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The Lens that Sees Itself: Fruitful Interactions of Film and Philosophy

Perhaps the most compelling aspects of our most cherished films are those that we do not understand. Lapses in conventional depictions of reality, time, and space are so challenging that often we fail to have any reaction beyond simple awe. What does Bergman's barrage of imagery at the opening of Persona (1966) signify? Are we missing commentary when Kubrick is at his most enigmatic? Lastly, as a comical example of this impenetrability of meaning, in Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (1992), why does Lynch suddenly cut to an ape looking directly at the camera saying, “Judy,” when that name does not belong to any character in the film?

I suspect that most audiences would admit that they do not understand what they see. Certainly they are “understood” on a basic level; returning to our Lynch example, a viewer recognizes that the image before them represents an ape, but one would hesitate to say that anything “meaningful” is understood in this exchange. The audience has no sophisticated interpretation, and therefore interacts with very little on the level of meaning. The very fact that the only common responses seem to be laughter or complete bewilderment lends credence to the idea that confusing film moments such as these are not understood.
Much contemporary film theory, however, centers on the statement of film semiotician Christian Metz that “The fact that must be understood is that films are understood” (Metz 77). Metz's sentiment and the aims of film semioticians more generally are rooted in Saussure, whose work shows that language is the location where the “vague uncharted nebula” of thought is “fixed in a sound,” or in our case, fixed in a film's marriage of sound and image (Saussure 112-113). Put more simply, our own raw, uncategorized thoughts only solidify into concept when we organize them into language.

It makes sense that film could be understood in this context, as it resonates with our tendency to speak about what a director is “saying” with a film, or what a film's “message” is. Film semioticians are drawn, therefore, to the obvious question: if films are an act of communication between a filmmaker and an audience, what is being communicated? The simplest tactic for answering this question is precisely the one posited by Metz – the attempt to catalog the “cinematographic grammar” by which audiences understand films (Metz 77).

Film semiotics' position, at least in regards to film's legibility, is by no stretch of the imagination a controversial one. Traditions both related and unrelated seem to leave this claim uncontested. For instance, psychoanalytic theory – which often overlaps with semiotics – tries to illuminate instances of audience understanding as well, albeit on a subconscious level. Even critics of film semiotics such as David Bordwell, who describes the traditions that followed from Metz as having “conceptual weaknesses and empirical shortcomings” (427), often agree that semiotics only begins to go in the wrong
direction after Metz (428). When theorists question the semiotic approach, they often do so on the level of methodology. In other words, most scholarship begins at the notion that films are understood, and only contests the best way to analyze that transaction of meaning.

Perhaps some of the shortcomings that Bordwell notes, however, are not due to a shift in focus away from Metz’s original goal, as he suggests (Bordwell 427), but that Metz’s statement that films are understood is not always correct. Often, we find ourselves completely baffled by enigmatic films. Some scenes or even entire films feel entirely foreign and unintelligible. There exist very few paradigms by which a critic can examine indecipherable film moments.

First among these possible interpretations is to say that these misunderstandings occur because they are acts of rebellion against the dominant cultural narrative. Ideological theorists would say that anything that is immediately understood is as such because the dominant narrative defines what is “obvious.” (Althusser, n.p.). Counter-argument is rendered indecipherable, as it directly contradicts what we are told is “common sense.” Dominant ideology would naturally want to suppress dissidence, and making blasphemy indecipherable is an effective tactic.

However, this is not a satisfying answer. Even if we accept this explanation, it only allows us to say that indecipherable film moments are examples of rebellion against ideology. Not only is that conclusion incredibly vague and fatally boring, it is also fallacious. We cannot conclude that a text is rebellious simply because a text uses utterances outside of an ideology’s vocabulary. It is conceivable that certain ideas might
not be included in ideology because they are simply foreign, rather than antagonistic, to it. To avoid the negligence of ignoring this large possibility, a different paradigm is necessary.

In this essay I will outline a method, namely the use of philosophical works as a comparative tool, that I believe proves useful in the analysis of the films that exist in this blindspot of film criticism. I also intend to show that this method is not only useful in interpreting enigmatic films but also in illuminating the very philosophies we use to interpret them.

I find that comparison between philosophy and films that approach similar subject matter to be an elegant solution to the problem. Philosophy's long history of dealing with the indescribable is ripe for comparison. Plato's allegory of the cave, and the notion of the forms in general, describe existences beyond our current understanding but not beyond our capability to understand. Bonaventure describes mystical experience as causing the mind to "rise on high and pass beyond not only this sensible world but itself also" (The Mind's Road to God Ch. 7). Swami Vivekananda refers to the divine being as the "Intangible" and the "Inexpressible" (76). In all of these instances, the indescribable
is only as such temporarily. Contemplation, study, or communication allows what was once ineffable to be known. Certainly each of these philosophers would have different ways of speaking of the indescribable, but each wrestles with it nonetheless in an attempt to make it accessible.

I would argue that even in cases much less direct than these, philosophers are almost always engaging with ineffable experience, notion, form, etc. The fact that all our previous examples place the indescribable in high positions, whether as divine or as the goal of their endeavors, serves as evidence. We do not even need to retreat into the dirty Platonism of assuming there is some sort of higher level of knowledge achieved only by meditation to come to this conclusion, though. If it pleases the reader, we could restate this idea in the terms of even the most post-modern and verbose of ivory tower dwellers by saying that philosophers try to “illuminate ineffabilities that arise from the vast incommensurability inherent in a plural universe defined by the irreconcilability of differing identities.” Regardless of which millennium’s jargon you prefer, the conclusion is the same: one of philosophy’s most frequently recurring goals is to describe ideas for which we previously had no vocabulary.

Given that film, like philosophy, is first and foremost a method of expression, then it follows that films too could interact with and attempt to communicate the indescribable. Such films call for us to step out of our current understanding and engage with challenging new experiences. Therefore, when we want to find meaning in these films’ incomprehensible moments, we need only to compare it to the work of a philosopher who approaches similar ground.
The first step is the identification of a shot, scene, or film – or a philosophical text, for that matter, as the comparison does not mandate with which medium the theorist begins her search – that eludes immediate understanding, but that seems to be too nuanced, evocative, etc. to be a simple example of poor communication. Next, the theorist pairs that film with a philosophy, or vice versa. Perhaps the theorist chooses a pairing because both texts use similar metaphors or because the aspects of both texts that are decipherable are quite similar. Any multitude of reasons are justifiable, but the theorist has to rely ultimately on a “hunch.”

For the last step, the theorist begins the comparison in earnest. She treats each text as a lens that reveals foggy sections of the other, keeping in mind the advantages and disadvantages each medium grants its respective text towards the aim of communicating the obscured message. Each text grants a more complete view of the other, and “averaging” the findings from both allows the theorist clearer access to the ideas that each text has in common or in contrast.

The theorist looks at the cinematic text and the philosophical text as two imperfect and differing attempts at explaining similar ineffabilities, or as attempted translations of similar source material. That source material is unknown and confusing to us, so the filmmaker or philosopher attempts to situate it into a language that we can understand. Neither can fully describe the indescribable, but the particular successes and failures of each can provide clues as to towards what both were aiming. Perhaps the visual nature of a film allows it to pierce into one aspect more deeply, while a philosopher’s argumentation gives them access to another.
Taking these advantages and disadvantages into account, the theorist can determine which elements of each piece should be weighed more heavily than others. Once she has highlighted these important elements, she reads the sum of the findings from both pieces as if they comprised one text, the subject matter of which is the indescribable we seek to understand. This new text, composed of two different perspectives of the same object, provides a clearer and more complete view.

The act of comparison between these distinct mediums allows us to look through the trappings of both. The two modes of expression use entirely different vocabularies, techniques, and styles to communicate, but often it is difficult to see beyond these tools. Comparison encourages us to ignore what is different—at least initially—in order to see what commonalities shine through. These “trappings” are worth analyzing as well, as they comprise the filmmaker or philosopher's immediate message to us, but comparison allows us to go beyond the immediate levels of signification and reach at something higher.

It is worth noting, however, that this is not the only benefit from the method. An interesting byproduct of this process is that it reveals biases, convictions, strengths, and weaknesses within each text, not only the initial one. Finding that the works of a given philosopher is consistently successful at interpreting a given type of film gives us considerable information as to where that philosopher's insights are most relevant. Perhaps repeatedly using the same famously dense or impenetrable texts to interpret multiple others would give us a better view of texts we often give up on. For example, while *Immanuel Kant and the Films of 1947* is not a book I would ever want to write,
some theoretical glutton for punishment could use this method to get a better understanding of Kant by seeing which pairings are unexpectedly fruitful or what insights repeatedly present themselves.

We are able, then, to turn the lens back on itself. Knowing what it consistently “sees” tells us about its composition at the same time that it illuminates blindspots of meaning. When paired as two lenses revealing each other, film and philosophy can make known what drew us to them in the first place—mystery. The results of the process encourage even more pairings, as a success might encourage another round of the method to see if the same philosopher might be an equally successful partner to a different member of a director's filmography. In this way, the method provides some of those answers, but more importantly allows us to ask countless more questions.
Works Cited


