Introduction to Section VIII: Film and Knowledge (by Noël Carroll)

Film *imparts* knowledge is a view supported by:

a. Some films of documentaries, which everyone regard as knowledge sources.

b. Criticisms of fantasy films for promoting false pictures of the way the world is/functions.

c. Many think narrative films can add to or subtract from our fund of moral understanding.

d. Some films and filmmakers are taken to advance *philosophical positions about reality*.

1. Bergman/Antonioni seemed to promote an existentialist account of the human situation.

2. Bresson’s films struck many as theological in tone and content.

3. Eisenstein and Vertov advanced Marxist philosophy.

4. Ozu seems to promote a Zen picture of human experience.

5. Lang can be taken to present a determinist picture of human life.

**Bruce Russell’s Contrarian View**

“The Philosophical Limits of Film” advances a contrary view. His evidence:

1. Much knowledge is *general,* and film, as a source of *instances* in support of a *general* thesis, cannot offer sufficient evidence (short of documentary presentations) in favor of any thesis.

2. Even empirical knowledge requires evidence through *argument* and films are poor at presenting arguments, even when they try.

Russell’s caveat: since a generalization *can* be defeated by a *single effective counterexample* (e.g., “crime pays” is defeated by Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors*), film can *debunk* generalizations (particularly moral generalizations).

**But**: no *positive* generalizations can be supported by film in this way.

JP: Why is that?

Limits of Russell’s Thesis

a. Russell’s necessary conditions for knowledge are ones that *philosophy* is unable to meet.

Consider: The Original Position, the Veil of Ignorance, the Chinese Room, Twin Earth examples, etc.

Russell can counter this: The Original Position, et al., are accompanied **by arguments** and these are what do most of the work in establishing grounds for accepting the philosophical conclusions advanced.

Counter to the Counter:

a. Many of Wittgenstein’s views are conveyed **without explicit argumentation** (even the famous “Argument Against a Private Language” [which no one has ever been able to successfully present *in the form of an argument*]).

b. Thought experiments are frequently used as the **basic framework** against which to test philosophical theories (this is true of ‘The Chinese Room’ as evidence against the idea that computers can think)

Russell possible comeback: “That for which there is no argument, there is no reason to believe.”-Ernie Lepore (well-known philosopher)

Upshot on Russell’s view: if this applies to philosophy, much of philosophy does not impart knowledge. And that is unnecessarily (and implausibly) narrow in its view of what ‘knowledge’ is, and so admirers of the view that film can convey knowledge should not be deterred in using film as a medium for knowledge.

**Lester Hunt’s Alternative, More-Expansive View of Knowledge**

Hunt’s counterexamples to Russell’s draconian view:

a. Argument to the Best Explanation, e.g., Socrates’ *Slave Boy* [Jason Explains] story in the Meno, proceeds from a case to a general claim. The instances *is a story,* and it could just as easily be a *fictional story* presented in a film. Q.E.D.

**Note**: while argument to the best explanation does not support truths that have ‘deductive necessity’ or ‘apodicticity’, they are widely accepted in philosophy (and elsewhere) as more-than-merely-plausible claims worthy of further investigation.

This technique is widely used in philosophy. Bertrand Russell thought “the fictional-narrative thought experiment [is widely used in philosophy as a way to gather] credibility for certain hypotheses…”

Hunt thinks *literature* is better equipped to produce effective narratives that can produce the kind of results that philosophical thought experiments do.

His main reason: literature can be **more dense with details** supporting the argument-to-the-best-explanation.

Counter: Hunt presupposes that verbal communication is **more dense** and thus **more effective** in advancing a basis for a hypothesis, and this is **not adequately proved** in his essay.

**Karen Hanson’s Alternative to Russell’s “hide-bound and blinkered” View of Knowledge**

Her evidence:

A. Philosophy often proceeds **by paradox** (Zeno’s Paradox of Motion still leads many to the conclusion that motion is impossible, or at the very least, ***inadequately understood****.*)

B. Philosophy also has been known to present a phenomenological perspective on human experience that helps us understand our own behavior and something distinctive about the human **situation** as a **conscious, intentional being**.

Specific fictional example: Sartre’s fictional example of a case of self-deception that

reveals aspects of the layers of *conscious intentions* that we often fail to recognize

(which is, Hanson thinks, a **form of knowledge**).

Hanson film example: *Vertigo* (represents pathological romantic love).

Hanson also notes that many **kinds of knowledge** can be conveyed through **anecdote** (a source of information that is forbidden if scientific knowledge is the model for all knowledge).

Why this is often a vehicle for knowledge: a lecturer gives a hypothesis (e.g, “love is blind”) and then tells a couple stories that support the hypothesis. The audience is thereby encouraged to look for their **own** evidence to see if the hypothesis fits. While this may lead to *mistakes* that one later realizes were mistakes, it can also lead to knowledge (consider the **insights** that people who have engaged in psychotherapy to deal with counterproductive emotional or behavioral habits **claim to have gained,** insights that **led to new, productive emotional and behavioral habits!**).

But what can be conveyed in **anecdote** can equally well, even more effectively be advanced through a film narrative.

Carroll’s supporting example: *How Green Was My Valley* scene where Carroll learned that some human behavior that seemed random and inadvertent **could be an intentional signal** passed from one person to another. This, Carroll suggests, was **important and true information about human interaction** that was valuable, true, and of **general application** in the conduct of everyday life.

Upshot: Perhaps what film can teach us has more to do with human behavior than with the nature of the cosmos or our place in it!

**Two** **Questions** for the class to discussion breakout rooms:

1. What are some things that you **learned from watching a film** that you regard as **knowledge of a valuable kind**, and **how did you learn it**?

2. Are there other art forms that are even **better** at passing along **valuable knowledge** than films, and if so, what are **some examples**?