

# Film as Argument

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Since I am a philosopher and I expect that many of my readers will be film scholars, I shall begin by briefly setting the context that my discussion presupposes. Recently, there has been a spate of philosophical activity focusing on film. But unlike earlier work by such philosophers of film as Noël Carroll and George Wilson, who approach film from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics, much of the current activity uses film as a taking-off point for discussions of philosophic issues without focusing primary attention upon film as an artistic medium.<sup>1</sup> So, to choose one popular example, *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999) has become a virtual obsession among philosophers who generally use it to introduce a discussion of Cartesian skepticism, though other topics such as the nature of pleasure are addressed as well.<sup>2</sup> An additional reason why philosophers have been attracted to film is that film is a convenient means for introducing students to the study of philosophy. At this moment, there are at least five recent textbooks for introductory philosophy courses that use films to launch discussions of philosophical issues, and this number can be expected to increase rapidly.<sup>3</sup>

Although I am pleased that philosophers are beginning to pay more attention to film, there is one feature of this recent trend that gives me pause: It has often resulted in films being treated only as pretexts for discussions of standard philosophical issues and texts. Thus, a philosopher might summarize the plot of a film like *All of Me* (Carl Reiner, 1984), only to quickly turn to questions of personal identity and the role of the body as a criterion for it, with the film being left in the dust. And, as often as not, the

view that the author attributes to the film he is considering is simplified – and perhaps even distorted – in order to assimilate it to the ‘properly’ philosophic discussion of the issue at hand.

In order to provide a corrective to this tendency, I have undertaken the project of investigating whether films make a more integral contribution to philosophy than is apparent from such treatments. This is the origin of my interest in the question of whether films can be *arguments*, for arguments have generally been acknowledged as central to philosophy. Clarifying exactly what makes something an argument is itself an important topic in philosophy, but for our purposes it will do to stipulate that an argument is a persuasive use of language that attempts to convince an audience that a certain proposition, theory, or, to speak more loosely, view is true by means of logic rather than other tactics such as an appeal to the emotions. Although not all philosophy need take the form of an explicit argument from stated premises to a stated conclusion, nor must the contribution of film to philosophy be limited solely to its ability to make arguments, *if* it can be shown that films *can* make arguments – and *philosophical* arguments, specifically – this will establish one very important way in which films can contribute to the discipline of philosophy.

## I. Arguments in Narratives, Recordings, and Documentaries

Before developing this point, I want to consider an important objection to the idea that films can present arguments. This objection relies on the

fact that the films that I am concerned with here, which have been of the most interest to recent philosophers, involve fictional narratives. Although there certainly are non-narrative films that qualify as meriting philosophical interest, such as those in the structuralist tradition of avant-garde film,<sup>4</sup> I am concerned primarily with narrative films – especially popular ones – and ask whether they can present arguments. The objection to this possibility relies on the fact that the stories that such films present involve specific individuals and circumstances. In so far as they do so, the objection maintains, they are incapable of employing the discursive form of an argument, for arguments involve universal claims and narratives are inherently particular. So, for example, *The Matrix* tells the story of specific fictional inhabitants of the Earth in the year 2200. The film could certainly be used, the objection concedes, as an illustration of a philosophical position such as Cartesian skepticism: that there is no way to justify taking my present experience to be veridical. However, since *The Matrix* is a specific story, there is no way that it can result in our accepting on logical grounds a general claim like the one put forward by Cartesian skepticism. While our sympathy for the fates of certain characters might encourage us to accept a general truth, the objection concludes, this is not the same thing as acquiring rational conviction through an argument.

In response, let me first admit that written philosophy has only rarely employed a narrative structure. While it is true that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an extended narrative, it can be regarded as the exception that proves the rule, for its central character is *consciousness* – hardly the sort of entity one would expect to be the star of a popular film – and its story is of the tragic road consciousness faces in attaining self-consciousness – not exactly suitable material for the Hollywood dream machine. And though Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* also tells a story – that of the mythic Zarathustra's trials and tribulations – it can be maintained that its philosophy resides in the argument-like speeches that Zarathustra gives about the eternal recurrence and other matters,

rather than in the story of his ascent and descent. Even if we grant that Nietzsche's narrative has philosophical significance, his unique text would also seem to support the more general contention that philosophic argumentation stands at odds with narrative structure. And while Sergei Eisenstein reportedly dreamt of making a film version of Marx's *Das Kapital*, it is hard to see how, for example, Marx's analysis of the nature of the commodity-form would make a compelling action movie. Although in the later sections of Volume 1 Marx does tell a narrative, that of primitive accumulation, it is still not clear how this story could be made the basis for a popular film.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the paucity of narratives in written philosophy, recent analytic philosophy has begun to acknowledge their philosophical significance. The recent emphasis on narrative began with Alasdair MacIntyre's claim in *After Virtue* that personal identity depends on narrative considerations.<sup>6</sup> Previously, most accounts of this notion pointed to some feature such as bodily continuity or the continuity of memory as the ground for our sense of ourselves as unified beings. MacIntyre argues that we see ourselves as unified beings because of a story that we narrate about ourselves that establishes the necessary continuity.

Despite the introduction of the idea of narrative into philosophy itself – and the idea has flourished in a variety of quarters – it is important not to confuse the claim that narrative is a newly discovered topic *within* philosophy with the assertion that philosophy itself can *proceed* narratively. This latter claim receives no support from the former and is widely rejected by philosophers. So despite attention paid in recent philosophy to the notion of narrative, the fact that movies proceed narratively marks them as having a different structure from that necessary for philosophy itself.

To respond to the objection that films' narrative character precludes argumentation, it is important to recognize that films can – and sometimes do – contain explicit arguments, although this fact will prove less interesting to our investigation than it might first seem. To see

why, consider a hypothetical film – perhaps just a recording of a class or a lecture – that shows an actual philosopher making an argument. You might think here of the late John Rawls, the influential twentieth-century social and political philosopher, presenting a lecture in which he argues that the difference principle would be agreed upon by individuals in the original position, that is, under the veil of ignorance.<sup>7</sup> Let us call this film, *Justifying Difference*. Certainly films can, in virtue of their ability to record reality – a fact made much of by the Bazinian tradition in film studies – present material like this. And, in so far as they record a philosopher making an argument, they might seem to themselves qualify as instances of philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Now we could enter into a long debate about whether such a film makes a philosophical argument, but I do not think that is necessary. The issue of whether films can present arguments as *I am raising it* would not be resolved by the existence of such a documentary, even were we inclined to say that it should be counted as developing Rawls' argument. The reason for this is that, in *Justifying Difference*, the film merely functions as a device for recording Rawls' talk. As far as capturing the content of what he is saying, a tape recorder would have done as well, and no one would assert that audiotapes have some special connection to philosophy. This is because in such uses these media are simply means for recording work that is actually done in another medium. As such, they do not themselves produce works that count as independent works, rather than simply functioning as records or duplicates of previously existing works. So while *Justifying Difference* does present the argument made by Rawls, its doing so does not qualify it itself making an argument, for it merely reproduces Rawls' argument in a non-standard medium.

We can find support for my assessment of this hypothetical film by turning to the actual case of a PBS *Great Performances* show in which an actual stage play is broadcast. It is generally agreed that, because the PBS show involves a recording of a specific performance of a stage play – say, of the October 7, 2000, revival by the

Roundabout Theater Company of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's play, *The Man Who Came to Dinner* – the film here is not an independent work of art but only a means of transmitting the stage performance, the actual work, to a wider audience than was able to see it live on Broadway. And just as the PBS recording of *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is not an independent work of art but only a recording of one, *Justifying Difference* would not itself be making a screen version of a philosophical argument, but only recording a person actually making one at a specific place and time.<sup>9</sup>

I do not want to be taken as claiming here that there is no way for a recording of a lecture (or a play) to become an independent work of philosophy (or art). Were illustrations and new points added, it might be possible to make a film of a philosophy class or lecture that was itself a work of philosophy.<sup>10</sup> My only point is that *merely* recording a lecture on film, while it would succeed in presenting philosophy, does not solve the problem we began with of whether a film can make an argument that is philosophically significant.

Our argument about fiction films presenting philosophical arguments will be assisted by a more general discussion of non-fiction or documentary films. One might hold that such films provide one context in which it is possible to answer the question of whether films can present arguments in the affirmative, for such films often do make explicit arguments by means of their narratives. Consider Carl Plantinga's claim that what distinguishes the non-fiction from the fiction film is precisely the assumption that non-fiction films are making assertions about the world. Even if not all non-fiction films involve explicit argumentation, there are many that do use their soundtracks in conjunction with their image tracks in order to present arguments. Plantinga cites the *CBS Reports* documentary *Harvest of Shame* (1960) as an example of such a film. He states that the film 'documents the degrading plight [of] the nation's migrant farm workers, placing the blame squarely on the landowners/farmers, and advocating specific legislation to alleviate the problem'.<sup>11</sup> If Plantinga

is right about this film – he points to a range of different claims that the film justifies argumentatively to support his view – then we have to admit that some films do present arguments, even if not yet ones that are clearly philosophical in nature.

But this does not really settle the issue I began with, which is whether fiction films can present arguments. Although the case of documentary films does show that the visual nature of film does not preclude it from presenting an argument, such films usually rely on the explicit linguistic statements, made in their soundtracks, on intertitles, or in subtitles, to present at least some of the claims that constitute their argument. Often the balance of the film, including much of the visual material, functions only as evidence for the claims that are explicitly made linguistically.

The case of documentaries or non-fiction films thus leads us to another difficulty faced in affirming the possibility that fiction films can present arguments, for the question is not whether fiction films can present arguments of any type, but whether they can present specifically *philosophical* arguments. In a documentary like *Harvest of Shame*, parts of the film can be used to provide evidence for claims made about, for example, the awful working conditions the laborers had to endure by showing what those conditions actually were like. But philosophical arguments rarely if ever involve empirical evidence that can be presented without verbal language. So the question of whether films can present philosophical arguments is not only not answered by an appeal of documentary films, but even made to seem less likely of receiving affirmation.<sup>12</sup>

There is yet a further wrinkle to the issue, for many of the films that have attracted philosophers' attention as sources of philosophical insight are *popular* narrative films, like Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi action film, *Blade Runner*, or Harold Ramis' 1993 comedy, *Groundhog Day*.<sup>13</sup> Such films are often deemed to be vehicles of popular entertainment, so it is hard to see what could justify their being taken to be works of philosophy. Such 'ephemera'

seem the polar opposite of philosophy, with its concern for eternal questions.

## II. Argument by Example and Counter-Example

The crux of the issue facing us, then, is whether a film can present a philosophical argument through a fictional narrative that involves dialogue and images, a soundtrack and an image track.<sup>14</sup> Some philosophers have taken the obvious course and denied this possibility. For example, Noël Carroll asserts quite baldly that 'narrative films are not arguments'.<sup>15</sup> And while I would not disagree with the literal assertion made by this claim, I want to affirm that narrative films can, in addition to doing many other things, present arguments, a possibility Carroll denies. Similarly, Seymour Chatman offers little support for my case when he affirms that film are only able to present arguments 'in the loose sense', while denying that they can present the more formal arguments he identifies as constitutive of philosophical texts.<sup>16</sup>

We can, however, find support for my claim in unexpected quarters. In the very article in which he denies that narrative films are arguments, Carroll does affirm that films often attempt to convince us of something, only the method they use, he claims, is not that of a formal argument. To establish that films exhibit this intention, Carroll cites approvingly Andre Bazin's claim that *Citizen Kane* (1941) establishes the universal truth that 'there is no profit in gaining the whole world if one has lost one's own childhood'.<sup>17</sup> And while this is not specifically a philosophical claim, it does point in a direction that leads towards our desired conclusion.

Carroll's discussion relies upon the view of argumentation Aristotle develops in his *Rhetoric*. There, Aristotle is interested in explaining the different ways in which language can be used to persuade people. The example which he discusses that is relevant to Carroll's and our purposes is that of the fable. A fable is a made-up story, often featuring talking animals, that is intended to establish a general conclusion or moral that can, but need not be, explicitly stated.

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Aesop's well-known fable of the tortoise and the hare tells the story of a speedy but overconfident hare who is literally caught napping by the plodding tortoise who, despite his slowness, perseveres and beats his flashy competitor to the finish line. The fable is intended to establish the moral truth, 'Slow and steady wins the race,' or, in less metaphorical terms, that perseverance and tenacity are moral virtues, while flashiness is not. And, indeed, the story provides an instance of this general truth.

Now, there are films that, at least on the surface, conform to this model. One is Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's 1933 horror-adventure film, *King Kong*. After the opening credits, an intertitle displays what it claims to be an 'old Arabian proverb': 'And lo, the beast looked upon the face of beauty. And it stayed its hand from killing. And from that day, it was as one dead.' The film presents itself as a fable that will demonstrate the intertitle's claim that beauty has the power to tame, and even kill, a beast. And as if to ensure that we get the point, the film concludes with Kong's captor, Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), reiterating this idea by saying that it was beauty, rather than bullets, that killed 'the beast'.<sup>18</sup>

However, neither Aristotle nor Carroll sees a fable's attempt to establish a moral as involving a legitimate form of argumentation, although both acknowledge its persuasive power. Carroll dubs it the *argument by example*, for a single instance – the story presented by the fable – is cited as evidence for the general truth it seeks to vindicate. From a formal point of view, it is obvious why the argument by example is an invalid form of argumentation, one that philosophers discuss under the rubric of inductive inference. Inductive inferences are ones in which one attempts to use empirical evidence to justify a general conclusion. An example of a successful induction would be Kepler's presentation of his law about the orbits of the planets – that they are elliptical – on the basis of extensive observation and data gathering.

It is generally agreed that generalizing from a single case to a universal proposition is invalid. To do so would be to commit the fallacy of

composition by assuming that the character of a class of objects can be determined from an examination of just one of them. While a particular lion may be friendly – say one trained for a circus – it would be a mistake to make an inductive inference from the case of this one affectionate beast to the general claim that all lions are friendly. In formal terms, this fallacy can be characterized as involving the following invalid inference pattern:

*A*, is *F*  
All *A*'s are *F*.

This is an invalid inductive inference because there is no guarantee that *A*<sub>1</sub> might not just happen to be *F*, so that there would be many other things that are *A*'s while not being *F*'s. The friendly lion is a very special case of lionhood. One would jeopardize one's health, while also making a logical error, by generalizing about lions on the basis on the nature of this one, very unusual beast.

At this point, even the most sympathetic of my readers might think that my attempt to show that fictions films can present philosophical arguments is doomed to failure. After all, in addition to the general arguments against this possibility, hasn't my examination of the 'argument by example' definitively shown that fiction films cannot present arguments, let alone philosophical ones? Since fiction films generally present stories about specific individuals, as virtually any fiction film you can think of will confirm, wouldn't the attempt to move from a story about a particular character – such as Charles Foster Kane – to a general claim – such as the one about childhood proffered by Bazin – involve just the sorts of illicit induction we have seen in the case both of fables and the fallacious reasoning about lions?

The burden of my argument is to show that this is not so. And, indeed, there are a number of ways that one could attempt to argue that films, despite their narrative structure, can present arguments. One strategy would be to show that some films are *enthymemes*. An enthymeme is an argument for which one of the premises is missing, so that the audience must supply it. The

missing or implicit premises in an enthymeme are usually of universal form and also part of the cultural background shared by people to whom the enthymeme is addressed. A simple example of an enthymeme is: 'Socrates is mortal because he is human.' The reader must supply the universal or major premise for this argument – 'All humans are mortal' – and then see that 'Socrates is mortal' follows from that statement plus the minor premise that he is human. In the case of a film, the audience might similarly be called upon to supply a general claim that, together with the particular premise exhibited in the film, creates a valid argument. Although I think this is an important element of the solution to our problem, I will leave my discussion of enthymemes for the moment, though I will return to it towards the end of this paper.

A second option for showing that films can present arguments involves looking more carefully at what Carroll dubs the 'argument by example'. Despite the formal invalidity of this mode of inductive inference, there is one case in which the inference is valid, namely when F is an essential property of A's. In that case, since nothing could be an A without being an F, the conclusion that all A's are F could be inferred from an examination of one example. If we knew, for example, that having a heart was an essential property of mammals, we could conclude from examining one mammal and discerning a heart that all mammals were so endowed.

The problem with this suggestion is that it appears to beg the question. How can the fact that F is an essential property of A's be established? Doesn't knowing that having a heart is an essential property of all mammals require that we have more than a passing acquaintance with those creatures? Indeed, it even seems that justifying F to be an essential property of A's presupposes the very conclusion it was supposed to justify: All F's are A.

This suggests that we need a different strategy if we want to justify the idea that films can present arguments. The one I shall adopt in this paper and that I have explored elsewhere I dub *local*, for it involves consideration of very specific

techniques for making philosophical arguments and posing the question of whether films can do *that*, rather than trying to solve the problem of whether film can present philosophical arguments *globally*. So let me turn to a philosophic technique that uses narrative as an element in developing an argument: the *thought experiment*.<sup>19</sup>

A full discussion of thought experiments would take us far afield, for thought experiments have recently become a subject of discussion in philosophy.<sup>20</sup> For our purposes, however, it will be sufficient to focus on just one use of thought experiments, namely that in which they function to provide a *counter-example* to a philosophical thesis, for this is a clear-cut example of a use of thought experiments in philosophy that we can also find, I argue, in fiction films.<sup>21</sup>

How exactly does a counter-example function in a philosophical argument? As we have seen, an important component in the articulation of a philosophic vision is the establishment of universal claims or even definitions. Equally important is the testing of those general assertions to see whether there are any situations or circumstances in which they do not hold. This is where counter-examples come in. A counter-example to a universal claim is a single instance in which it does not hold. Thus, to use a trite philosophical example, if we asserted that all crows are black, the existence of an albino crow would be a counter-example to that general claim, for it would show that there is at least one crow that does not have the color specified by the generalization. Similarly, if I claim that all politicians are liars and you can show me one politician who always tells the truth, then that unique politician functions as a counter-example to the general claim about politicians.

Developing counter-examples to philosophical claims is an important aspect of philosophy, but, since most philosophical claims are not empirical generalizations like those we have just considered about crows and politicians, normally philosophical counter-examples cannot employ actual examples of things that do not fit the generalization. So instead of relying on actual exceptions to a proposed rule or definition –

such as that provided by the albino crow and the honest politician – philosophical counter-examples are generally provided by thought experiments: imaginary narratives that present cases that do not fit the principle in question. What a philosopher does is to present a story that she has invented and that she claims is a counter-example to the proposed general truth.

To see the logic of this process, consider the following well-known counter-example involving a thought experiment from Plato's *The Republic*. This dialogue concerns the concept of morality or justice.<sup>22</sup> At this point in the dialogue, 'giving each what he is due' has been proposed as a definition of justice or morality. In order to show that this definition is inadequate, Socrates asks his interlocutors to imagine the following situation: Suppose someone has leant you a weapon and subsequently, having lost his mind and become a threat to himself and others, asks you to return what you have borrowed. Certainly, although we all believe that we ought to return what we have borrowed, we also think it would be a mistake to give the weapon back to the insane menace. But this means that, in at least one case – that specified by the story of the insane weapon owner – the formula 'give each his due' does not provide what is the right thing to do, since that would require returning the gun to its now untrustworthy owner. So the proposed definition of justice or morality fails. And the reason it fails is that this imaginary case provides a counter-example to the general claim that justice or morality (i.e., the right way to act) is simply giving people their due.

Despite the brevity of Socrates' thought experiment, only an extended analysis can explain precisely how it functions as a counter-example. There are two elements involved in a counter-example to a philosophical thesis. The first is the counter-example proper: the albino crow, the honest politician, or, in the recent case from *The Republic*, the imaginary case of the insane weapon owner. What is involved here is a specific instance to which attention is called. But equally important is the reasoning process that shows why this instance really is a counter-example to the general philosophical thesis,

which involves deductive reasoning of the following sort: Assume a general proposition of the form, 'All A's are B', is true, here 'All acts in which one gives another his due are moral.' The counter-example furnishes an imaginary case of an A – an act of giving another his due, i.e., the weapon – that is not an instance of B – a moral action. But this means that the general proposition is false; that is, we deny that it is the case that all acts in which one gives another his due are moral, so the proposed definition fails.

Contemporary analytic philosophy is replete with thought experiments that function in philosophical arguments as counter-examples to universal claims. For example, John Rawls uses a counter-example to expose the problems that he sees in the conceptual foundation of utilitarianism. Utilitarians take the principle of utility – the claim that a social institution is justified if it contributes more than any alternative to the general welfare – to be the supreme principle of morality. Rawls believes utilitarians are mistaken and, to make his case, he puts forward a thought experiment involving the hypothetical social institution of telishment.<sup>23</sup>

Try to imagine, then, an institution (which we may call 'telishment') which is such that the officials set up by it have authority to arrange a trial for the condemnation of an innocent man [sic.] whenever they are of the opinion that doing so would be in the best interests of society. The discretion of officials is limited, however, by the rule that they may not condemn an innocent man to undergo such an ordeal unless there is, at the time, a wave of offenses similar to that with which they charge him and telish him for.<sup>24</sup>

Telishment is designed to be exactly like our practice of punishment except that, in extreme circumstances of social unrest, it allows an innocent person to be penalized. The idea behind making this exception is as follows: In such extreme situations, such as when there is a series of violent crimes that has led to general fear and anxiety, the social order will be served by 'telishing' an innocent person, for then everyone else will be reassured that the threat has been extinguished.

Telishment serves as a counter-example to the utilitarian theory of institutional justification because, Rawls argues, the following two things are true:

1. The principle of utility justifies telishment. That is, because telishment provides a means of establishing calm in situations of major social unrest, it is a social institution that contributes more to the social welfare than the alternative of our normal practice of punishment in which, at least conceptually, innocent people are not punished.
2. Our moral intuitions tell us that there is something wrong with telishment. The idea here is that we resist accepting a social practice that harms innocent people, no matter how greatly society as a whole would benefit from so doing.

Utilitarianism cannot be the correct moral theory, Rawls argues, because it justifies a social institution we believe is illegitimate.

I am not claiming here that Rawls' counter-example to utilitarianism is decisive, though many have taken it to be and also view his own theory of justice as a superior analysis of morality. There are die-hard utilitarians who think Rawls is wrong to assert that telishment would be justified by the principle of utility. I use it here only as an example of a philosophical counter-example that can assist us in exploring the question of whether films can provide similar counter-examples to philosophical theories.

### III. Case Study: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

We are now finally in a position to argue for the following important claim: Films can present arguments when they are thought experiments that function as counter-examples to philosophical theses. In order to make this plausible, I will turn to Michael Gondry's 2004 film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.<sup>25</sup> As was the case with Rawls' counter-example of telishment, the target of the counter-example presented by the film is utilitarianism, only the

film's counter-example is quite different from Rawls': selective memory erasure. Although this practice could be justified on utilitarian grounds in the case of severely troubled individuals, *Eternal Sunshine* argues that it is problematic nonetheless, so that consideration of this practice provides a counter-example to utilitarianism.

The target of *Eternal Sunshine's* argument is a fictional technology for selective memory erasure developed by Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson). Using a non-linear narrative, the film shows us two young people – Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) – who appear to have a chance meeting on the beach in the Hamptons. As the narrative continues, it goes back in time to reveal that the two had been lovers who chose to have their memories of each other erased: Clem because she was so unhappy about their break-up and Joel because he could not bear the realization that Clem had taken such dramatic measures. The film tells the story of the demise of the first relationship between the two through a variety of techniques, most interestingly by presenting what we are to take as the contents of Joel's consciousness as his memories of Clem are erased. In the end, despite having found out from pre-erasure recordings of their dissatisfactions with each other how unsuited to each other they really are, the two decide to pursue a relationship for a second time.

The first question that we need to ask is how *Eternal Sunshine* presents an initial justification for this surprising technology. The film does not spend a lot of time explaining what is attractive about this technology because it takes it to be self-evident: People who are experiencing a great deal of psychological pain choose to undergo selective memory erasure because it promises them relief from that pain. In addition to the lovers who choose to erase their painful memories, we see an oriental woman who appears to be so distressed over the death of her cat that she is going to erase all her memories of her feline companion.

How, then, would a utilitarian justification of technology of memory erasure go? Roughly, it



• Memory erasure in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004).

would claim that people would be made better off if, when they were having extremely painful memories that disrupted their lives and kept them from ‘moving on’, they could have those memories erased. Although the film contests this view, it shows that people in the film’s world accept this rationale for the procedure.

I have claimed that *Eternal Sunshine* presents a counter-example to utilitarianism. In order to do so, it cannot simply claim that the social welfare is not actually increased when a person’s painful memories are erased, for this would only show that use of the technology was not sanctioned by utilitarianism. The film does make this claim by showing that Joel is made truly miserable by discovering that Clem has had all the memories of their relationship expunged from her consciousness. Indeed, he becomes so miserable that he decides to undergo the process himself.<sup>26</sup> Still, there must be more to the film’s case against this technology if it is to be a counter-example to utilitarianism.

When Joel decides, while undergoing the process of memory erasure, that he does not want to have it completed, the film moves onto different ground. Joel is not merely saying that he doubts whether the world will be a better place in terms of total happiness if all his memories of Clem are erased. Rather, his attempt to halt the process mid-stream is motivated by an unwillingness to let go of his memories of Clem, for they are among the best moments of his life – as well as the worst. He rejects the

erasure of his memories despite the prospective gain in happiness that it proffers.

In showing Joel attempting to halt the erasure of his own memories, the film offers a counter-example to utilitarianism. For Joel realizes that his memories play an important role in his life, one that he does not want to lose even if they make him unhappy. The film asserts that one’s memories have an intrinsic value and that there is something wrong with erasing them. It goes so far as to suggest that the desire to live only with one’s positive memories is somehow inhuman, failing to understand the role of pain in our experience.

This is underscored by the film’s narrative when, even after they discover that their previous relationship ended in disaster, Clem and Joel choose to live it again. Given the film’s invocation of Nietzsche – Mary quotes a line from Nietzsche’s parody of the Sermon on the Mount from *Beyond Good and Evil*, ‘Blessed are the forgetful, for they get the better even of their blunders’ as a way of expressing her admiration for the technology – it is not at all far fetched to see the film as here presenting a version of the test that Nietzsche posed with his theory of the Eternal Recurrence. Clem and Joel are here asserting that, even with full knowledge of the dangers that await their relationship, they choose it, for having it is better than not having it at all, despite the pain that it brings.

On my interpretation, then, *Eternal Sunshine* involves a thought experiment that functions as a counter-example to utilitarianism. The hypothetical technology that we see in the film is one (i) whose use could be justified by considerations of utility and yet (ii) the film asserts that there is something wrong with it being implemented. Hence, it functions as a counter-example to utilitarianism.

So structurally, the film’s presentation of the technology of memory erasure and Rawls’ presentation of the social practice of telishment are identical. Both of them present counter-examples to utilitarianism. The film, like the article, incorporates an argument involving a thought experiment that functions as a counter-example to the principle of utility.

There is one important objection to my claim that the film presents a counter-example to the technology of memory erasure: Whereas Rawls explicitly argues that his thought experiment is a counter-example to utilitarianism, the film makes no such assertion. In fact, it is the philosophical interpreter – in this case, myself – who *uses* the film as a counter-example to the philosophical theory. Without my *imposition* of utilitarianism as a philosophical theory, the film would not be a counter-example at all.

In response to this objection, I want to return to my earlier discussion of enthymemes. You will recall that an enthymeme is a deductive argument in which one of the premises is suppressed, so that the audience has to supply it for themselves. Generally, such premises involve knowledge that the audience can be assumed to have.

Formally, a film like *Eternal Sunshine* involves something like an enthymeme. What the audience has to supply is the explicit content of utilitarianism, so that the film can be seen as an argument against it. The argument would then run something like this:

1. Utilitarianism justifies social institutions or practices by means of their beneficial consequences.
  2. Memory erasure is justified on utilitarian grounds.
  3. There is something morally wrong with memory erasure.
- So:
4. Utilitarianism is not the correct moral theory.

The narrative of the film provides both premises 2 and 3. Premise 2 is supplied, as I have indicated, by the view of the procedure exhibited both by those who choose to undergo it and also by those who implement it. Premise 3 is supplied by Joel's attempt to reject the procedure as well as his and Clem's decision to become involved once again. But premise 1 as well as the reasoning to the rejection of utilitarianism is something that the viewer must supply. The question is whether we can legitimately claim that understanding this argument is part of the meaning of the film.

This raises the question of intentionality, one

of the vexed problems in philosophical aesthetics. There is heated dispute among philosophers of art about whether, in order for an interpretation of a work to be valid, a work's author had to *intend* that the work mean what the interpretation says it does. While there have been many champions of this point of view, there have also been many critics who point out that the authors of works are often not in the best position to interpret the significance of what they produce. Especially when one takes cognizance of meanings that require access to levels beneath the surface of the work, the interpreter is often in a better position to ascertain a work's meaning than its author.

Clearly, this is not the place to attempt to settle this complex issue. For my purposes here, it is sufficient for me to acknowledge my view that the meaning that a work of art has is not determined solely by the intentions of the author, though those may indeed be relevant to many interpretations. On the other hand, I do not go as far as many do, for I believe that interpretations are constrained by various different considerations, including that they succeed in making the work in question more accessible for its various audiences.

In relation to the charge that my interpretation of *Eternal Sunshine* *imposes* the context of utilitarian ethical theory on the film, I simply reject it. The film appears to me to be concerned with showing both the problematic nature of memory erasure and why such a practice ought not be widely used. One element in the film's more general argument is its rejection of utilitarianism as an adequate moral theory, for such a theory provides at least some *prima facie* justification for memory erasure. In its attempt to convince its audience that selective memory erasure is immoral, the film does not simply contest its utilitarian justification, though it does do that. It shows that there are other moral grounds for rejecting this practice, so that it should be rejected *even if it promotes social utility*. It is in this specific context that the film presents a philosophical counter-example.

Further support for my view can be garnered from the fact that memory erasure is not simply

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an issue that the filmmakers have invented whole cloth. In fact, there is a growing debate about memory erasure that involves the drug, Propranolol.<sup>27</sup> The fanciful technology for memory erasure presented by the film can be thought of as an imaginative means for getting audiences to think about a complex issue that is becoming significant in the mental health field. Is it too far fetched to think of the film as a timely intervention into the ethics of memory erasure? I think not. And for this reason, I think that it makes sense to see this film as, among other things, contesting the validity of a utilitarian justification of the practice of memory erasure that it sees as so problematic.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that my aim here was neither to provide a complete analysis of *Eternal Sunshine* nor to develop a general analysis of the relationship between philosophy and film, but a more modest one. I have attempted to show that, despite a range of serious objections to the possibility that fiction films can present philosophical arguments, they sometimes do just that. More specifically, I have shown that at least one film – *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* – presents a counter-example to the principle of utility and thus qualifies, on my view, as a work of philosophy, though I have not argued for that latter claim here. I have only shown that the film presents a philosophical argument in the form of a counter-example that involves a thought experiment. Although there is a lot more to be said both about the example I have used and the more general question of whether and how films can present arguments, I hope to have convinced the reader that, counter-intuitive as it might seem to film scholars and philosophers alike, fiction films can present philosophical arguments through their narratives because they contain thought experiments that play a crucial role in the presentation of counter-examples to philosophical theses.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1 For example, see Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge, Cambridge University

Press, 1996) and George Wilson, *Narration in Light* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

2 For example, see the various essays collected in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, edited by William Erwin (Chicago and LaSalle, Open Court, 2002).

3 Mary Litch, *Philosophy Through Film* (London, Routledge, 2002); Dean A. Kowalski, *Classic Questions and Contemporary Film: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, McGraw Hill, 2004); Burton F. Porter, *Philosophy Through Fiction and Film* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson Education-Prentice Hall, 2004); Christopher Falzon, *Philosophy Goes to the Movies* (London, Routledge, 2002); and Nina Rosenstand, *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5th edn (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006).

4 Structuralist films are a key group of avant-garde films that are often taken to make philosophic claims about film's nature. For example, Michael Snow's film, *Wavelength*, has been seen as a philosophic 'discussion' of the zoom lens.

5 But see my account of *Modern Times* as an illustration of Marx's Theory of Alienation in 'Beyond "Mere" Argument: How Films Can Be Philosophy,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64:1 (2006), forthcoming.

6 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

7 Rawls' difference principle justifies departures from equality and is to be found in his epoch making *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 1971).

8 Although the hypothetical *Justifying Difference* is a documentary, the case can be changed easily into a fiction film by having actors play the various roles. The same points can be made about the latter hypothetical film.

9 It is interesting to note that, in his book *The Photoplay* (New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1916), Hugo Münsterberg worried that film might not be considered an independent artform precisely because it was able to record performances of other works. For this reason, he emphasized the aspects of film that distinguished it from other artforms such as theater.

10 In *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Films* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1990), Seymour Chatman discusses an interesting hybrid film, Alain Resnais' *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* (1980), that contains both an explicit argument and a narrative.

11 Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 70.

12 The question of whether and, if so, how documentary films can present philosophical

- arguments is itself worth investigating. I cannot do so here for obvious reasons.
- 13 Both of these films have received attention from philosophers. *Blade Runner* is the subject of an interesting discussion by Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (London, Routledge, 2002), pp. 33–52, while Joseph Kupfer discusses *Groundhog Day* in *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film* (Boulder, CO, Westview, 1999), pp. 35–60.
  - 14 For purposes of this paper, I ignore non-discursive elements of the soundtrack such as music.
  - 15 Noel Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, p. 281. At the talk at which this paper was presented, Carroll admitted to having changed his mind on this issue. For evidence of this, see his 'Philosophizing Through the Moving Image: the Case of *Serene Velocity*' in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64: 1 and 2 (2006), forthcoming.
  - 16 See Chatman, *Coming to Terms*.
  - 17 Carroll, *Theorizing*, p. 280.
  - 18 I have discussed the implications of this view of beauty in my 'Humanizing the Beast: *King Kong* and the Representation of Black Male Sexuality' in *Classic Whiteness: Race and the Studio System*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 157–77.
  - 19 Noël Carroll discusses the use of thought experiments in fiction in 'The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60:1 (2002), 3–26. Oddly, Carroll appears to deny that films themselves can present thought experiments while simultaneously holding that their scripts can.
  - 20 See, for example, Roy A. Sorenson, *Thought Experiments* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).
  - 21 I discuss films as thought experiments in 'Philosophy Screened: Viewing *The Matrix*', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 27:1 (2003), 139–152.
  - 22 Traditionally, the Greeks treated 'justice' as a disposition to treat others well. It was one of the four main virtues.
  - 23 John Rawls, 'Two Concepts of Rules', *Philosophical Review*, 64:1 (1955), 3–32.
  - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
  - 25 My discussion of *Eternal Sunshine* draws on the insightful analysis of the film by Christopher Grau in his essay, 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind and the Morality of Memory,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64: 1 (Winter 2006), 119–33.
  - 26 Mary's (Kirsten Dunst) humiliation when she discovers that she has undergone the process underscores the film's assertion that the practice is not justifiable on utilitarian grounds. But note that the reason she is told is that she once again attempts to have an affair with Howard.
  - 27 See, for example, the *Washington Post* article by Rob Stein on October 4, 2004, 'Is every memory worth keeping? Pills to reduce mental trauma raise controversy', available at: <http://www.ajc.com/news/content/health/1004/19memory.html>. Grau also discusses this issue in the appendix to his article cited in note 25.
  - 28 This paper was first read at the 2004 meeting of the Center for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image at Calvin College. It has benefited from comments received there as well as very helpful written comments from Daniel Barratt, Jonathan Frome, and Joseph Kupfer.