Thomas E. Wartenberg, “Contemporary Philosophical Filmmaking”

TW begins by considering a common criterion that answers the question “what makes a film *philosophical*?”

Common Criterion: the film explicitly refers to a philosophical text or author.

Objection: too broad (referring to a philosophical text or author, as Woody Allen’s characters often do, doesn’t make a film philosophical since the film itself does not thereby address the philosophical *ideas* or *claims* in a significant way) and too narrow (a film can engage with philosophical ideas or claims even if it never explicitly refers to *any* existing philosophical text or author [e.g., Bergman’s so-called *Faith Trilogy* or the Wachowski’s *The Matrix*])

TW’s Criterion: “Filmmaking will count as philosophical … when the best interpretation of a film includes an essential reference to at least one philosophical claim or issue.”[492t]

TW restricts his criterion to films whose makers (director, screenwriter, actors, etc.) *intend* the film to represent and be interpreted in terms of certain philosophical ideas and/or claims.

JP: this is itself too narrow, since a film like *Memento* can raise philosophically-interesting questions about/issues related to **human memory,** for example, without the filmmaker (in that case, Christopher Nolan) *intending* to address or raise those questions/issues.

TW claims that “the *least substantial* cinematic engagement with philosophy occurs when a film raises for its audience a philosophical issue” [492b-493t]

JP: TW doesn’t *explain* what makes this true, but I suspect it is because a film can *raise* a philosophical issue (as Nolan does in *Inception* where the storyline raises the Dream Problem, but doesn’t actually *engage with the problem* in a philosophical way).

TW notes that discussion among film theorists and philosophers about philosophical filmmaking is “focused primarily on narrative fiction films”, while acknowledging that non-fiction filmmaking can also be properly philosophical (his example is *The Act of Killing*, the documentary in which people involved in state-sponsored murders in Indonesia were persuaded to reenact those murders on camera).

Raising a Philosophical Question: *Waking Life*

This film raises the philosophical puzzles that arise from reflecting on the relationship between waking perception and dream perception (e.g., Descartes’ *dream problem*, which seems to challenge our faith in beliefs based on waking perception, or whether there is any *meaningful* relationship between dream life and waking life, etc.).

TW notes that the use of rotoscoping (where live-action digitally-recorded film is converted via computer software into an *animated film*) helps to promote the philosophical issue being discussed by the characters in the film. It does this implicitly for any viewer who knows how the film was literally made from original live-action digital recordings. But Linklater makes this explicit by manipulating the way the images appear (sometimes throbbing, vibrating, undulating “in a wave-like and quite unrealistic fashion”) so that the viewer is forced to consider that what they are seeing *may not represent what is really going on for these characters,* and thereby raising the very question about the relationship between dreams and everyday waking reality that the film is addressing.

*Waking Life* is particularly appropriate as a *philosophical* film in part because the philosophical issues are partly raised *through discussion* among the characters. This parallels the way philosophical ideas and claims are conveyed: through conversation (either in person, or through texts written by philosophers and read by philosophers and/or other interested readers).

TW notes that *Waking Life* “has no clear plot line” and this helps to raise the very philosophical question that is also the subject of so much of the dialogue among the characters: what is really going on? What is the relationship between this dreamlike presentation and whatever the presentation *refers to*?

TW notes the way some of the early scenes in the film help to raise the philosophical issue the film is addressing. He addresses these from the bottom of page 495 through 496 and 497.

Presenting a Counterexample to a Philosophical Thesis: *Crimes and Misdemeanors*

The claim the film addresses comes from Plato’s *Republic*: that people who are *just* will be happy, while those who are unjust or immoral will not be (an argument Plato offers in response to the challenge from Thrasymachus that people only act *justly* in order to avoid punishment.) Woody Allen’s film *challenges* this view by presenting an immoral character who manages to *become happy* when he realizes that the only barrier to happiness after the murder of his mistress, which he arranged and which tormented him for a period of time, are *his guilt feelings*, feelings that can be abandoned as these are unnecessary when he realizes that no one will ever discover he arranged for her murder, and since God doesn’t exist, there is no fear of divine punishment either. [499]

Illustrating a Philosophical Thesis: *Anomalisa*

TW notes that films are adept at doing something that philosophers often do: *consider how to think about a philosophical issue/question by* ***generating a philosophical ‘thought experiment’*** in which the issue is raised in such a way that thinking about the thought experiment helps us to figure out how to think correctly about the issue, or how to answer the question it raises. [499b]

*Anomalisa* illustrates “the philosophical theory of pessimism.” [500m]

JP; “philosophical pessimism” is “[the belief] that human life is inherently unfulfilling, that happiness is an unattainable goal.”[500m]

Possible question for the exam: “how does *Anomalisa* get the audience thinking about *philosophical pessimism*?” (answer lies on pages 500-502)

Providing Empirical Support for a Philosophical Thesis: *The Act of Killing*

Here, TW gives a robust account of how Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary *The Act of Killing*, in using a revolutionary method to get people who actually *carried out* the genocidal killings in Indonesia in 1965-1966 to come face to face with the immorality of what they did.

Possible question for the exam: what was this revolutionary method?

Answer is on page 505.

TW thinks that *The Act of Killing* presents empirical evidence for Hannah Arendt’s thesis: that *evil is banal*. How does it do this? See page 507 middle-to-bottom.

Presenting and Supporting a Philosophical Thesis: *Amour*

Michael Haneke’s film presents a compelling case that not only is euthanasia *permissible,* in some cases it is *required*. See pp. 508-509 for what it is about the events presented in the film that offer reasons for this conclusion.