *parity*, corresponding to modern pluralism. And on this point Pippin aligns himself with two philosophers who have both, in their own ways, reacted positively to Hegel's aesthetics. I am talking about Adorno and Heidegger. According to Adorno, it is only possible to tell the truth about a society and a way of life by creating a context of mutual reference between philosophy and art, exemplified in the sentence: "It is for this reason that art requires philosophy, which interprets it in order to say what it is unable to say, whereas art is only able to say it by not saying it" (Adorno 1997, p. 94). Here Adorno follows the same lines as Schelling in his *The Philosophy of Art* from 1802/03. In contrast, the position of Heidegger concerning the parity paradigm is less clear. For him, art has primacy to the extent that it manifests the duality of simultaneous concealment and unconcealment of the truth-event. Here Heidegger adopts a stance within a tradition leading from Schelling in his *System* from 1800 to post-modern theorists. However, when philosophy grasps itself no longer as metaphysics, but simply as "thinking", then it is on a level of parity with art.

In reconstructing Pippin, what I have said about art can also *a fortiori* be valid for film. Film cannot *be* philosophy, or at least not while we practise philosophy as a primarily *conceptual* undertaking. Film can, firstly, illustrate particular philosophical themes and provide examples to support abstract theories, to be sure. Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* would then serve to illustrate the habitual consequences of mechanical assembly-line work. Secondly, film can grant us access to imagined historical and situative experiences and thus begin to make us aware of them, also to be sure. Thirdly, it can provide *counterexamples* to support theoretical assertions, especially in the form of thought experiments, and in so doing

potentially promote the crystallisation of new theories. Thought experiments generally take the form of a challenge, bidding us to imagine a counterfactual constellation of elements. 'Imagine that ...' is a challenge which can only aim at a hypothetical constellation or seek to dramatise it. But in both cases it has a narrative structure. As dramatised figments of the imagination, films do at least play the role of one of the *steps* in a scholastic philosophical argument. In this regard, current philosophers of film are largely in agreement (cf. Carroll 1996, p. 280–281, Wartenberg 2005, pp. 270–283, Smith & Wartenberg 2006, pp. 19–32, 33–42). The film *Matrix* (1999) then parallels Descartes' thought experiment of a deceitful evil demon or Putnam's variant involving brains-in-a-vat. But film can also, fourthly, represent a challenging opportunity to view it as a new form of perception and experience, and thus to think philosophically about perception and experience (or action, in the case of Pippin) in the first place. In this regard, film expands the subject matter of philosophy, the yardstick by which it necessarily measures its own potency. An outstanding testament to this, albeit not specifically for film, can be found in the book *Art As Experience* by John Dewey. And ultimately, fifthly, film can demonstrate an inherent connection to philosophy and to this extent be deemed genuinely philosophical. This, in any case, is the strong claim which formed the starting point for my paper, with Cavell and Deleuze as currently the most famous advocates of this hypothesis. However different their theoretical contexts might be, they both agree that (modern) film can give us back our "faith" or – to use a phrase less likely to lead to religious misinterpretation – trust in the world (cf. Früchtl 2013a). For Cavell, film *qua* film drives the problem of scepticism, in other words the denial of reality, to some ultimate head by only being able to reinstate the connection to the world at the price of establishing our absolute distance and isolation. The 'world viewed' is a world which is constituted by putting us in the condition of viewing unseen. For Deleuze, the concept of world or being centres around the three concepts of immanence (Spinoza), duration (Bergson) and affirmation (Nietzsche). Accordingly, being is without transcendence or divisions. The only form for its expression is temporal, not in the conventional sense (linear, infinitely divisible, infinitely extending), but in the sense of Bergson's *durée*. Accordingly, at any moment in the present, the entire past can undergo actualisation, making it 'virtually' existent. With Nietzsche this virtuality extends to the dimension of the future, albeit not as a return of the same, but as a return of difference; affirmation refers to the being of becoming. Film, as I interpret it, presents the world returned from the epistemological subject-object division in the ambivalent mode of the *as if*: as if that mentalistically aborted connection with the world could be reinstated. Cineastic experiences are – like aesthetic experiences in general, yet most particularly – ambivalent affirmations of ontological affirmation, evident substantiations of ontological realism. In them,

through the power of evidence, we experience how that tie with the world is not broken, or more precisely: does not evidently appear to be broken. These experiences strengthen us in our attitude of acting as if this tie were intact.

Taking these five aspects, the intelligibility which Pippin assigns to art/film comes above the first, but below the last: films do not simply serve an illustrative purpose, but neither do they offer any assistance to philosophy in matters of ontology. For Pippin, this intelligibility is located at the second and third, possibly also the fourth level: films provide imaginative experiences and innovative exemplifications, as well as the potential to extend the concept of experience itself. But this intelligibility is always of a sensible (visual, auditory, emotional, tactile) nature, remaining a constitutive element in the Hegelian sense.

Finally, I would like to postulate another hypothesis. Namely that film can similarly to visual art as interpreted by Manet, also be grasped as a projection presented by Hegel or, in a somewhat diluted form, as a *Hegelian projection*. And in two ways. Firstly, by interpreting film in terms of the theory of Modernity introduced by Hegel and later taken up by Habermas, Charles Taylor, as well as Pippin himself (cf. Früchtl 2009). Film is then, however, not only relevant to Political Philosophy, as presented by Pippin in his books, but also to philosophy concerned with the theory of Modernity. It then appears as an allegory of Modern subject theory. Certain genres – the western, the thriller and the science fiction film – can be read as expressions of the figure of the hero in Modernity. Or vice versa, the subject becomes the (dominantly male) hero of Modernity, whose story can be told on different levels, in my opinion three overlapping levels, namely the “classical”, “agonal” and “hybrid” levels. At the classical level, allegorised by the western, Modernity, or its principle of subjectivity, appears as a major substantiation of the self. At the agonal level, allegorised by the thriller, Modernity appears as a tragic or ironic battle of the ego with itself. And at the hybrid level, allegorised by the science fiction film, Modernity becomes creative and plays with its own elements in wild combination. What is so fascinating about the western, the thriller, the science fiction film? About the figure of the western hero, the gangster (or his counterpart, the dubious private detective or dogged policeman), about the cyborg? In Hegelian terms, it is fascination with the self, the self in its three dimensions of self-justification, self-combat and self-creation.

The other way is not historico-cultural, but of philosophical interest in a narrower sense. It leads us back to the ontological-existential problem, making it primarily less of a Hegelian and more of a Heideggerian issue. Of course a media-tion exists, as so often, namely in the position of Adorno. It is not devoid of a certain irony that Pippin's Adorno lectures in Frankfurt make no mention at all of the namesake of these lectures. And yet Adorno shows himself to be in close proximity to the concerns of Hegel and Heidegger, for example when he ponders

the linguistic character of art. For him, the Etruscan vases in the Villa Giulia, a former Papal summer residence in the north of Rome which is home to the Museo Nazionale Etrusco, are, namely, “eloquent in the highest degree”, and “that aspect of the Etruscan vases depends most likely on their *Here I am* or *This is what I am*”, a form of expression which seems to apply not only to objects: “Thus the rhinoceros, that mute animal, seems to say: ‘I am a rhinoceros!’” (Adorno 1997, p. 147). In scholastic philosophical terminology, the “Here I am” or “This is what I am” refers to the that-ness (*quodditas*) of things as opposed to their what-ness (*quidditas*). This is the starting point of Existentialism, with its doctrine that existence precedes essence both temporally and logically. In order to be able to define something conceptually, it first has to be (in both senses of the word) accepted (both received and assumed). Its epistemological equivalent is not conceptual determination, but presentation and appearing (*zeigen* and *sich zeigen*, with a connotation of “pointing”). In the same vein Adorno writes: “Images say: Behold!” They “point to” (*deuten auf*) something. So, what they “say” is: Look Here! (Adorno 1997, p. 221). They demand that we gaze at them. Hegel expresses this in his own fashion when he says that art “makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point” (quoted in Pippin 2014, p. 49) – though this metaphor can of course, from today's point of view, be interpreted in a more unfriendly, panoptic manner as influenced by Foucault (cf. Früchtl 2013b). Of course, a work of art cannot demand this literally, but only by deictic gesture. As Adorno goes on to say in the same place, it points to something, and the direction in which it points is, once again in Hegelian terms, twofold: both to itself and – beyond itself and away from itself – to something spiritual. In the context of the accusation that art is mere deceptive semblance, Hegel writes that “the pure appearance of art has the advantage that it points through and beyond itself; and itself hints at something spiritual of which it is to give us an idea” (Hegel 1975, p. 9). Film, qua film, is specialised in this *deictic gesture*. As an aesthetic medium which is based constitutively and in multiple ways on movement, it is capable of performing this gesture itself. In the case of film, movement has three different contexts: it is, firstly, the result of mechanics (the camera); secondly, the result of an objective illusion which, in turn, stems from the mechanics of an accelerated sequence of images (24 per second); and, thirdly, the result of a montage technique which, on the one hand, creates the impression of dynamic space, without which the body of the observer would have to move, and, on the other hand, the impression of dynamic time, leaping back and forth, enabling the observer to be in one fictitious place at one moment and in quite another at the next. Thus, film is indirect, non-verbal communication which employs the movement of images and looks: it is *gestus*.

This concludes my comments about film as a Hegelian projection. Since my concern has been the relationship of film, or more generally speaking of art, to philosophy, a specifically *aesthetic* manner of contemplating film has not been in the foreground. And yet I am loath to finish without at least establishing that the relationship between film and philosophy is one in which – in the words of Adorno, and thus yet again of Hegel (and, as I would like to add without further argument, those of John Dewey) – there are overlaps, as well as tensions. And it is only because this is the case that it is possible to perceive film as a cultural object with an irreducible intrinsic value, in other words an intrinsic value which cannot be reduced in any way, including to philosophical thoughts. Ultimately it is a good thing that film is *not* philosophy.

Translation by Sarah L. Kirkby

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