Philosophy of Film

CAN FILM TEACH US PHILOSOPHY?

Background

- The main question of this presentation:

- Is the medium of film an appropriate one for illustrating/doing philosophy?

- As you can see, I'm dividing the question into <u>illustrating</u> and <u>doing</u>…

- This is an intentional division which I will explain later.

- But first, I need to tell you a little bit about how film and philosophy intersect in my life.

- My interest in philosophy started at around the age of 15...

- What motivated my philosophical enquiries was a deep sense that there was a lot that I didn't know, and being curious, I believed that philosophy had the potential to give me insight into myself and the nature of reality.

- My questions were typical of any person starting to study philosophy:

- Why am I here?
- Who am I?
- What is consciousness?
- What is the nature of reality?
- What is death?
- What is identity?
- What is Justice?
- Is Justice man made or something that exists in the very fabric of the universe?
- Is it possible that what I perceive with my senses is an illusion?
- Does evil exist?
- Are people naturally good or evil?
- Is there an ultimate meaning to existence, or is it meaningless?

- The very first philosophical text that I read was Jean Paul Sartre's "*Being and Nothingness*".

- To a 15 or 16 year old statements such as the following were both sublime and perplexing:

- "I must be without remorse or regrets as I am without excuse; for from the instant of my upsurge into being, I carry the weight of the world by myself alone without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant."

- While I wasn't 100% sure, at the time, what that statement meant, it was clear to me that it involved being self aware and taking responsibility for one's actions.

- It took a fair amount of reading and a significant mental workout to understand the essential concepts proposed by Sartre.

- While reading Sartre (and other philosophical texts) I also went to lots of films.

- So while reading philosophy could be difficult and at times mystifying, films were always a pleasurable experience.

- Even films that dealt with difficult ideas were reasonably easy to digest.

- Instead of speaking in general terms and trying to formulate universal truths using difficult words and jargon, films were much more about particulars…

- The best films dealt with specific issues and problems and seemed to pose questions that all of us, as human beings, have to deal with. The issues revolved around the following:

- Love
- Questions of Identity
- Justice
- Questions of Right and Wrong
- Questions about death and the after life

- Questions that seemed to be present in most films included the following:

- "What is human nature?"
- Are human beings good or bad?
- Are human beings Both Good and Bad?
- Can human beings change?
- Are human beings naturally moral?
- Is morality fictional or is it real?

- As you can probably already see, the two (seemingly very different)forms (philosophy and film) seem to intersect.

- Both are interested in the question of what it means to be human and how one should live one's life.

- Later, when I was teaching philosophy, it seemed natural to me to use films as an <u>illustrative tool</u> for philosophical concepts.

- And I did so often, since it made difficult ideas much easier for my students to understand and discuss.

Philosophy Through Film vs. Film as Philosophy

- There are two ways in which film can be used philosophically.

- First, it can be used as a resource <u>to give examples and illustrate</u> philosophical positions, ideas, and questions.

- This is the primary way in which I used film when I taught.

- The second approach is to think of film as a medium for philosophizing...

- In other words, using film and the language of film to contribute to <u>original philosophical knowledge</u>.

- The idea that film can <u>illustrate philosophy</u> is pretty much accepted by most philosophers and non-philosophers.

- <u>Film as philosophy</u>, however, is much more debatable...

- The general argument against it is that the very nature of film (its specificity and narrative structure) is contrary to the way philosophy approaches knowledge – because films deal with specific situations and events, and do not touch on the universal, some argue that they are epistemologically questionable. (Murray Smith)

- Those philosophers who argue that films can be philosophical generally discuss the following questions (Thomas Wartenberg):

- The nature of film (Ontology)

- What constitutes film…(what makes a film a film, its underlying grammar).

- Is film art?

- How does art differ from philosophy, and does art and philosophy share a common ground?

- How do films differ from other narrative forms?

- Do films have metaphysical significance? Do they mirror in an accurate way the nature of the real, or do films obfuscate and impose an illusory veil over reality?

Specific vs. Universal

- As I already mentioned earlier one argument against philosophy through film is the idea that films only deal in <u>specific narratives</u>, images, and scenarios, whereas philosophy concerns itself with <u>universal truths</u>.

- Since by definition film is about particular experiences and people the argument is that it has a very difficult time expressing and arguing universal truths, which are at the heart of philosophy.

- This is Plato's central arguments against particulars. For him particulars are objects of the senses and of belief, Forms (Universals) are objects of knowledge, grasped by the intellect.

- Since films deal with particulars and do not deal with Universals they cannot give us knowledge:

- *...we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state, but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is.*

- (Plato, Timaeus 27D-28A)
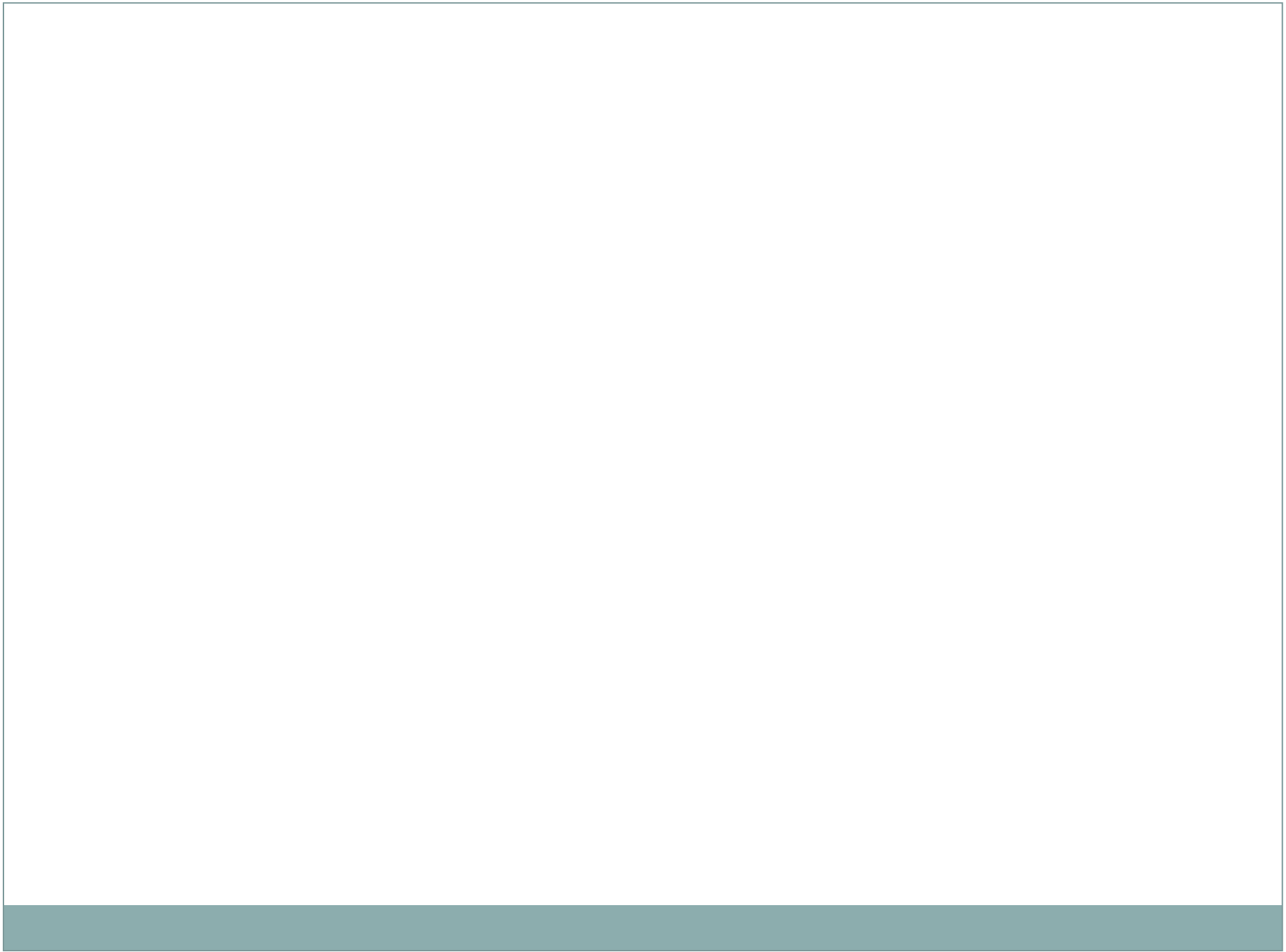
In response…

☐ Film can give us a glimpse into very specific people's experiences, thoughts, and feelings

☐ We can momentarily experience a different reality

☐ And when we exit the theatre, and come back to our own reality, we often reflect on what brought out those mirrored emotions.
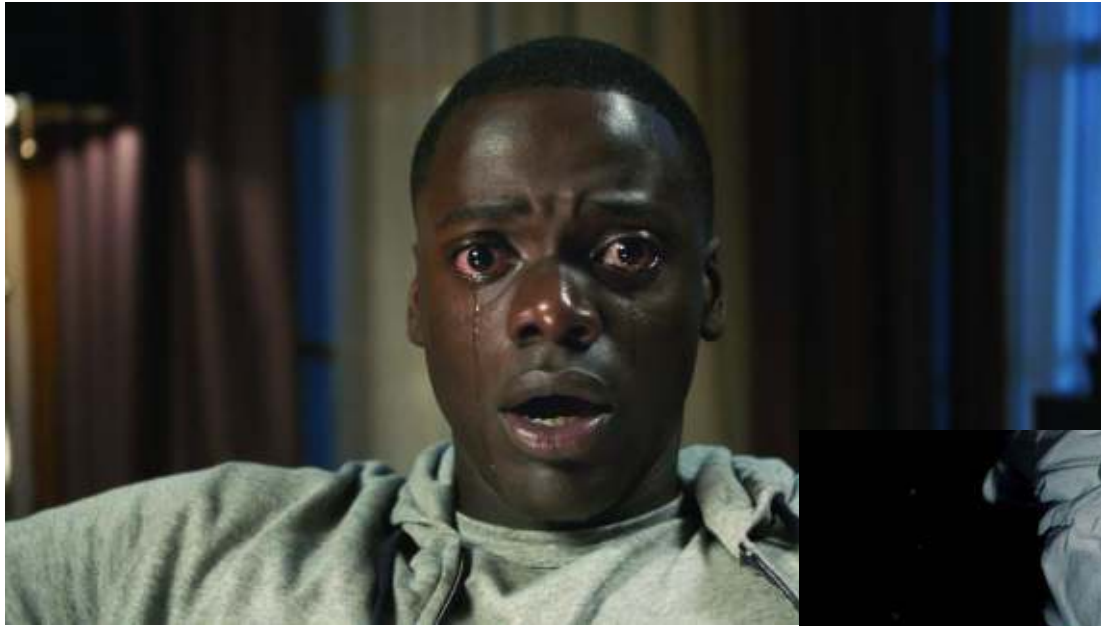
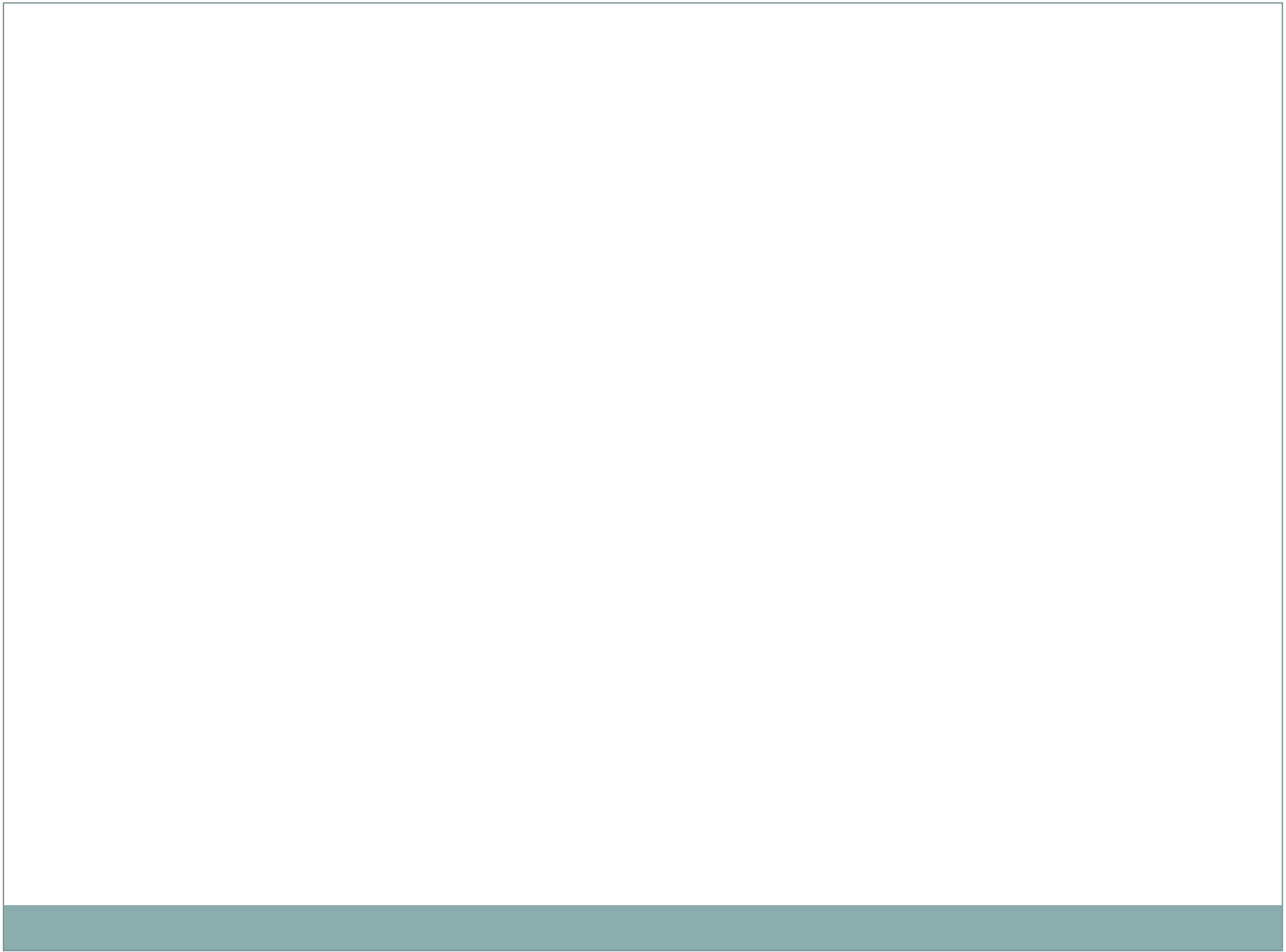# Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (Gondry, 2004)

Her (Jonze, 2013)

Get Out (Peele, 2017)

In response…

☐ Naturally I ask, what is the universal experience that allowed me to identify with these characters?

☐ It is the specificity & immersive nature of film that allows us to reflect on universal experience and the nature of reality

Films and Plato's Cave

- A central argument against film, both as original philosophy and as a resource to explore already existing philosophical ideas, often reference Plato's Allegory of the Cave.

- For those of you who are unfamiliar with Plato's Allegory (The Republic 514a-520a) it tells the story of prisoners trapped in a cave.

- The prisoners, however, are unaware that they are imprisoned or that they are in a cave.

- For the prisoners, the cave is everything that exists and it is the only reality.

- Inside the cave, the prisoners are able to see the shadows of things reflected on the cave wall.

- The prisoners mistake for reality what are in fact mere shadows projected on the cave wall.

- Plato's essential message in this narrative is that visual images and representations are inadequate as a source of knowledge…

- More importantly, what Plato seems to be suggesting is that philosophical enlightenment requires <u>thinking</u> and <u>critical reflection</u>…

- Knowledge, in other words, is much more than mere reliance on the way <u>things appear to us</u>.

- Appearances are ever changing and illusory and so cannot possibly be a source of <u>true knowledge</u>.

- Philosophical enlightenment, according to Plato, can only come when we escape from the cave and go out into the sunlight where we can see the real objects.

- Plato's claim is that sense experience only gives us access to shadows.

- To grasp the true nature of reality, which is the proper task of philosophy, we have to break free from dependence on sense experience and use <u>reason alone</u>.

Allegory of the Cave

I put a short video on The Allegory of the Cave on the API website.
www.theapi.ca/api-videos

- Cinematic imagery and mass media in general (TV, Streaming, YouTube, etc.) is reminiscent of Plato's cave.

- Just as in Plato's Cave, in the cinema we also sit in a darkened space, transfixed by images removed from the real world.

- Watching films we are a bit like Plato's prisoners.

- Cinema audiences watch images projected onto a screen in front of them, which are like the shadows in Plato's allegory.

- So on the surface, at least, it seems that films are of no help whatsoever for an understanding of philosophy.

- Films give us mere shadows/appearances which are far removed from what the real world is really like.

- So if the goal of philosophy is to discover the nature of reality (metaphysics) then relying on mere appearances is going to take us away from the truth/knowledge (epistemology) rather than bring us closer to it.

- But maybe this complete dismissal of philosophy through film is a bit premature…

- The problem is that it is a total dismissal of film's potential.

- While some films are nothing more than an entertaining distraction and cannot be used as a source of enlightenment, other films are much more insightful about what it means to be human and the nature of reality.

- Instead of a monolithic dismissal of films, film as philosophy require us to be selective.

- Careful examination of individual films has the potential of cutting through prevailing ways of thinking, social practices and institutions.

- Films can undermine our false beliefs through playfulness, irony, and subversion.

Question(s) for Discussion -- #1

- Is Philosophy Through Film possible?

- Is Film As Philosophy possible?

- Do you personally turn to films for philosophical enlightenment?

- What films have you seen that you feel are philosophically important and have given you insight into the nature of truth.

- Does the specificity of film undermine its potential for universal truth or does it help?

The Matrix (Philosophy through Film)

- In The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) Keanu Reeves plays a computer programmer who leads a double life as a hacker called Neo.

- After receiving cryptic messages on his computer monitor, Neo begins to search for Morpheus (Laurence Fishburn), the leader of a resistance group, who he believes is responsible for the messages.

- Eventually, Neo finds Morpheus, and is then told that reality is actually very different from what he perceives it to be.

- Morpheus tells Neo that human existence is merely an illusion.

- In reality, humans are being 'farmed' as a source of energy by a race of sentient, malevolent machines.

- People actually live their entire lives in pods, with their brains being fed sensory stimuli which give them the illusion of leading 'ordinary' lives.

- Morpheus explains that, up until then, the 'reality' perceived by Neo is actually 'a computer-generated dream world…a neural interactive simulation' called The Matrix.

- Neo's choice between the simulated world and reality is symbolized by Morpheus's outstretched hands offering a red or blue pill. "After this there is no turning back," Morpheus says. "You take the blue pill, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland. And I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes."

- No sooner has he swallowed the red pill than the simulation begins to liquefy and collapse and Neo is thrust into the realm beyond the Matrix: a bio-mechanical world of tubes and pods filled with gallons of ooze.

- Earth is a blackened husk governed by machines which patrol the endless battery farms of unconscious humans.

- Before he knows it, Neo's aboard the Nebuchadnezzar, a gravity-defying ship which Morpheus uses to search for The One – a person who will save humanity from the machines.

- Among Morpheus' crew is Cypher, who unlike Neo has had the time to regret his decision to swallow the red pill.

- In fact, Cypher's disgust with the harshness of reality – a claustrophobic ship, slop for food, the constant threat of death by machine – leads him to cut a deal with the bad guys.

- Jacking into the Matrix, Cypher meets with Agent Smith – one of the programs that patrols the system, sniffing out rebels – and, over a particularly bloody slab of steak, agrees to sell out the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar in order to have his body plugged back into the Matrix.

- "I wanna remember nothing," Cypher says, waving a glass of wine. "Nothing, you understand?"

"I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain that it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss."

- Can anyone necessarily blame him? Maybe a comfortable illusion is better than an unpleasant truth – particularly when the illusion is literally indistinguishable from reality.

Question #2

Is a comfortable illusion better than an unpleasant truth if the illusion is literally indistinguishable from reality?

- So in the Matrix, we see philosophy done through film.

- There are philosophical questions that are suggested. These questions are not original, but are part of the canon of already existing philosophies.

- The film simply asks us to reflect on these questions.

- Now here's Meaghan to discuss film as philosophy.

Film as Philosophy

- Film is an inherently visual medium

- Lends itself to strains of philosophy that culture has forced into the visual sphere, most notably feminist philosophies

Born in 1941 in the UK

Film theorist and cultural philosopher

Influenced by the likes of Sigmund Freud and Jaques Lacan

Laura Mulvey

The Male Gaze

- The way that mainstream media objectifies women, showing the female body though a heterosexual male lens

- Feminine subjects are shown as passive non-actors, secondary to the active male characters

- Women are in fact "the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning,"

The Male Gaze

- Typical examples of the male gaze include:
  - Medium close-up shots of women from over a man's shoulder
  - Shots that pan and fixate on a woman's body
  - Scenes that frequently occur which show a man actively observing a passive woman

Rear Window (Hitchcock, 1954)

The Graduate (Nichols, 1967)

GoldenEye (Campbell, 1995)

Transformers (Bay, 2007)

The Male Gaze

Patriarchal cultural systems make the visual medium of film integral to feminist theories and the philosophies that follow.

They could not be done separately.

Mulvey's theory of the Male Gaze pinpointed dominant ideologies

Filmmakers have since been responding and philosophizing through the very medium of their own films and creating new philosophies of their own.

Most directly is the philosophy of the Female Gaze

1. Exposing how it feels to be the object of a gaze– the camera actually speaks out as a receiver of a gaze and in a sense is self-reflective or is critically reflective on its own point of view

1. Returning the gaze– acknowledging the male gaze and actively making women subjects rather than passive objects

1. Bodies are used as a way to portray emotions and the film frame is used in a way which invokes personal emotion, rather than just the viewing of it on screen
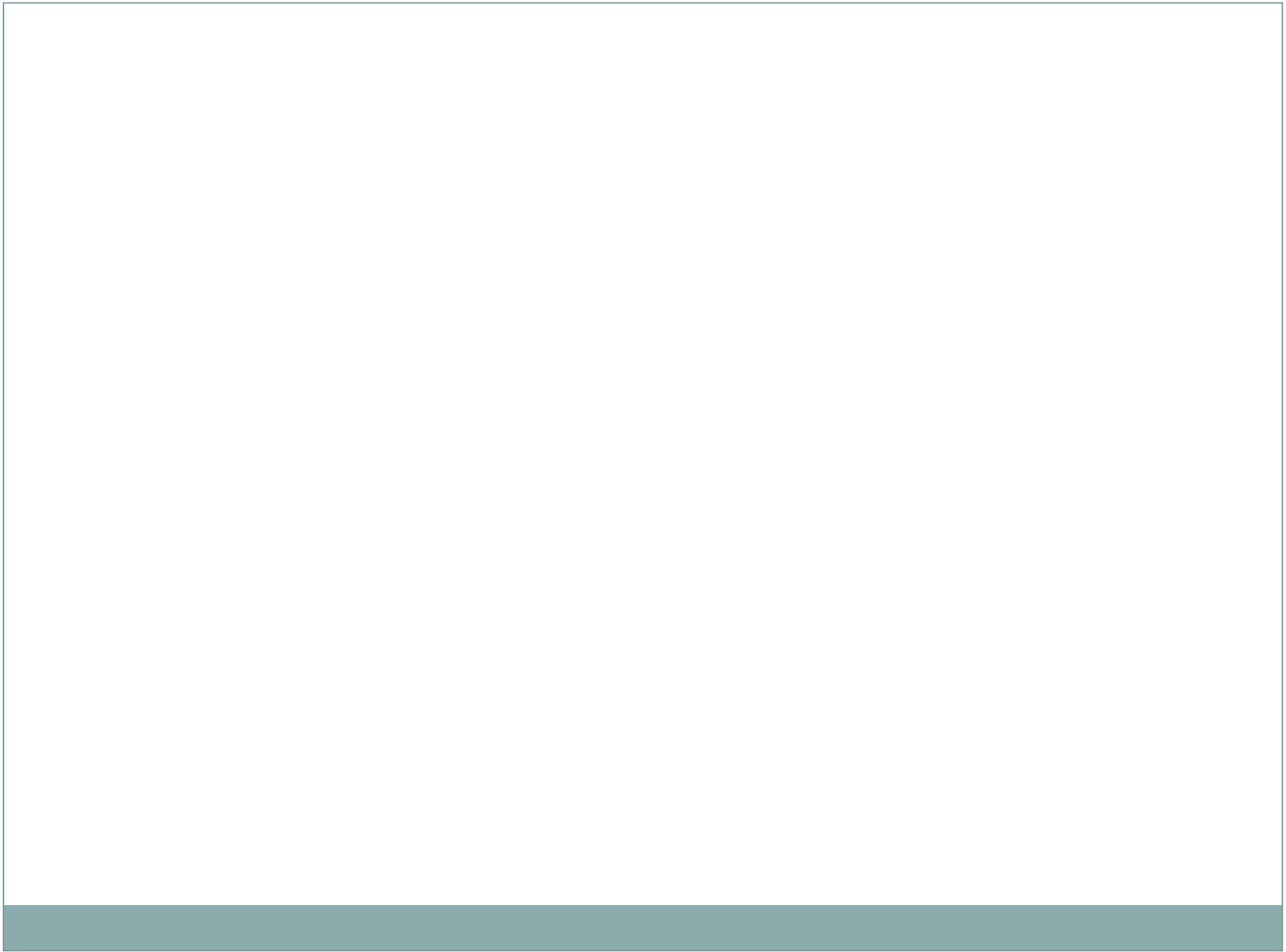
Film as a Thought Experiment

- Another way that films are integral to philosophy is by acting as thought experiments?

- Thomas Wartenberg has developed a conception of philosophy as thought experiment which attempts to turn any objection to film as philosophy on its head.

- He does this in his book *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*

- He points out that fictional narratives can be found readily enough in philosophy itself, in the form of imaginary scenarios and hypothetical situations which are known as **thought experiments**.

- But what is a thought experiment?

What is a Thought Experiment?

- Thought experiments are defined as the mental process of using hypotheticals to logically reason out a solution to a difficult question.

- Thought experiments often try to simulate the experimental process through imagination alone.

- Typically thought experiments tend to be rhetorical…they are made to emphasize a point rather than to give an absolute answer to a question.

Some Famous Thought Experiments

- The Prisoner's Dilemma
- Mary the Colorblind Neuroscientist
- The Beetle in the Box
- The Chinese Room
- The Experience Machine
- The Trolley Problem
- The Spider in the Urinal
- The Replacement Argument
- The Malicious Demon Argument

- There's a link to these thought experiments on the API website if you'd like to read more. You can find them on the link page (www.theapi.ca/other-links)

Example – Philosophy (The Experience Machine-Robert Nozick) This is The Matrix

- Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired.

- Neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book.

- All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain.

- Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences?…

- Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening…

- Would you plug in?“

- *(Robert Nozick in his 1974 book Anarchy, State, and Utopia)*

- First Matrix released in 1999

The Experience Machine (Ways of thinking about it)

- The argument

- Premise 1: If experiencing as much pleasure as we can is all that matters to us, then if we will experience more pleasure by doing x than by doing y, we have no reason to do y rather than x.

- Premise 2: We will experience more pleasure if we plug into the experience machine than if we do not plug into the experience machine.

- Conclusion 1: If all that matters to us is that we experience as much pleasure as we can, then we have no reason not to plug into the experience machine. (P1&P2)

- Premise 3: We have reason not to plug into the experience machine.

- Conclusion 2: Experiencing as much pleasure as we can is not all that matters to us.

Reasons Nozick Provides For Not Plugging In

- We want to do certain things, and not just have the experience of doing them.
  - "It is only because we first want to do the actions that we want the experiences of doing them." [1]:43

- We want to be a certain sort of person.
  - "Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob." [1]:43

- Plugging into an experience machine limits us to a man-made reality (it limits us to what we can make).
  - "There is no actual contact with any deeper reality, though the experience of it can be simulated."

- So as you can see thought experiments are not empty narratives devoid of truth.

- They are narrative-based arguments that have the potential to initiate philosophical reflection, raise questions, undermine existing views by posing counter-examples and even confirm or undermine a theory.

- Plato's cave story is itself such a thought experiment, a narrative embodying a memorable image or scenario, designed to raise general questions about the role of sense experience, the nature of knowledge and the character of philosophical enlightenment.

- Ironically, Plato resorts to a narrative, embodying a memorable image, in order to argue that images have no place in philosophical discourse

- In Fact, Thomas E. Wartenberg's doesn't only say that films have philosophical elements or philosophical themes, but also that films actually philosophize.

  - (You can find links to Thomas E Wartenberg's writings on the API website at www.theapi.ca

- Wartenberg argues that films have a capacity to actually do the work of philosophy.

- Wartenberg defends his thesis through readings of popular as opposed to art house films.

- Some of the films that he looks at include:

- Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*
- The Wachowski sisters *The Matrix*
- Michael Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

Film as Philosophy
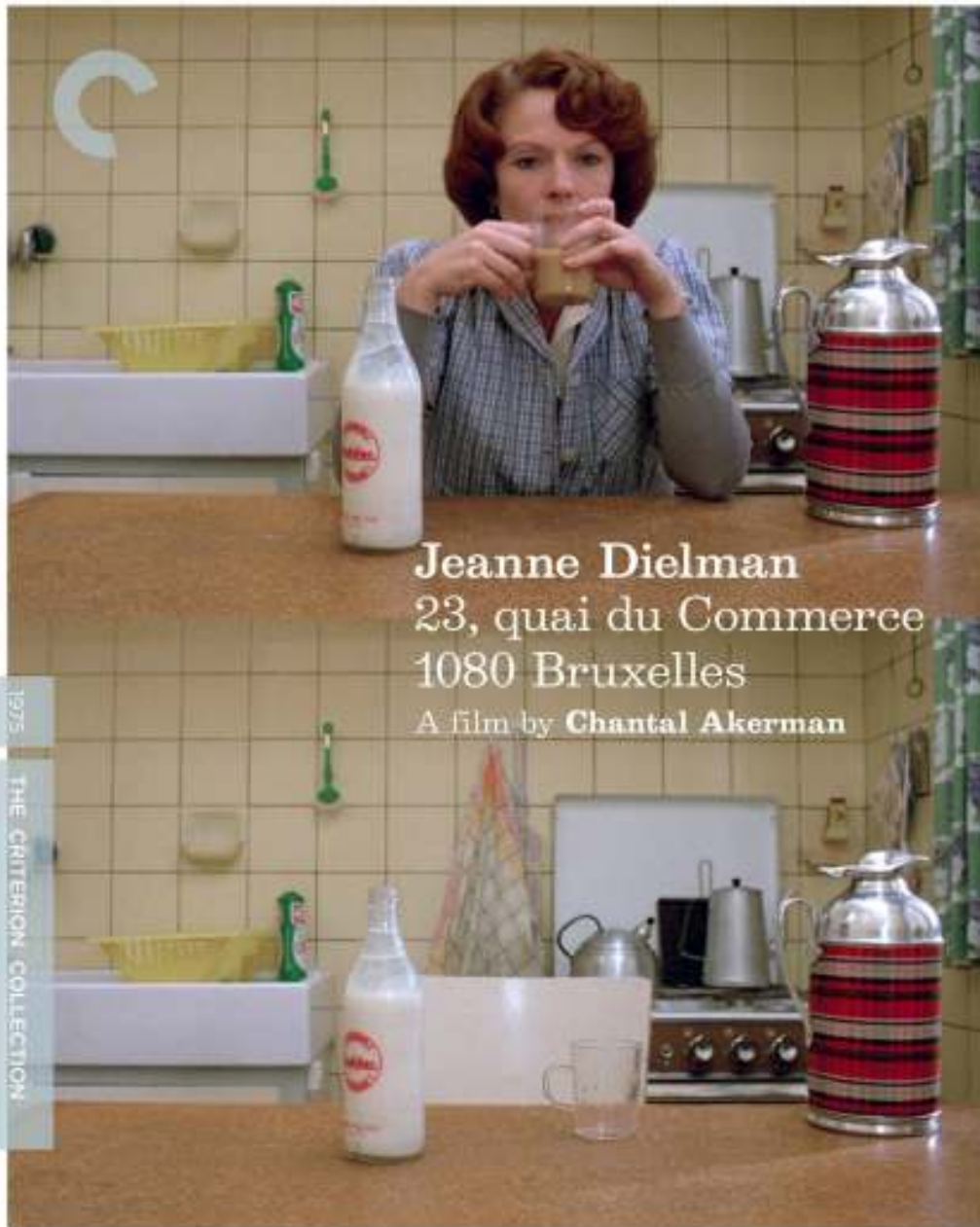
Jeanne Dielman is a widowed housewife who spends her days consumed with repetitive domestic work, while also keeping herself financially afloat through occasional prostitution. It's only when small interruptions in her daily routine occur that she takes some unexpected measures to correct them…

The Female Gaze

Chantal Akerman (1975)

Formal construction must change, not just the content…

The Female Gaze & the Pre-Aesthetic

Long takes and medium shots of Jeanne Dielman in her home with as little filmic distortion as possible.

The frame is controlled by Dielman's actions, gestures, and looks, and importance is placed on traditionally devalued actions

The pre-aesthetic essentially values the image before a traditionally aestheticized image

The Female Gaze & The Pre-Aesthetic

Let's Discuss!

- Are there any films that you think philosophize through the film medium itself?

- I focused on feminist philosophies, as they are intertwined with the visual. Are there other areas of philosophy that you think lend themselves to being created/extended in film?

- Or, any other thoughts!

Some Philosophical Films

- Waking Life
- Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
- Match Point
- Zelig
- Donnie Darko
- Fight Club
- The Truman Show
- The Matrix
- Lost in Translation
- Inception
- Interstellar
- My Dinner with Andre
- The Seventh Seal
- Etc…

Order of Presentation

1. The Question (5 min)
2. Intersection of Philosophy & Film in my life (10 min)
3. Philosophy through Film & Particular vs. Universal (10 min)
4. Meaghan's response (10 min)
5. Film & Plato's Cave (15 min)
6. Questions for Discussion #1 (15 min)
7. The Matrix (10 min)
8. Question for Discussion #2 (15 min)
9. Film & the Male Gaze – Feminist philosophy (10 min)
10. Film as a Thought Experiment (10 min)
11. Meaghan – Film as Philosophy (10 min)
12. Question for Discussion #3 (15 min)
13. End