Travelling philosophy: from literature to film

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Conclusion

Originally, I embarked on this philosophic journey because I have had a long-standing fascination with the dynamic between literature and Hollywood film. However, buried underneath this irresistible attraction was, as Madison put it, an “overriding concern” and an “insatiable desire” to know who I was, to be myself, “truly” and “understandingly” (155). It was this search for a more profound level of self-awareness that led me to critically pose the question: “What is the self?” Framed within the context of an Aristotelian-Thomastic moderate realism, the question was directed toward a better understanding of a transcendent concept of self, which emerges from its more immanent counterpart that exists as a narrative creation. I examined this narrative self in relation to its narrative other in an effort to discern the metaphysical self, or, as Niebuhr put it, the “mystery and meaning” that constitutes the humanness of human beings. In order to more fully plumb the depths of this matter, I analyzed six postmodern entries in the long narrative tradition of selves telling stories about other selves.

Using a functional narratology as a heuristic tool, I constructed descriptions of the novels and their filmic counterparts in order to expose what I considered to be the philosophy that radiated from the binary tension inherent in the dialectic between “self” and “other." While my first objective primarily centered on the narrative descriptions, my second objective was to grasp the correlation between the literary and filmic philosophies. A deeper awareness of the philosophy that travels between these media is important in light of the mainstream accessibility and prevalent influence of film in postmodernity. With these points in mind, I utilized a postmodernized version of Socrates’ cave analogy to illustrate the relevance of a cultural analysis that critically examines objects that we take to define our present culture.

Employing a vocabulary of literary narratology and film theory, I performed analyses and interpretations of cultural artifacts that fictionalized and problematized popular notions of the postmodern self’s predicament in its oppositional relationship with the other. Not only did I want to discover the extent the philosophies travelled from one medium to another, but I also wanted to examine how the philosophies bore upon the notion that the postmodern self is a prisoner whose field of vision is inundated with dazzling technological images that effectively serve to keep the self bound to an existence in the realm of images – the hyper-real. Furthermore, I desired to understand how the philosophies related to the notion of a postmodern emancipation that has largely been considered a kind of freedom from an oppressive universal conception of self and other imposed by Western white males through the image factory that is Hollywood.

As stated in the introduction, the larger consistency of the oppositional relationship between self and other in both media allowed me to arrange the pairings to demonstrate a kind of progression in the way this central antinomy is treated through narrative expression. The arrangement exhibits the self’s movement from its grappling with the external, political question: “What is the self’s place in society?” to the more internal phenomenological question: “What is the self?” to the even more intensely personal existential question: “Who am I?” Considering these philosophical queries, I further explore not only the measure in which the literary philosophy travels into film, but also how the concept of an altruistic, saving love acts as a didactically connective thread that runs through the travelling philosophies in a way that helps us better understand the self and its emancipation.

Generated from the oppositional tension between the self and the state, the political philosophy of Burgess’ Clockwork conceptualized a Christianity that oscillated between the free will of Pelagianism and the Augustinian determinism that results from original sin. In opposition to the more Machiavellian degenerative form of “mere
calculation” based on selfish ambition, Niebuhr’s description of mutual love appears to be the kind of Augustinian remedy promoted by Clockwork’s prison charlie. The novel demonstrated how the manipulative relationship between self and other inexorably leads to the practice of selfish-oppression by both parties. While Burgess’ work condemns Alex’s cruel actions, they are shown to be the lesser evil in comparison to the state’s systematic eradication of an individual’s capacity to make moral choices. Clockwork denounced this kind of Machiavellian oppression in favor of a more altruistic love as a means to foster the transformation of unredeemable criminals into not only good citizens, but also good men.

Also treating the notion of selfish oppression, Kubrick’s Clockwork emphasized the triangulated relationships between Alex and his fellow citizens, Alex and the state, and the citizens and the state as ones of Machiavellian calculation. Like the novel, we are presented with a story set in a slightly futurist Western city in which nearly every principal character abuses what power s/he possesses by oppressing others to meet their egocentric objectives. The film, however, is missing the last chapter of the novel where Alex finally matures and exhibits an altruistic love for his son. This significant omission is arguably the primary reason why Kubrick’s Clockwork articulates a fabula that conceptualizes a conquering notion of Machiavellian power. Unlike the novel, the chaplain’s words of a saving love go unheeded and Alex is never shown to transcend his mechanical urges because he never loves another more than he loves himself. It is this pervasive ideal of Machiavellian selfishness that is shown to supersede the notion of an Augustinian altruistic love and its resultant moral transformation that, unlike his literary predecessor, Alex never undergoes.

Palahniuk’s Fight Club articulated a fabula that conceptualized the notion of salvation through destruction in view of Hegelian phenomenology’s lord – bondsman dialectic and its implications on the evolution of self-consciousness. Through my analysis, I discovered that – although he did transcend his servant consciousness – Joe’s understanding consciousness never evolved into a more absolute consciousness that operates in a love for others. Considering this point, I addressed the novel’s central question: “Was Joe saved through destruction?” I concluded that if saved means transcending his servant consciousness and achieving an understanding consciousness by risking his life in the context of the lord – bondsman relationship, then yes. However, if saved means reaching an absolute consciousness marked by love for others, then he was not.

Similar to the Kubrick film, Fincher’s Fight Club is missing the last chapter of its literary forerunner, which reveals Joe’s existential resignation that there is no higher stage of self-consciousness. In the film, however, Jack avoids this resignation and exhibits signs of an absolute consciousness marked by selfless love. Although he is unsuccessful, it is Jack, not Joe, who attempts to prevent Tyler from destroying the credit card buildings. What is more, at the end of the fabula, it is Jack who holds Maria’s hand in a visual expression of his acceptance of his suppressed love for her. Hence, unlike the novel, the viewer gets the sense that Jack can now peacefully coexist with the world and help bring its inhabitants to their next stage of self-consciousness with the insight he has gleaned from his violent experiences.

My analysis of Lem’s Solaris revealed that the cycle of human existence was kept fixed by the central problem presented in the narrative, which is the self’s cognitive finiteness and the resulting failure to see itself through the other. The story articulated a fabula that conceptualized the cycle and, most significantly, the particular manner it bore upon the question: “Who am I?” It was not until Kelvin realized that an understanding consciousness paradoxically lies in the other, or visitor Rheya, that he began to provisionally free himself from the cycle. However, the full weight of this critical realization was limited by a finite capacity to reason, which lead to a kind of profound
ignorance that produced an anthropomorphic overcompensation. This overcompensation resulted in Kelvin’s failure to fully understand the other, and thus himself, and it ultimately engendered his philosophy of existential humanism. It was the unresolved tension between Kelvin’s humanistic denial of the supernatural and his existential responsibility based on limited reason that prevented him from achieving a more absolute consciousness. Although Kelvin existentially resigned himself to being a clock that measures time, he did cling to a degree of a more transcendent hope that the “time of cruel miracles was not past” (204).

On the other hand, my analysis of Soderbergh’s filmic adaptation revolved around a progression of ideas that led ultimately to moral anthropocentrism. While the literary Kelvin concluded with an existential acceptance of the other’s impenetrability, the filmic Kelvin does not end up in a state of anxiety because his attempts to understand the other are not thwarted by anthropomorphic theorizing. His goal was not to colonize the other through his limited reasoning, but rather to love and accept visitor Rheya in the awareness that he did not truly comprehend the nature of her being. Thus, in spite of his finite awareness, Kelvin avoids the limitations imposed by anthropocentrism and transcends into a more absolute self-consciousness by choosing to see humanity in the other so that he may offer a kind of sacrificial love for Rheya. While the literary Kelvin clung to a measure of hope, this measure is given its full expression at the end of the film when “Everything is forgiven. Everything” (24). The filmic “I” transforms his essence and achieves a higher level of self-consciousness because he encounters his own forgiveness through an other he chose to love completely in spite of her impenetrability.

Considering these six texts in relation to a principal objective set forth in the introduction, it appears that a film is philosophically “like” a book primarily in the sense that one is generally being asked the same type of philosophical question by positioning the self against a consistent other. In other words, the novel’s philosophical question travels relatively unaltered into its filmic adaptation because it is generated by the same oppositional agents in both media. For example, both Clockwork texts pit the individual against the state in order to present a brand of political philosophy that attempts to understand the self in relation to the concepts of a good citizen and a good man. Both Fight Club texts position the masculine self in opposition to an emasculating consumer culture in order to present a strain of Hegelian phenomenology that seeks to comprehend the mental phenomena of the self as it manifests to the subject’s consciousness. Lastly, both Solaris texts put forth an existential philosophy that attempts to understand the nature of “I” as a free being-for-self in the mode of engaged agency with an alien other that functions to reflexively reveal to the self who it is.

Although the films were philosophically like the novels in the interrogational – oppositional sense, each film differed in its answer to the question originally posed in the literary text. To put it another way, the novel’s philosophic answer does not travel in the same unaltered fashion as the question that produced it. While the oppositional consistency fosters philosophical similarity as far as the question being asked, the concept of an altruistic, saving love was the common agent for the philosophical difference, or variation between the narrative texts. Each text posed the same philosophical question, however, it was how the protagonist interacted with the concept of love that produced a different answer. For example, while both texts consider the idea of the good citizen, Burgess’ novel reveals how a love for his future son begins to transform Alex into a good man and potentially a good citizen. Although Alex becomes a good citizen at the conclusion of the film by complying with the will of the state in return for professional favors, he is not transformed into a good man because he never applies the “proper remedy” by expressing love for anyone besides himself.

Similarly, while both Fight Club texts pose phenomenological questions –
such questions with regard to the evolution of self-consciousness and the concept of love – are answered differently. In the novel, Joe is saved from his servant consciousness and achieves an understanding consciousness by risking his life in the context of his lord – bondsman relationship with Tyler. However, Joe’s partial salvation ultimately fails to free him from the vanity of the cyclical nature of either the botched Project Mayhem or the consumer culture it was intended to destroy. In contrast, at the end of the film, a primary objective of Project Mayhem is achieved by the destruction of the credit card buildings. However, the imploding buildings are not the true images of Jack’s salvation because, as the film made evident, violence is insufficient to achieve the personal fulfillment he longed for. Rather, the enduring image that implies Jack’s more absolute consciousness marked by the love for others is seen when Jack finally “lets go” (as Tyler would say) and allows himself to express his love for Marla. Just after he says to her: “I’m really ok. Trust me. Everything’s going to be fine” (35), Jack tenderly grabs her hand as they observe the destructive climax of Project Mayhem.

In Solaris, while both texts consider similar existential questions, such questions – as they pertain to the nature of a free being-for-self and its self-consciousness that evolves via its choices – are answered differently. In the novel, because Kelvin cannot completely see the other, or fully comprehend even that which springs from his own mind, he experiences a kind of alienation from himself. Kelvin’s resulting anxiety fosters his feeling of isolation and the collapse of his meaningful immersion in the world, which is evidenced when – after his experience with visitor Rheya – he declares: “I shall never again give myself completely to anything or anybody” (196). On the other hand, the filmic Kelvin moves beyond his literary antecedent’s existential resignation and the impenetrability of the other because, in an “Attridgean” sense, he truly “encounters” visitor Rheya and achieves his own forgiveness of past sins through her. Explaining the self’s didactic encounter with the other, Attridge wrote that:

It is in the acknowledgement of the other human being’s uniqueness and therefore of the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for him or her that one can be said to encounter the other. At the same time it is an affirmation of the other as other, therefore, the experience is an encounter with the limits of one’s powers to think and to judge, a challenge to one’s capacities as a rational agent (24).

The filmic Kelvin moves beyond the other’s impenetrability by resisting objectification. This notion is demonstrated when, in answer to visitor Rheya’s question: “But am I really Rheya?” Kelvin states: “I don’t know anymore. All I see is you” (19). It is this release of his former egocentric pretenses and his newfound unconditional love for visitor Rheya – in
spite of her seemingly impenetrable “otherness” – that allows him to exhibit the beginning of a more absolute consciousness the literary Kelvin never displayed.

The positive modification that love can engender on self-consciousness is made meaningful because it reveals an artistic consistency that issues forth its own philosophy. The philosophical variations demonstrated that the other functions to permit the self, through its relation to it, an occasion to experience an evolution of self-consciousness. Love appears to be the means through which the self can achieve emancipation from any externally imposed self-conceptions because, as the variations revealed, it is only within a context of love that the self can eventually come to discard its self-deceptions. For, in this context it has no longer any need for self-protection or to disguise its self-serving interests. While, as Derrida argued, “every other” may always remain “completely other” (1987: 203), if the self’s love for the other that may allow it to see itself most clearly in the mirror’s reflection. Considering this point, Thiselton stated that: “Love never ends... the partial will come to an end... Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face” (1995: 129).

Although the self may be powerless to break the boundaries of its finiteness and can only attend to the concept of the other within itself, the variations suggest that it is within the framework of a meaningful expression of altruistic love that the self is able to transcend to the highest level of human consciousness. Seen in this way, the dual-medium pairs emerge as examples of philosophical activity, or Aristotelian “supremely human” undertakings in order to interrogate ourselves in order to “become other than one is” (Foucault 1984: 329). Considering such metaphysical questions, it appears that it is ultimately selfless love that facilitates the evolution of self-consciousness as the self can, in a sense, “look beyond” the materiality it sees in the mirror and into the Platonic realm of the Forms where the metaphysical self may reside.

The juxtaposition of these poets’ philosophies seems to disclose that the self’s expression of an altruistic love does not destroy the mirror, but rather allows the self to see its reflected materiality as truly the locus from which its more transcendent Being unfolds. In an Aristotelian-Thomastic sense, this type of love enables the literary Alex, the filmic Jack, and the filmic Kelvin to discern the transcendent by the immanent and become clearer observers of themselves. Thus, it is in this way that these postmodern fictional selves may thrust aside their deceptions and begin to achieve an emancipation from the great multitude of images that have bound them to the lowest level of the divided line. In other words, their desire to express selfless love facilitates each of these individuals’ progression beyond the faculty of imagination and drives them to develop their faculties of faith, reason, and ultimately understanding. As each self begins to pour their life into an other and exhibits a measure of altruistic love, they no longer see in the mirror dimly, but rather achieve a clearer vision of their metaphysical selves, themselves to be, truly, understandingly.