

HOW FILM CAN PLAY A COGNITIVE ROLE IN PHILOSOPHY

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Do we take more pleasure in the sight of the sufferings of others or their joys? Is it pleasanter to do a kind action or an unkind action, and which leaves the more delightful memory behind it? Why do you enjoy the theatre? Do you delight in the crimes you behold? Do you weep over the punishment which overtakes the criminal? (J.-J. Rousseau 1911, paragraph 1027)

Can a film play a cognitive role in philosophy; more specifically, can it contribute a stage to a philosophical argument? There is a trivial way in which it obviously can. A character in a film may stand up and deliver a philosophical argument. One could easily imagine Plato's *Republic*, for example, translated into a film in which Socrates is heard enunciating many arguments. However, even though there may be some pedagogic value in such a film, this would be putting film to a use better achieved by an essay. Is there a way for a film to contribute to an argument more effectively than an essay? Is there a way for a film to provide evidence which can be cited in an essay?

Documentary footage is one way in which film can play a cognitive role. For example, film of holocaust victims empirically supports the claim that humans can commit great evil against their fellow human beings. Since this is a philosophically important fact, we see here one way in which film can contribute a stage to a philosophical argument more effectively than an essay. But it should come as no surprise that a documentary can present evidence for a philosophically important claim. The more interesting question is whether a theatrical, non-documentary use

of film can provide such evidence and whether it can do so in a way that the philosophical essay cannot equal, at least relative to certain questions. A related question is whether or not film can provide rationally valuable grounds for a philosophical view more effectively than at least some other art forms. Yet another related question is whether or not film can do so more effectively than forms of persuasion that fall into neither the category of philosophical essay nor the category of non-filmic art, e.g. scientifically controlled psychological data. In this paper, I am more concerned with the first question, but will briefly address the other two as well.

One might think that the only philosophical role that a non-documentary film can play is to raise questions. For example, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and the novel upon which it is based *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Dick 1997) raise the philosophical issue of whether it is morally acceptable to kill or disable artificial devices that behave and look very much like humans. But can a theatrical, non-documentary use of film help *answer* the questions it raises? Is its only cognitive role to generate restaurant discussion after seeing it, discussion which ninety-nine percent of the time is terribly thin anyway?

One might think that it can have no other role, since characters and events in film can be depicted in any way that can be visualized. In *The Matrix* (Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski 1999), we see the character Neo perform acrobatics which physicists would say are impossible. Does this mean that physicists are wrong? Of course not, since Neo's acrobatics are largely an illusion. We know that what we see is not real, and if we fail to know this then we are being irrational. In *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming 1939), Prissy is a cowardly, dishonest, and idiotic African-American. Is this evidence that African-Americans are typically cowardly, dishonest, and idiotic? Of course not, since Prissy could have been portrayed as a heroic and virtuous fountain of wisdom, had the film makers chosen to do so. Actors and film makers can portray characters and events in any way they like. Given the deceitful powers of acting, special effects, and even simple editing and lighting, one might think that non-documentary film is useless for providing real evidence about anything. One might be tempted to dismiss the whole thing as too hallucinatory, like a modern version of Plato's cave. Can non-

documentary film give a good reason for believing something about the *real* world, the world that exists outside the film?

Some might think that a film is better than an essay in presenting thought experiments. A *thought experiment* is a way of testing a hypothesis by appealing to intuitions. It involves imagining a situation and considering what one would say about it. For example, John Locke argued that being the same person over time depends upon memory, not body (Locke 1694, chapter 27). That is, you have survived from yesterday to today by reason of memories you have about experiences that occurred yesterday. He tried to support his point with a thought experiment: imagine a prince, or the body of a prince, waking up one morning having only the memories of a certain cobbler. Erstwhile, that cobbler, or his body, wakes the same morning to find himself having only the memories of the prince. Locke believed that we are inclined to say that the former body of the prince now sustains the identity of the cobbler and vice versa. In other words, each person now has the other's body or what was formerly the other's body. This was meant to support his view of personal identity. This little story of the prince and the cobbler could easily be filmed, and our intuition that what was once the cobbler's body now belongs to the prince, and vice versa, may be even stronger while watching the film than it was while reading Locke. Does this mean that film can rationally persuade by presenting thought experiments and perhaps even do so more effectively than an essay?

Unfortunately, films are not reliable means of presenting thought experiments at all. People who watch them virtually always want to be entertained, and they will make assumptions to help meet that goal. For example, we tend to assume that the same protagonist survives throughout much of the story, unless the film-maker makes it clear that we should think otherwise. We make this assumption not because it is philosophically plausible but because it is necessary for us to continue finding the film interesting and entertaining. But this assumption can influence how we interpret what we see in the film, including judgments of personal identity. Peter Unger provides another example.

In [a science fiction story], almost all of us may respond to a case as though it is perfectly possible for a given person to go backward in time and, at a certain particular past time, perform an action that is *other than* what, before, she herself did at that very time. Of course, the belief that this response appears to indicate is obviously inconsistent. It is doubtful that so many of us believe that a particular person both does, and also does not do, a particular thing at a particular time... [If we discount our desire to be entertained and hence discount our wanting to believe in] the continuity of main characters throughout much of the plot, we may then respond to the case by giving it quite a different description. For just one way of doing that - there are others - we may say that another person, exactly similar to the first, went back to the past time and then performed an action that was opposite of what, before, the first person did at that past time. (Unger 1990, 12)

In *Blade Runner* (1982), for another example, we see machines built to look and act very much like humans. In terms of internal structure, however, they are radically different. After all, these constructions are silicon, not carbon like us. But nonetheless, we see them looking and acting *almost* the same as humans. In watching the film, one perceives these creatures as having genuine thoughts and emotions. Does this perception mean that such silicon beings really would have thoughts and emotions if they behaved so much as we do? Not necessarily, since the film would be much less entertaining if we did not make that charitable assumption. The desire to have a good time in the cinema biases how we interpret what we see. So film is not a good method for presenting thought experiments. Once again it might seem that, even if films are sometimes good at raising philosophical questions, they are poor at answering them.

A Clockwork Orange: Augustine versus Pelagius

But there is a way that film can rationally persuade, a way for it to present good

evidence for believing something about the real world — even more effectively than an essay. Film can evoke emotions, and sometimes the very existence of those emotions, in conjunction with some plausible assumptions that most people would already be inclined to make, supports a philosophical claim. The mere fact that the viewer is even capable of certain emotions in certain contexts may serve to shatter, to rationally discredit, a deeply held view of oneself and, by plausible extension, a view of humanity as such, a deeply held view of philosophical importance.

In order to see how this can be done, consider Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of the same name (1971). Both the novel and the film reflect Burgess's fascination with an old philosophical debate, the quarrel between Saint Augustine and the British theologian Pelagius. Augustine believed in original sin, the view that human nature was so corrupted by the sin of Adam that we have a tendency to do evil which we can do nothing to remove. True inner goodness is only possible through God's grace, although outer conformity to morality may be achieved through threats of punishment from, say, the government. Pelagius, on the other hand, refused to believe in original sin, maintaining instead that humans are inherently good and therefore capable of saving themselves from wickedness. In other words, moral self-improvement is humanly possible, according to Pelagius.¹ The debate is not exclusively a religious one. In some broad sense, Karl Marx was Pelagian since he believed that humans were destined through their own nature to reach a perfect society in which greed and social inequality would be no more. Thomas Hobbes was, in an equally broad and loose sense, an Augustinian, since he held that conformity to moral principles requires the threat of punishment from the government.²

Burgess was more sympathetic to the pessimistic Augustinian view, and in *A*

1. For more on the relevance of this debate to Burgess, see Geoffrey Aggeler (Aggeler 1987).

2. One of the most dramatic, significant, and long-running public debates between a Pelagian and an Augustinian after the Middle Ages was that between the utopian optimist William Godwin and the pessimistic Thomas Malthus. Malthus' discussion of the 'struggle for survival' provided much of the groundwork for the Darwin/Wallace explanation for evolutionary change in terms of natural selection. Ironically, this reignited utopian optimism in many who mistakenly took evolution to be goal directed.

Clockwork Orange, he satirizes various forms that Pelagianism can take. The protagonist and narrator of the story is Alex, a seventeen-year-old street thug who robs, rapes, and kills but who also has a brilliant gift for language and loves classical music. Imprisoned for murder, he comes to be the recipient of a strange psychological treatment sponsored by the government in their effort to reduce crime. As part of the treatment, he is made to watch violent films while under the influence of a nauseous drug. He is conditioned to experience a feeling of sickness whenever he sees violence, a kind of learned association, and so can no longer behave violently. The experimenters play classical music for him while he watches the films in order to heighten the emotional effect. As a result, in the novel Alex becomes sick when hearing any music. In the film, only Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which had been his favorite, causes nausea.

Due to his strange, new, and somehow less human condition, Alex cannot defend himself from people who try to take advantage of him. Homeless and beaten up, he is eventually 'befriended' by political progressives who object to the current government and wish to use him as an example of the failure of the government's authoritarian anti-crime methods. Following the film version, they are especially interested in the fact that Beethoven's Ninth has become torture for him. In order for Alex to become a martyr for their anti-authoritarian cause, they force him to listen to the Ninth, hoping that it will drive him to suicide. It is their intention that when the newspapers hear of this, the current government will be disgraced and weakened.

Utopianism is a kind of Pelagianism, the view that human effort alone can bring us heaven without being guilty of any wickedness in the process. The authoritarian government and the progressives who oppose it in Burgess's novel are both utopians, each in their own way, and hence both Pelagian. The progressives in the story are Pelagian in that they believe a more loving and humane environment will foster innate human goodness, making authoritarianism unnecessary. Ironically, they are so hell bent on reaching their goal that they have no qualms in forcing Alex into suicide. They are so convinced that they occupy the moral high ground that they do not realize that they are murderers and hence evil themselves. But the

authoritarian government is equally utopian, since they believe that the evil in the human soul can be rooted out through a little associationistic psychotherapy. Ironically, they can only root it out by destroying Alex's love of music, or at least his love of Beethoven's Ninth as in the film. That is, they only remove his evil through torture, which is what the treatment clearly is, and by removing his humanity as well, the ultimate degradation. Like the anti-government progressives, the government too fails to recognize that what they see as their own goodness is, in fact, torture and degradation. The novel and the film are satires on different forms of utopianism and hence on different forms of the Pelagian heresy. Burgess and Kubrick are using satire to make the point that being evil is necessarily part of being human, ironically illustrated by people being especially guilty of evil when they try to bring out the best in another human being.

But this use of satire does not prove that Augustine was right and Pelagius wrong. In fact, it is not even evidence. Burgess and Kubrick could just as easily have satirized the pessimistic Augustinians. But Kubrick artfully arouses feelings of pleasure and even glee in the viewer while watching Alex perform exceptionally depraved acts. In this way, he gives us an actual reason to doubt Pelagianism. Kubrick is not just making fun of the intellectual opposition through satire but contributing a stage to a philosophical argument.

The film begins with a visual contrast between Alex and his first victim, a contrast designed to make the viewer feel contempt for the victim and delight in Alex and his friends' wantonly maiming him. First we see Alex sitting like a king in his court, actually a futuristic bar or nightclub that serves tall glasses of warm milk laced with drugs, while we hear the solemn and royal chords of an electronic version of Purcell's *Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary*. The next take is of an aging derelict 'lording it over' some subterranean urban recess, possibly the space under a walkway. Instead of hearing royal music, we hear the derelict's own drunken singing and belching. The contrast is between apparent greatness and apparently despicable lowness. Alex and his friends appear on the scene and proceed to assault and maim the old man simply out of contempt for his condition. Even though one will say that what Alex does is morally grotesque, it is difficult while watching

these two scenes not to feel some admiration and awe for Alex, the kingly criminal, and some contempt for the apparently innocent but disgusting derelict who is so seriously assaulted, the very sort of contempt which Alex himself feels.

In the next scene, we see another group of thugs brutalizing a young woman whom they mean to rape. Her short but frequent screams and Kubrick's use of Rossini's Overture to *The Thieving Magpie* as background music make the scene almost comical and cartoon-like. The viewer is encouraged, not to feel horror at the woman's plight, but amusement at her helplessness. Shortly afterward, Alex and his friends go on a joy ride through the countryside which is so reckless it could well be murderous. The camera literally takes Alex's point of view as we see motorists and a pedestrian just barely managing to dart out of the way of the speeding car he pilots, the immediate fate of their lives uncertain. Perhaps some of these people have been hurt or even killed in their frantic attempts to get off the road, but we only see them as cartoon-like figures adding to the fun of what feels like a roller coaster ride. The viewer almost wants to laugh, or at least chuckle, at the people whom Alex is terrorizing. At the very least, it is hard not to feel a slight thrill.

Alex and his associates arrive at the home of a wealthy author and his young wife. Through guile, they enter the house where they kick, slap, and beat the couple and eventually rape the woman. Alex shows tremendous *joie de vivre*, giving a dynamic rendition of 'Singin' in the Rain', literally accenting the music by kicking and slapping his victims. Kubrick is manipulating the viewer to feel some of Alex's joy and amusement. Not only does the viewer see these events from the perspective of the criminal, the viewer *feels* the criminal's pleasure. To be more precise, the viewer experiences a kind of squeamish mixture of revulsion at what Alex is doing combined with a degree of joyful identification with him.

Many who watch the film are angered and offended by these scenes, probably because they resent such feelings of delight being aroused in them while seeing images of brutality. The cognitive dissonance between how they view themselves and the emotions they find themselves having during the film causes disgust or anger, often directed at Kubrick. But Kubrick is performing an intellectual service; he is forcing the viewer, no matter how moral and upright he may take

himself to be, to recognize his own capacity for delighting in things criminal. It appears that the apparent moral distance between the criminal and the virtuous is an illusion born of a dishonesty with oneself. Kubrick is not merely satirizing Pelagianism but giving the viewer reason to doubt his own Pelagian assumptions about innate human goodness. The film is not simply presenting a philosophical vision but defending it with argument by adducing evidence.

Why one feels this mix of exhilaration and revulsion is less relevant than the fact that one feels it at all. The film shows that the capacity is there. Perhaps the film helps to counteract the suppression of a vile emotional attitude toward those who cannot defend themselves. The viewer may successfully suppress certain emotions throughout most of daily life and even convince himself that they do not exist. He may do this in order to maintain a certain philosophical view of human nature. But while watching a film, those emotions may be aroused, forcing him to acknowledge them and revise some of his philosophical views. But this is not the only possible explanation of what Kubrick has accomplished. Most who watch it also feel horror at what they are seeing mixed with the delight. One could argue that the delight results entirely from aesthetic appreciation of the music, editing, and visual composition. The actual content, the brutality, may be producing nothing but horror in the viewer. But even if this is so, it does not alter the fundamental point. If you, the spectator, are capable of feeling pleasure, even a mixed pleasure, at the sight of someone being brutally beaten just because of music, lighting, and editing, then you have scarce grounds for self-congratulation. One feels concern for how you might behave if given great power over others and even a slight encouragement or incentive to abuse that power. One wants to cry 'Shame!' at a nature so easily misled; and that nature is human nature. Even if Kubrick has not shown that vile attitudes are often suppressed, he has at least shown that it is not difficult to blunt or qualify feelings of moral indignation, certainly not something that a Pelagian would feel comfortable in learning.

I want to clarify the point being made by contrasting it with a claim one often hears about the relation between literature and philosophy. Although certainly not the only one to make this claim, I quote from Colin McGinn: "Some attempt should

be made to come to terms with the embeddedness of the ethical in the fictional. For this we need new methods and styles with which to discuss stories and morals. Our discussions will be less abstract and more immediate, since we are now closer to lived ethical experience. ... The universally quantified ethical prescription will not be the standard form here (not that I object to that form in its proper place)” (McGinn 1997, 175). The notion that literature and film can provide us with, at best, a philosophy of the concrete or of the particular, as opposed to the universal, is voiced so often that I fear that readers will jump to the conclusion that I am here defending some variant of that view. I am not. The discussion of human nature above was meant to be universal, not particular. Strictly speaking, the pertinent generalizations here are not universally quantified in the logician’s sense of ‘universal’, since there are always abnormal individuals here and there; but the relevant generalizations are at least universal in the linguist’s or anthropologist’s sense of ‘universal’, meaning that they are typically true of humans.

McGinn’s view rests on the assumption that art, say a film, can only rationally lead the viewer to a philosophical conclusion if all the semantic content of that conclusion is somewhere to be found within the narrow walls of the film itself. Since a film only portrays a series of particular events, it might seem inevitable that the pertinent philosophical conclusion, whatever it is, can only allude to particulars.³ But the example of Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange* shows that this is not so. It is true that the film only depicts a series of events, a series of particulars. However, this does not mean that Kubrick cannot use that series of particulars to rationally persuade the viewer of a general conclusion. The vast majority of people watching the film will take themselves to be at least approximately normal in their emotions. Some will not be, of course. But it is a truism that the vast majority will be. Most people are right and justified in believing themselves to be normal; and when they do not believe themselves to be normal, it is usually because they take themselves to be better

3. Of course, there are virtually no limits at all on the semantic content that can be portrayed in a film if one takes into account the characters’ utterances, e.g. “All men are rats.” However, McGinn is clearly concerned with what is unique to film/literature; any universal claim made by a fictional character could also conceivably appear in a written essay, if not always so colorfully worded.

than normal. Hence, finding such appalling emotions in oneself is, for the vast majority of people, a rational ground for rethinking human nature as such. It is true that the universal premise warranting this conclusion is not found in the film itself, but it is found in the spectator's bosom as the filmmaker well knew.

Another point that must be stressed is that my thesis here is not Kubrick's thesis. In other words, the point of this paper is not to defend Augustine's picture of human nature. The point is to defend the ability of a film to contribute a stage to a philosophical argument. If one raises objections to the Augustinian view, that is important to philosophy, e.g. political philosophy, but it does not tend toward refuting the claim that Kubrick has presented a philosophical argument. Kubrick's argument needs to be defended independently of mine.

How effective is Kubrick's means of presenting his argument? How does Kubrick's means compare with other possible means? I contend that the filmic means of presenting evidence about human nature, namely by arousing certain unexpected emotions in the viewer, is better than some other means, equal to others, and inferior to yet others. All things considered, it remains one valid means of presenting such evidence. With regard to showing that a typical human is capable of dangerous emotions, film is more effective than the philosophical essay because the film, but not the essay, can create simulations of moral atrocities while evoking the sorts of emotional responses that would cause Augustine to say 'I told you so'.⁴ The only qualification here is that a philosophical essay may refer to evidence elicited in a film just as it may also refer to controlled scientific data.

For the sake of providing a contrast with Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, and

4. This is not to say that Augustine would have approved of a film like *A Clockwork Orange*. Augustine repeatedly condemned the portrayal of obscenity in the theater for fear that it would encourage spectators to imitate it. Specifically, he condemned the pagan theater for portraying the gods as committing indecent and depraved acts and hence as encouraging the general public to hold such acts worthy of imitation (e.g., Augustine, 1972, II 9-14). *A Clockwork Orange* is clearly not a pagan celebration of the gods, but one must consider the possibility that Augustine would have condemned it as well and for related reasons, namely for encouraging the audience to identify with a sadistic wanton. The point in the text is merely that Augustine should have granted that the ability of this film to evoke such emotions in the viewer would have been evidence for there being a flaw in human nature, a point much stressed by Augustine. Whether or not he would object to the film on other grounds is a different issue.

hence with the potential of film in general, consider a passage from Bertrand Russell's *Power*. Note those instances where Russell appeals to familiar experiences, reasonably typical human experiences, to make his philosophical point.

The psychology of the oligarch who depends upon mechanical power is not, as yet, anywhere fully developed. It is, however, an imminent possibility, and quantitatively, though not qualitatively, quite new. It would now be feasible for a technically trained oligarchy, by controlling aeroplanes, navies, power stations, motor transport, and so on, to establish a dictatorship demanding almost no conciliation of subjects. The empire of Laputa [in *Gulliver's Travels*] was maintained by its power of interposing itself between the sun and a rebellious province; something almost equally drastic would be possible for a union of scientific technologists. They could starve a recalcitrant region, and deprive it of light and heat and electrical power after encouraging dependence on these sources for comfort; they could flood it with poison gas or with bacteria. Resistance would be utterly hopeless. And the men in control, having been trained on mechanism, would view human material as they had learnt to view their own machines, as something unfeeling governed by laws which the manipulator can operate to his advantage. Such a régime would be characterised by a cold inhumanity surpassing anything known in previous tyrannies.

...Those who have the habit of controlling powerful mechanisms, and through this control have acquired control over human beings, may be expected to have an imaginative outlook towards their subjects which will be completely different from that of men who depend upon persuasion, however dishonest. Most of us have, at some time, wantonly disturbed an ants' nest, and watched with mild amusement the scurrying confusion that resulted. Looking

down from the top of a sky-scraper on the traffic of New York, the human beings below cease to seem human, and acquire a faint absurdity. If one were armed, like Jove, with a thunderbolt, there would be a temptation to hurl it into the crowd, from the same motive as in the case of the ants' nest....Imagine a scientific government which, from fear of assassination, lives always in aeroplanes, except for occasional descents on to landing stages on the summits of high towers or rafts on the sea. Is it likely that such a government will have any profound concern for the happiness of its subjects? Is it not, on the contrary, practically certain that it will view them, when all goes well, in the impersonal manner in which it views its machines, but that, when anything happens to suggest that after all they are not machines, it will feel the cold rage of men whose axioms are questioned by underlings, and will exterminate resistance in whatever manner involves least trouble?

All this, the reader may think, is unnecessary nightmare. I wish I could share this view. Mechanical power, I am convinced, tends to generate a new mentality, which makes it more important than in any former age to find ways of controlling governments. Democracy may have become more difficult owing to technical developments, but it has also become more important. The man who has vast mechanical power at his command is likely, if uncontrolled, to feel himself a god – not a Christian God of Love, but a pagan Thor or Vulcan. (Russell 1996, 19-21)

Similarities between Russell and Kubrick are not hard to find. Both defend the view that the human being who has unchecked control over other human beings is likely to abuse that power. Both would agree that this observation has political significance, although what that significance is perhaps not immediately obvious. For Hobbes, the darkness in the human soul requires strong leadership and a corresponding diminution of the power of the people so that one's neighbor does not

go astray. For Russell, the same darkness requires giving power to the people so that one's leadership does not go astray. To the extent that one is convinced of the Augustinian view, one will have to admit that the solution lies in a system in which no one is unchecked, a view perhaps implicit in Burgess's choosing to portray both the potential evil of one's neighbor, namely Alex, as well as the potential evil of one's leaders, namely the government. There is also an overlap between Russell and Kubrick in their method of arguing that there is a dark potential in human nature. Each appeals to the experience of the reader or viewer.

But here lies a crucial difference. Russell can only appeal to the reader's memories of actual experiences, or experiences which Russell deems likely for the reader to have had. The more probable experience is the one of disturbing the ants' nest. The somewhat less probable experience is that of fantasizing of hurling thunderbolts down from the top of the Empire State Building while savoring the view from its observation deck. Russell seems to think that if the reader will only recollect the experience of disturbing the ants, then the reader will likely agree that with such Jovian powers one would be sorely tempted to exercise them wrongly. In itself, the case is not terribly convincing. The reader could easily dismiss Russell's example, persuading himself that, no matter how small people may look from on high, a reasonably normal mentally healthy individual would never take any perverse thrill in wantonly hurting them. After all, one knows that people are not ants no matter how they look from far above.

This is not to deny that Russell's argument is important and persuasive. As for its importance, it is evidently even more so than Russell could have known in 1938 when *Power* was first published. Today, we live in a world in which the United States is attempting to control the entire globe through outer-space military technology (Chomsky 2003, Chapter 9), so that even while its government remains accountable to its own public, that government would not be accountable to anyone else and would have the capacity to rule the planet through fear alone if its outer-space plans are fulfilled. As for the persuasiveness of Russell's argument, he is clearly not just appealing to the examples of the anthill and the Manhattan skyscraper. It is part of the commonsense conception of the mind, 'folk psychology',

that power corrupteth. Folk psychology is not sacrosanct, it could be overturned; but one would need a strong reason to do so, including an adequate alternative to it. The point is that Russell's appeal to common sense is the strongest part of his argument, and that argument is persuasive almost wholly due to its commonsense appeal. He may be adding something to the argument in using the example of the ant hill and in using the more hypothetical and hence less obvious example of the skyscraper, but he is not adding much.

Now contrast this with Kubrick. As a filmmaker, he is not limited to situations which the viewer is likely to have lived through but can create illusory simulations of events which, hopefully, one has never encountered. He can then create a sense of exhilaration through music, editing, and other elements of the film making art and then leave one to contemplate the significance of one's own emotional responses in the context of a story which invites one to reflect on precisely the matter of feeling good while seeing evil. This is not to overlook that there are advantages to Russell's essay form. One advantage is that one can state in plain language that one is presenting an argument, clearly indicating the assumptions, the inferential steps, and the conclusion. But one advantage of the cinema is that one can create an environment more akin to a psychological experiment in which certain emotions are deliberately evoked thus providing for an especially direct means of illustration.

This is not to say that film is, in all cases, unequaled in its power to evoke such emotions. Traditional theater, the stage, is evidently equally good. Consider, by way of example, Euripides' *Medea* in which one is encouraged to identify with the rage which drives Medea to slaughter her own children. This identification is encouraged by the knowledge that her motivation is not wholly without justice, although she is clearly taking it too far. The point is not that film is uniquely qualified to arouse such emotions to illustrate human nature, but that it can do so better than the bloodless philosophical essay.

Written literature lies between the two extremes. Consider Russell's thesis that absolute technological power corrupts absolutely. This is also Jules Verne's thesis in his novella *The Master of the World* (1905), in which Robur, an ingenious inventor who has earlier shown some true compassion, now loses all his

compassion since inventing a traveling machine which gives him the potential to terrorize the whole planet. The protagonist, Strock, an agent of what will someday be the FBI, finds himself aboard the infernal *Terror*, a machine capable of flying, traveling on the ground like a car, passing under the water like a submarine, and sailing like a ship, a combination which, in Verne's day, would be quite frightening if only one agency in the world possessed it. Strock narrates the experience of being inside the vessel as it eludes those who mean to destroy it. Strock describes an especially dramatic moment from within *The Terror* in which that vessel eludes two fighter craft on Lake Erie by sailing toward the Niagara Falls and then flying above the cataract in the moonlight rather than crashing down to the waters below. Verne's attempt to exhilarate his audience, successful in my opinion, like Kubrick's attempt, is an artful way of coaxing one to feel a kind of joy in being a moral monster which is what Robur has become. But it is less emotionally evocative than would be a film of the same events, just as Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* is less emotionally evocative than Kubrick's corresponding film. This is not a comment on the talents of Verne or of Burgess, but a comment on the power of literature versus film to evoke strong emotions. I appeal to the reader's experience to bear me out.

Earlier, Kubrick's evocation of an emotion was compared to a psychological experiment. This raises the question of whether controlled scientific evidence is more rationally persuasive than the subjective experience evoked by a film. One must concede that it is. Experiments, such as Stanley Milgram's studies of people's obedience to authority figures, even when those authorities are urging one to hurt the innocent (Milgram 1987), give us greater assurance of the human capacity to go morally awry than could any subjective experience evoked while watching a film. However, there are reasons not to dismiss the philosophical importance of film in throwing light on human nature. One reason is that, even though film may not provide the very best evidence for features of human nature, it can convey some forms of evidence better than the sorts of homey examples philosophers sometimes use, such as those found in Russell. Film could, in fact, supplement the philosophical essay by giving a philosopher stronger examples than those used by, say, Russell. Given that the philosopher can assume that the reader has seen some

relevant film, then the philosopher can appeal to the reader's emotional experience in viewing it. Another point involves practical motivation. One very likely may be prompted to take the evil potential of humans more seriously in having such emotions evoked in *oneself* as opposed to merely reading about others who succumbed to behaving disgracefully in experimental conditions. The very vividness of the evidence, vivid since the evidence consists of *one's own* emotions, may prompt one to look into the question of human depravity more urgently.

Of course, controlled psychological data and subjective experiences in watching films here complement one another; they are not in competition. The point can be illustrated by turning to linguistics. Many linguists use intuitions (spontaneous judgments) of grammaticality as data in choosing between syntactic hypotheses. The approach is reasonable on the assumption that linguistics is a cognitive science, that its subject matter consists of unconscious mental representations which produce these intuitions just as electrons produce vapor trails in cloud chambers or as the liver secretes bile. There are two approaches to these intuitions. One approach is for the linguist to record his own intuitions on the assumption that the intuitions of others will be similar, this assumption being bolstered by the fact that a speaker of a language will seldom produce a string of morphemes which other fluent speakers of the same language would regard as structurally bizarre (Chomsky 1965). The other approach is to use questionnaires on a number of people to elicit intuitive data systematically and to test them for statistical significance (Cook 1994). Not only are these approaches compatible, they are complementary. The former approach serves as a quick initial test for the (im)plausibility of a syntactic hypothesis. The latter serves as a more definitive test. The former is indispensable as a quick and easy means of narrowing the vast range of possible hypotheses prior to more in depth consideration.

Subjective responses to films and other forms of theater can likewise be used by philosophers as data provisionally suggesting certain facts, pleasant or otherwise, about human nature which can later be tested more systematically. The vividness of one's own individual emotional response can rationally add urgency and focus to one's doing so. What makes the film *A Clockwork Orange* especially

interesting in this case is that in the film itself Kubrick explicitly raises the philosophical questions for which viewer responses during the film provide a tentative answer.

Riefenstahl vs. Kubrick

If it is possible for film to rationally support philosophical positions, then it should also be possible for filmmakers to engage in philosophical debates with each other through the medium of film alone. It is obvious that one filmmaker can make a film presenting a certain philosophical vision and that another filmmaker can make a film presenting a contrary vision. But it is also possible for one filmmaker to provide evidence for a philosophical claim and for another filmmaker to make a film meant to undermine that very same evidence. In the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1936) and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), this sort of non-verbal debate has occurred. Riefenstahl described herself as a great admirer of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, especially his poems as found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Riefenstahl 1995, 130). In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is most famous for his prediction of or hope for the *Übermensch*, the 'overman', a creature outwardly resembling humans but psychologically superior. The overman will only come to be, claims Nietzsche, if humans, at least a few, feel for themselves the kind of contempt which pushes them to be hard on themselves, punishing of themselves, and aspiring toward greatness; a 'self-overcoming' achieved through will. He contrasts this healthy self-contempt with the contempt for the body found in Christianity and in 'afterwordly' metaphysical doctrines in general. The afterwordly contempt is self-hatred and hatred of the body and a belief that one cannot overcome the body's or self's inadequacies through one's own will, a hatred which has made the body and the self unhealthy. By contrast, Nietzsche urges a contempt for the unhealthy body for the sake of health. The body is the self, and, since the overman is a supremely healthy body, the overman is also a supremely healthy self or mind (Nietzsche 1954, 125, 144-5). As a this-worldly bodily ideal, the overman replaces the image of the unhealthy body dying on the cross. Nietzsche, the hyper-Pelagius.

Even without Riefenstahl's avowed love of Nietzsche, *Olympia* is perhaps

one of the most unmistakable references to Nietzsche's ideal in any film. Ostensibly a documentary of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, *Olympia* skillfully blurs or combines the categories of art and reportage. It is a depiction of athletic human motion often accompanied by music. The emphasis on the body is clear from the beginning in which one sees a series of nearly nude athletes running, throwing, and dancing to the accompaniment of heroic music. Afterward, the film moves a bit closer to the style of a conventional documentary depicting the athletic competitions of the Berlin games. It also includes footage of the African-American runner Jesse Owens repeatedly beating 'Aryan' athletes. This was an embarrassment to the race theories of Adolf Hitler, who is also seen in the film presiding over the events, but it was no embarrassment to Riefenstahl's belief in self-willed excellence. Nor did it contradict the motto at the beginning of the film, 'To the Honor and Glory of the Youth of the World'.

The use of documentary in the film could be understood as an attempt to illustrate self-overcoming as a fact. This is especially obvious in the long distance marathon near the end of the first part of the film, *Fest der Volker/Festival of People*. According to Riefenstahl,

I had to think how I could shape the twenty-eight mile race into a few short minutes that would be exciting and interesting. I soon realized I couldn't achieve this by filming the race step by step. Instead, I'd have to try to show the feelings, the mental state of the marathon runners; and I thought I could best express that by showing the exhaustion in their faces; how, though their legs were like lead, they didn't collapse but kept going by sheer willpower. (Müller 1993)

The film seems to try and show the possibility of what Nietzsche described, a higher state of excellence achieved through contemptuously fighting and overcoming mediocrity in oneself and in one's body. Even if these athletes were not literally Nietzschean overmen, they were at least evidence that humans can will themselves a bit closer to that ideal, or such is the film's attempt. Many of the images in *Fest*

der Volker and some of the themes of *Olympia* in general reappear in a transmogrified form in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Repeatedly in *Olympia*, Riefenstahl chose to place the camera near the ground so as to frame athletes majestically against the sky. She applied this technique to flags, the Olympic torch, and even at one point to a loudspeaker. Filming the athletes in slow motion to the accompaniment of grand music added to the sense of majesty. Similar techniques appear in Kubrick's film, but one can only understand their significance by considering the plot and intellectual background of *2001*.

In Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Arthur C. Clarke's novel of the same name (1968), we first encounter our pre-australopithecine ancestors, the 'ancestral ape', divided into troops fighting over a muddy water hole in an otherwise arid African rockscape. One can already make a comparison to *Olympia's* depiction of different nations gathered together in symbolic contests meant to replace war, nations that just a few years later would be engaged in mutual slaughter. In *2001*, the apes are visited by a mysterious black monolith which appears overnight seemingly from nowhere. By using low camera angles, Kubrick often frames the monolith against the sky with the sun and moon appearing above it (and in one extraterrestrial scene, the sun and the earth appearing above it). The effect is similar to Riefenstahl's image of the Olympic torch, also filmed from a low angle and with the sun appearing through the heat-distorted atmosphere above the flame. The Kubrickian monolith, the viewer eventually figures out, is the product of extraterrestrial intelligence, and its purpose is to raise the apes' cognitive and technological competence. As a result of this greater skill, one troop of apes begins using tools both to kill local tapirs and to kill the other troop of apes. This violence, the film leads us to infer, was instrumental in the transition from ape to human. It was the invention of the first machine.

Kubrick and Clarke may have been influenced by the early ethologist Konrad Lorenz who gave a number of evolutionary reasons for individuals having aggressive instincts against members of their own species. 'Darwin's expression, "the struggle for existence," is sometimes erroneously interpreted as the struggle between different species. In reality, the struggle Darwin was thinking of and which

drives evolution was a struggle between near relations' (Lorenz 1979, 432). One reason Lorenz gives for expecting intra-specific aggression is especially reminiscent of the water-hole scenes in *2001*: by fighting and repulsing each other, members of a species spread out and do not become too dense in a region. According to Lorenz, this helps to avoid exhausting all of their nutritional resources. However, an even better interpretation of events in the film might be that the apes who invented murder weapons had a reproductive advantage over those who did not, namely that the former could kill the latter.

Lorenz noted that 'What causes a species to disappear or become transformed into a different species is the profitable "invention" that falls by chance to one or a few of its members in the everlasting gamble of hereditary change. The descendants of these lucky ones gradually outstrip all others until the particular species consists only of individuals who possess the new "invention"' (Lorenz 1979, 432). (These remarks date from 1963, and I am emphasizing that *2001* (1968) was created in the wake of Lorenz's influence.) "Invention" is in quotes because these modifications are usually genetic mutations, such as a coloration which happens to serve as effective camouflage, rather than bits of technology. However, in the biological world as understood by Lorenz, a technological innovation, especially one that enables members of the same species to kill or injure each other, would increase the chances of the victorious individuals reaching reproductive maturity. In *2001*, we see one of the apes figuring out how to use a bone as a lethal weapon, thereby transforming the local tapirs into dinner and killing the rivals to the all important water hole. In the film, the apes which become dominant due to this new tool are the ancestors of humanity. The implication is that we have inherited their aggressiveness, including their aggressiveness against members of their own species.

Superficially, events portrayed in the early part of the film may seem Lorenzian or Darwinian, but there is one important respect in which they are not. The use of this bone as a tool was not due to chance. Nor was it due to the ape's will-to-power alone. We are led to infer that the technological innovation would never have happened without the mysterious black monolith left by the unseen others.

Similarly, at the end of the film when we see humanity transcending itself and becoming super-human, we are not seeing Nietzschean self-overcoming. Once again, it is only the intervention of that same alien intelligence which makes the transition possible.

While Riefenstahl tries to present evidence that humans can achieve excellence through their sheer willpower, Kubrick depicts super-intelligent extraterrestrials coming to help us achieve a higher level of existence. For Kubrick, we cannot do it alone. While Riefenstahl's vision is Nietzschean, and hence hyper-Pelagian, Kubrick expresses the more standard view found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and some forms of Buddhism (e.g., the "Pure Land" sect in Japan), namely that salvation only comes from above.

The references to *Olympia* in *2001* must be seen in this light. Riefenstahl presents slow-motion images of athletes framed against the sky like gods, accompanied by grand late-romantic music. Kubrick presents slow-motion images of an ape framed against the sky, using its bone to smash a tapir skeleton to the strains of Richard Strauss's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The images of the ape with the bone are especially reminiscent of the images early in *Olympia* of a nearly nude athlete running through a desert landscape while throwing a javelin. In *2001*, the desert landscape remains, but the godlike athlete has been transformed into a screaming ape and the javelin into a bone. The references to the Nietzschean *Olympia* and *Zarathustra* are not reverential but mocking.

Another example of Kubrick's mocking reference to Riefenstahl is perhaps the clearest evidence that he was consciously referring back to her *Olympia*. Near the beginning of *Olympia*, we see the Discobolus, the famous ancient Greek statue of a man throwing a discus. To represent the passage of time from antiquity to the present, Riefenstahl portrays the statue being gradually transformed into a living flesh-and-blood athlete. Compare this to the moment in *2001* in which a pre-australopithecine ape throws a bone into the air. Just before throwing it, the ape assumes a position very much like the Discobolus as seen in *Olympia*. As we see the bone flying through the air, Kubrick cuts to a spacecraft orbiting the earth, another object thrown into the heavens by the ape's distant descendants. Just as

Riefenstahl's ancient Discobolus was transformed into a modern discus-thrower, so Kubrick's prehistoric bone is transformed into a futuristic spacecraft. Kubrick has outdone Riefenstahl, for her time gap is embedded within his far greater one.

Rather than honor the discus thrower, Kubrick sees technology as murderous from first to last. Not only did the ape use the bone to kill, but humanity's greatest technological achievement, the intelligent computer HAL, murders most of the crew of one of those spacecraft. So I do not think that we are meant to find anything grand in the ape's potential for humanity or its discovery that bones can kill. Technological progress is bought at the price of brutality. There are scenes in the film which also remind us that millions of years after the ape's exuberant killing, Russians and Americans are engaged in a cold war, in this case a tense conversation over drinks, just as their ancestors fought over a water hole.

If we are not meant to find the ape's use of weaponry grand, then why does Kubrick try so hard to evoke feelings of grandeur when we see the ape first realizing that a bone can kill? Kubrick borrows virtually every technique Riefenstahl used to arouse feelings of triumph while observing athletes to evoke those same feelings while watching the ape: the use of slow motion, low camera angles to frame the athlete or ape against the sky, heroic late-romantic music. Kubrick even uses repeated close ups of the ape's forearm which are reminiscent of repeated close ups of the forearm of the one of the marathon runners in *Fest der Volker*. It is difficult to watch the ape's savagery without feeling a sense of, if not triumph, then at least of grand potential. But if Kubrick portrays humanity negatively, as cruel and petty and requiring an extraterrestrial savior, then why does he so artfully use Riefenstahl's techniques to evoke a similar sense of awe and grandeur at the sight of the ape's human potential?

Kubrick is showing us how easy it is to play with our emotions, the same point later to be made in *A Clockwork Orange*. Riefenstahl used these techniques to evoke feelings of admiration for human potential. Kubrick shows that the same techniques can evoke the same emotions at the image of a murderous, spittle-strewing ape. By doing so, he undermines the evidence which Riefenstahl believed she had presented in *Olympia*. While watching *Olympia*, we feel that we are in the

presence of evidence of nearly super-human greatness and the ability to achieve it through sheer willpower. In *2001*, Kubrick shows how much of what we thought we were seeing was simply the effect of an artful manipulation of our emotions. Almost with the attitude of a psychological experimenter, Kubrick shows that we can feel that we are seeing greatness when a little reflection will force us to admit that what we are seeing is petty and murderous.

The only direct reference to athletics in *2001* is when we see the astronaut Frank Poole running laps aboard the spaceship Discovery One. It is also one of the few scenes in *2001* where we see a human being filmed from a low camera angle so as to appear like a towering giant. (The only other such scene is when Bowman is on his way to disconnect HAL.) Therefore, the scene invites comparison with the earlier images of the ape and to *Olympia*. With regard to *Olympia*, the scene bears closest resemblance to the long-distance marathon near the end of *Fest der Volker*. However, there is one crucial difference: while Riefenstahl used heroic music to portray the athlete's willpower, Kubrick chooses the languid and dolorous strains of Aram Khatchaturian's *Gayaneh Ballet Suite*, music that seems wholly drained of willpower. The effect is one of utter banality. Poole's athletics seem trivial, almost pointless save for the medical wisdom in avoiding muscle atrophy. Once again, Kubrick is showing how easy it is to play with our emotions. At least he is showing as much to viewers who have seen *Olympia*. In watching *Olympia*, one feels that one is seeing something truly great during the marathon run, documentary evidence of Nietzschean self-overcoming. But Kubrick shows that simply by changing the music, the effect vanishes. It was magic but not reality, an emotional deception. A man running is just a man running. Kubrick's point could be expressed in words: "You were tricked into thinking you were seeing something great and almost superhuman. The music was tricking you. Change the music to something slow and sad, and you will see that a man running is not something so great or even very interesting."

Kubrick is not simply referring back to Riefenstahl in order to contrast his philosophical vision with hers. He is debating with her. Something cognitive is going on. Riefenstahl has presented what appears to be actual, non-fictional images of

Nietzschean self-overcoming, empirical evidence that Nietzsche was at least approximately right. By using some of Riefenstahl's techniques and superficially similar images, Kubrick shows us, the viewers, that we were being tricked by Riefenstahl. His point could have been made in an essay but not as convincingly. He could simply have written: "Despite the documentary style of *Olympia*, Riefenstahl has not given us evidence of self-overcoming. Instead, she has merely pushed our emotional buttons in such a way that we *feel* we are seeing it." But Kubrick is better able to support this claim in a film than he could in an essay. In a film, he can push those emotional buttons himself but in the presence of different images (as in the ape scenes), or he can present us with images similar to Riefenstahl's and push different emotional buttons by changing the music (as in the images of Poole running). Either way, he is not simply telling us that Riefenstahl's 'evidence' is tainted, he is *showing* us that it is possible for evidence to be tainted in this way. There is a non-verbal philosophical dialogue going on between the two film makers, and this dialogue would have been less convincing if it had appeared in essay form.

This dialogue does not result in any decisive conclusion. There is no conclusive reason here to say that one filmmaker's philosophy is right and the other's wrong. However, written philosophy is seldom more or less rationally persuasive than this. Philosophers debating in journal articles or books seldom make any more progress toward proving a position than have these two filmmakers. For one philosopher to write an article attempting to give reasons for a view and for another philosopher to write an article questioning those reasons but with no clear refutation of the first philosopher's conclusion, is a perfectly normal state of affairs in philosophy. Therefore, the inconclusiveness of the debate between Riefenstahl and Kubrick does not show that their philosophical dialogue would have been more convincing in print.

Conclusion

Is there a way for film to contribute more effectively to a philosophical argument than an essay? We have seen one way in which it can, namely by evoking emotions

pertinent to some philosophical point. By evoking feelings of pleasure and excitement during brutal and patently immoral scenes, Kubrick in *A Clockwork Orange* provides at least some evidence for an Augustinian view of humanity. Even the most “moral” of viewers is drawn by Kubrick into feeling “inappropriate” pleasures. The essay, dry and unemotional by nature, cannot provide such evidence by itself. This is not to say that these two forms of communication can only be exclusive alternatives to one another. The essayist can appeal to the emotional effects of a film just as Russell appealed to one’s emotions in commonly experienced situations.

However, film’s very power to evoke emotion can also be risky in defending a philosophical view. The emotional power of camera angles, editing, and music can make us think we are seeing something when we are not. Perhaps in *Olympia*, we think we are seeing self-willed greatness when in reality we are only seeing people running and jumping. If I am correct in my interpretation of *2001*, that is what Kubrick was trying to show. However, film can also be used to illustrate this very emotional gullibility of ours, as Kubrick tries to do. In the case of *Olympia* and *2001*, one film maker showing how another film maker can misuse film in making a philosophical point, shows us how film makers, just like philosophers who write, can engage each other in an ongoing dispute. And the two films of Kubrick discussed here both illustrate how the artful manipulation of emotions can be used either to discredit or corroborate philosophical claims.

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