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## Transformational Ethics of Film-Philosophy

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# **Transformational Ethics of Film-Philosophy**



THINKING THE **CINEMAKEOVER**

**Martin P. Rossouw**

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# Transformational Ethics of Film-Philosophy

Thinking the Cinemakeover

**PhD thesis**

to obtain the degree of PhD at the  
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by

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*To Jo-retha*

*“... maar as ons mekaar liefhet, bly  
God in ons en het sy liefde in ons  
sy doel volkome bereik.”*

– 1 John 4:12 (Afrikaans 1983)

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# Foreword

The title of this thesis – *Transformational Ethics of Film-Philosophy: Thinking the Cinemakeover* – may raise some initial questions that I would like to address straightaway.

First, a word on my neologism, ‘cinemakeover’. My initial motivation for creating the term was purely pragmatic. Since this thesis is an exploration of ‘transformational ethics’ of film-philosophy (a strand of ethics dealing with aspirations of personal or self-transformation within this context), I needed an economical placeholder-term for a recurrent theoretical notion: the idea and ideal that *films* may somehow offer a resource for practicing self-transformation. After a good deal of wordsmithing (and long showers), I came up with *cinemakeover*. When I propose that certain film philosophers unwittingly ‘think the cinemakeover’, I therefore mean that they pose implicit views on how films may enable viewers to achieve various instances of personal transformation.

The ostensible weak link in this lexical concoction is of course the ‘makeover’ part. Rooted in the fashion and cosmetics industry, the word admittedly connotes superficial, external change – not the inward, subjective kind of change that normally goes under the banner of transformational ethics. Moreover, makeovers suggest reasonably quick and easy operations that can produce radical – albeit superficial – transformations overnight. However, as it turns out, these connotations of the ‘*cine-makeover*’ help to underline the critical agenda that I bring to film-philosophy. The term injects a dose of irony into proceedings, as I am perfectly aware that the makeovers of film-philosophy concern transformations of the deeper, ethically weighty kind. Part of the irony, then, lies in the ease with which philosophers in the field seem to assume self-transformation through films possible. Surely, such assumptions can do with greater theoretical grounding, since – given the many potential factors at stake – these transformations cannot be remotely as easy and straightforward as the full makeovers found in ‘reality’ television shows. This has always been the project that I envisioned for myself: to clarify and add depth to an ethical theme that in the context of film-philosophy remained (mostly) implicit and (always) undertheorized – a theme treated in a somewhat superficial, ‘television-makeover’ kind of way, if you like. Of course, having said that, the other part of the irony is that my envisioned intervention in the cinemakeover was never going to be all that easy and straightforward either. Not least because I remain sympathetic to the understandable and often compelling wishful thinking that inhabits this idea: to achieve an ethical ‘makeover’ through one of my great passions, film.

Next, a word on the particular theoretical project from which this thesis gathers its picture of the cinemakeover – ‘film-philosophy’. Note that I expressly use the term to refer to ‘film as philosophy’, the established notion for the idea that films may in one way or another ‘do’ or ‘be’ philosophy. The fact that ‘film-hyphen-philosophy’

is normally not used in this restricted sense may be a source of confusion, which I want to dispel as quickly as possible. In what follows here, I never use the term as a mere synonym for 'philosophy of film', as people often do. Here 'film-philosophy' is reserved exclusively for what is a distinct theoretical project *within* philosophy of film. To help set things in perspective: my thesis addresses the intersection between a *discipline*, a specific *project* within the discipline, and a *debate* within that project. The discipline in question is philosophy of film (or 'film philosophy', without the hyphen). Within philosophy of film, I am addressing the theoretical project of film-philosophy, which I take to encompass any conception, theory, or argument that concerns the possibility of film as philosophy. And, within that broader project, I focus mainly on the group of philosophers who more or less engage with one another in the 'film as philosophy debate'. This debate, very much embedded within the broader project of film-philosophy, marks the theoretical site from which I excavate the ethical idea(l) of the cinemakeover.

Lastly, a brief word on a political issue, which is in fact closely tied to the matter of debates-within-projects-within-disciplines. It has been stated several times already, both in critical essays as well as in workshops and conferences on the topic, that the development of the discipline of philosophy of film is hampered by a male dominated canon – and it clearly is, for various reasons. I am afraid that this issue holds just as much, if not more, for the specialized sphere of the film as philosophy debate. The best that I can do in this instance – given that a meta-theoretical study has to deal with the debate as it presents itself – is to duly recognize this regrettable fact, in solidarity with the cause of advancing female (and other understudied) voices in our field.

# Introduction

## On Film-Philosophy & the ‘Good’ of Film

A good story, screenwriting gurus like to say, must ultimately be molded around one single idea. I accept that they have good reasons for giving this piece of advice. And in some cases, I imagine, the advice may even hold true for non-fictional, theoretical books. But the advice means very little to my intentions with *this* one – even if this entails that I’m not telling a ‘good story’ – for pushing only one idea would simply not do justice to the occasion as I envision it. What follows here is a highly deliberate orchestration of themes, expressly schemed to perform many functions at once. An array of topics can qualify as the central ‘story’ of this thesis. Clearly, the thesis is about film ethics, specifically transformational ethics, and the idea of the ‘cinemakeover’. At the same time, it is about meta-theory, meta-criticism, and meta-hermeneutics. But also, and perhaps above all, if I had to choose one theme, this is a thesis about film-philosophy. All of my reflections here are launched from and move within the ‘film as philosophy’ debate.

If I may play historian for just a moment: the mid- to late nineties witnessed a clear upsurge in philosophers (as opposed to conventional film theorists) who applied themselves to ‘the movies’; that cultural sphere which is so easily dismissed as being too lowbrow to warrant serious philosophical reflection. Philosophers proper, as they would perceive of themselves, not only became more willing to philosophize about film – especially of the mainstream, Hollywood kind – but also became increasingly attracted to the thought that films themselves can be a fruitful source of philosophical insight. This trend soon matured into the now well-established notion of film as philosophy. So, to be clear, by ‘philosophy of film’ or ‘film philosophy’ (without the hyphen), I mean philosophizing *about* film; but by ‘film as philosophy’ or the shorthand ‘film-philosophy’, I distinguish this more specific notion – a still contested one – that film itself can somehow *initiate* or *do* the philosophizing. Of course, even twenty years ago this notion that film can make unique contributions to philosophy was not exactly new: people had long recognized the inherent philosophical ambitions of European art cinema, for example; and, at that point, philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell had already begun to set what would become highly influential agendas for the potential of film to contribute to philosophy.

But, looking back now, it was the release of Stephen Mulhall’s provocative little book, *On Film* (2002), that well and truly cemented what is now regarded as the contemporary film as philosophy debate. Picture it. Out of the blue comes Mulhall, a known Oxford professor of philosophy. And he argues about the first four *Alien* films – of all things – that they are not merely handy illustrations of philosophical issues, but that the films themselves think seriously and systematically about

these issues, just as philosophers do. Mulhall's claim is in short: movies can 'do' philosophy. Not surprisingly, it is a claim that for a while generated a good deal of commentary and critique – especially from Mulhall's Anglo-American philosophical colleagues, who may have worried about a dystopic scenario where 'thinking films' might cost Analytic Philosophers their jobs. But seeing that 'there's no such thing as bad publicity': amid and through the controversy, Mulhall's views became *the* reference point for the project of film as philosophy. What many had already been doing for a while now suddenly had a name, and a publicized advocate. And today, some fifteen years later, Mulhall's *On Film* is in its third edition, drastically expanded with each new release, as philosophers' pursuit of film-philosophy remains as popular as ever.

### The Fact of the 'Meta'

I have long detected in myself, however, a slight discomfort with the film as philosophy debate as a *debate*. Apart from the initial criticisms of Mulhall's claims – initial responses by Thomas Wartenberg, Murray Smith, Bruce Russell, and Paisley Livingston come to mind – talk of a 'debate' is to commit a rather grand hyperbole. For it seems that philosophers who buy into film-philosophy do not feel much of a need to address competing standpoints. Owing to their investment in the idea of film as philosophy, they prefer to perform their reflections in dialogue with films, rather than with fellow film philosophers. Besides that, I am also reluctant to speak of a real debate when its participants are in any case bound to talk past each other. For with little to no effort the notion of film as philosophy can splinter into an array possible meanings. As we will see, for example, 'film as philosophy' turns out to be two very different things when one philosopher speaks of 'philosophy' as a verb, while another uses it as a noun – and this is to mention but one common discrepancy in the discourse.

These smaller objections all link with one overall difficulty that I have with film as philosophy: that the whole affair is relative to the different things that philosophers assume by 'philosophy', or what they want philosophy to be. Film as philosophy is, to its core, a game of assumptions. Any notion of how film may do philosophy is tailored to a guiding set of assumptions – firstly of philosophy, but also of film. And whichever understanding of philosophy one adopts will govern the nature of the philosophy that you seek out in film. Not that anyone should have a problem with the making of assumptions. The problem, rather, is that players in the debate do not show enough concern with this level of the assumptions and its impact. Hence, these philosophers fail to appreciate how the diverse assumptions that they adopt each dictate a corresponding approach to the question of how films can do philosophy. And what we end up with is, not a debate, but a far looser and incongruent theoretical project; one in which philosophers, because of their mismatching assumptions, play the game of film-philosophy by diverse sets of rules.

A major point that I therefore wish to bring home with this thesis is that the project of film-philosophy could do with a meta-theoretical perspective. To gain such a perspective, to ‘go meta’ on film-philosophy, requires that we take a critical step backwards from the practice of theorizing and interpreting films as philosophy, in order to pore over the practice itself: which assumptions about ‘philosophy’, exactly, do we bring to the notion of films doing philosophy? What are the various paths along which we analyze and interpret films as philosophy? And why do we want (or not want) films to ‘do’ philosophy in the first place?

These are questions well worth asking, but which are never asked outright. The fact of the matter is that unless the idea of film as philosophy is carried forward at a meta-theoretical level – to ask, for example, ‘How do we account for the diversity of assumptions about philosophy that are manifest in the debate?’ – there really is no debate to have. Film as philosophy will remain as it is: a vaguely connected assortment of theories, conceptions and readings of films, ultimately chasing after different ends. In Chapter 1, I do propose some meta-theoretical vantage points from which to piece together the essential assumptions behind different conceptions of film-philosophy. Of course, I must admit: to forge such meta-theoretical grounds is in many ways a theoretical ideal, and remains for the most part far easier said than done. Yet my sensitivity to the meta-critical issues in film-philosophy, difficult as they may be to resolve, still makes me hesitant to commit to any positive claim about how films can perform philosophy. I do not deny the possibility that films ‘do’ philosophy. But when faced with the question of how, I find myself immobilized by having to heed the diversity of presuppositions that may precede and guide such an explanation. I am just not sure what kind of philosophy I want to see film ‘do’. And why settle for any one way of ‘film doing philosophy’, if it will cut so many other possibilities from the bigger picture?

Nevertheless, an impasse on one front is also an opportunity to raise neglected questions on another. Rather than figure out how films perform philosophy, my main interest has become the motives behind this figuring out: what do we philosophers ultimately *want from* film-philosophy? As a result, this thesis is less about film-philosophy than about the ethics that film-philosophy as a project demonstrates.

## **The Good of Film: Film-Philosophy’s Inherent Ethics**

Many ethical turns have arguably turned up in the Humanities over the past few decades, and right now the ethical turn of film theory and philosophy appears to be in full bloom (see Cooper, 2008; Stadler, 2008; Downing & Saxton, 2010; Jones & Vice, 2011; Shaw, 2012; Bergen-Aurand, 2013; Boljkovac, 2013; Choi & Frey, 2013; Wheatley, 2013; Trifonova, 2013: 170–171; Rodowick, 2015; Grønstad, 2016; Sinnerbrink, 2016a; Plantinga, 2018). Since I too explicate a particular ethical viewpoint here, this thesis obviously forms part of film philosophy’s ethical turn – albeit with a slight, meta-critical twist. What I first of all seek to explicate is the implicit ethical dimension that already, inevitably, attends the project of film

as philosophy. The very idea of film-philosophy, as we will time and again see, colludes with ethically significant conceptions about film, conceptions which for the most part go unrecognized. Film-philosophy cannot get around film ethics. In a sense we can say film-philosophy has already been on an ethical turn, a silent one, since its very inception.

Note that when I claim that film as philosophy is entangled with ‘film ethics’, I use the latter term in its most fundamental sense. It does not refer to questions of whether films are ‘ethical’ in terms of their philosophical content. Nor does it refer to the critical moral assessment of films and their effects. Nor does it in the first place refer to the ethically relevant experience or reflection that films may evoke. Prior to all these considerations, still, is the arch question of film ethics, as famously captured by Siegfried Kracauer in the conclusion of his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960): ‘What is the Good of film?’

In saying that film-philosophy involves itself with film ethics, therefore, I mean that the project of film-philosophy inadvertently answers the question of the good of film. Very few film theoretical endeavors could in fact proceed without making assumptions about the good of film – the theorist, after all, sees film as something worth theorizing about – and film-philosophy is certainly no exception. For philosophers to propose that films can do philosophy lets us in on what they think films *should* do, and, by implication, what they think films are good for. I suspect my assessment might be criticized for forcing an ‘is-ought’ fallacy onto the philosophers under consideration. ‘These philosophers only assert the fact, as they see it, of film’s ability to do philosophy – do they not?’ I say no. Film as philosophy remains a contestable theoretical idea, and in pursuing the idea these philosophers convey also an ideal: they clearly proceed from the view that there are particular benefits to films that do philosophy; that films-as-philosophy ultimately offer something more than what philosophy professors, lectures, and dusty books in themselves do. In short, philosophers who pursue the idea of film as philosophy unwittingly proclaim the value that they find in film.

But what ‘good’ of film, then, does the project of film-philosophy assert? First, there is the obvious answer. The philosophers concerned find in film the particular cognitive value of doing philosophy. This valuation however begs for a further justification of why film, specifically, should be valued as such: ‘We already have *philosophy*’, one has to ask; ‘Why do we need *films* that can do philosophy?’ And, of course, philosophers comply by affirming some or other added value that film brings to philosophy, as I elaborate in Chapters 1 and 3. One common view, for example, is that film’s experiential, affective, qualities make it far more engaging and immersive than conventional forms of philosophical discourse. The added value, as this view implies, is that film builds on and augments the cognitive value that philosophy already has.

Yet this thesis is mainly about another, less obvious, answer that film-philosophy gives to the question of the good of film. Here philosophers’ value-judgments converge around what is an overtly ethical ideal, alongside the cognitive and



philosophical value that they find in film: the good of films that ‘do’ philosophy, so they suggest, is that such films provide a special means to personal transformation.

## **On Transformational Ethics**

Wherever philosophers say that films ‘do philosophy’ or ‘think’ in a cinematic way, there is always the added suggestion of the practical, transformational benefits that such films hold for the viewer: they may renew our thinking, sharpen our senses, and even reconstitute our experience of the world. The project of film as philosophy, it thus turns out, amounts to more than merely theorizing the philosophical potential of film. In taking its course, film-philosophy also expresses the prominent ethical motive – often unacknowledged – of wanting to find in film a means to personal transformation. In effect, the philosophers concerned are proposing film-going as a technique of self-transformation; not unlike more conventional techniques like meditation, reading, or writing. Naturally this proposal takes on a number of different forms. But despite their differences, philosophers are still unanimous in the general assumption that films-as-philosophy offer viewers the prospect for some form of personal edification, whether this is to become more critical, wise, open, aware or (re-)attuned.

The ethical agenda that film-philosophy thus beckons towards is what I will call transformational ethics of film. Philosophers cast different visions of how our engagement with film can result in personal transformation. With this thesis I mean to explicate these often implicit visions; that is, to articulate, on behalf of each philosopher involved, the particular ethic of transformation that his or her approach to film as philosophy entails. And I piece together these various entailments to make clear the overall ethical proposition that the project film-philosophy invariably makes: that film can be a preeminent agent for self-change in its viewers.

By assuming the role of the ethical meta-analyst, I do not deny of course that I have my own assumptions that I bring to my study of film-philosophy. But I do deem it necessary, at least, to be as upfront as I can about those assumptions, as I will strive to be throughout this thesis.

One of those assumptions however needs stating straightaway: by no means do I take transformational ethics as such, and even less so the overall idea(l) of personal transformation that they express, to be exclusive only to the domain of film-philosophy. I take the notion of ‘transformational ethics’ from philosopher Johann Visagie (who, in Chapter 2, I introduce in dialogue with Michel Foucault). And like Visagie, I consider human aspirations to personal transformation, and the ethics that attend this ideal, to be universal. To want to change the self to some desired state is innately human. But the particular guise of this ideal, and the transformational ethics that it inspires, assume a myriad of forms from one historical context to the next. To mention only a few instances:

- The ideal of personal transformation is plainly showcased by the out-and-out transformationalist – the ancient sage, the medieval monastic monk, even the present-day self-help guru – who ‘specializes’, you may say, in the pursuit of self-transformation through the extreme ethics of meditation, solitude, and deprivation.
- Transformational ethics also enter into mainstream cultural spheres, even if only tacitly so. Think about the various concerns with personal transformation in contexts as diverse as established religious traditions, ‘new consciousness’ spiritual practices, psychological guidance, life coaching, pharmacology and drugs, or the now burgeoning posthumanist quest for human enhancement through technology.
- The human ideal of personal transformation moreover holds sway over our knowledge endeavors. In humanities disciplines, for example, personal transformation not only emerges as a theme of scholarly reflection and education, but at times also as the guiding motive that inspires this education. In fact, influential figures like Martha Nussbaum (1998; 2012) defend the Humanities precisely for its transformational value of self-cultivation, whether this be the cultivation of critical thinking, empathy or citizenship.
- The ideal of personal transformation furthermore reaches into the very cultural sphere of film and its institutions. Since the dawn of cinema, filmmakers and theorists alike have been mulling over the power of this new medium to form its audiences, on the one hand, yet on the other to also emancipate and transform them. One telling example is what Malcolm Turvey (2008) has identified as the deep-seated ‘revelationist’ tradition in film theory – including canonical figures like Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer – which locates the good of film in its capacity to reveal features of reality that are invisible to human vision (ibid.: 3, 8). Because cinema lets viewers overcome the limitations of human vision, and discloses the true nature of reality, revelationists see in it the potential to be an art of mass enlightenment and transformation.

In a comparable manner, then, the perennial ideal of personal transformation finds expression also in the very specific scholarly project of film-philosophy, a project that is drawn to this ideal for its own reasons, not the least because philosophy itself has had a persistent historical kinship with aims of personal transformation. Bear in mind that in Ancient Greek philosophy, and even more so in the Hellenistic and Roman periods thereafter, philosophy could not be separated from ethics, an ethics which to a great extent involved practices of self-transformation. And to this very day, still, it is common to conceive of philosophy as having an intrinsic transformational pay-off. But here too, film philosophers suggest, film provides added value: although philosophy may promise personal

transformation, film promises a distinct and compelling medium for philosophy to make such transformation happen.

## Thinking the Cinemakeover

To summarize, with this thesis I take the implied ethics of film as philosophy as an incentive to examine the idea of seeking self-transformation through film; what we may see as an inner makeover through cinema; a 'cinemakeover', if you like.

Now readers may assume that, by taking up this project, I automatically endorse the cinemakeover. But I do not. Like the claim that films can 'do' philosophy, I approach the idea of a cinemakeover with necessary caution. In fact, I reserve the same caution for any transformational ethics altogether. For I cannot ignore the predicaments that pursuits of personal transformation typically suffer from. Traditionally, transformational ethics is far too idealistic about human nature's capacity for volitional change; it tends to expect too much. Transformational ethics is highly normative, in assumptions that various forms of transformational ethics make about personhood and its place in the world, and in the values that they privilege and idealize. And more often than not, transformational ethics slide into 'transformationalisms' that fixate on the novel, the extraordinary, or the ecstatic, which among other things downgrade the value and validity of the ordinary everyday, as is attested to by Visagie. Such predicaments are bound to also creep into still budding visions of the cinemakeover. Naturally, I will highlight some of these predicaments as they emerge in the context of film-philosophy, with particular emphasis on those that ultimately threaten film-philosophy's very idea of transformational ethics.

So, to be clear: I have no commitment to the idea that film be a means to self-transformation, nor is this thesis a defense of it. Of course I find the idea intriguing, and certainly worth exploring. But my enterprise remains that of the interested observer who, personally, still needs some convincing. This is indeed a major point that I wish to drive home: that the distanced stance of a meta-theorist has its own, distinct, contribution to deliver to philosophy of film. People tend to see meta-theory as a sort of cop-out; as if to only examine the ethical conceptions of others, without committing to one of my own, is to break some unspoken code of honor between philosophers. I make it my mission here to convince readers of the contrary. Dedicated meta-reflection can reap rich theoretical fruits. And, with this thesis, I hope to harvest some of those fruits. Readers will get to see how a seemingly abstract debate about film as philosophy sets an agenda for the concrete, ethical significance that we may attach to viewing films. By taking a necessary step backwards, that is, readers get to see in film-philosophy the material with which to piece together an intriguing mosaic of the makeover that cinema may be – or, at least, what we film scholars want it to be.

## 2. Aims & Contributions

With the much needed backstory now in place, let me briefly spell out my main objectives with this thesis. My most central concern is to introduce and develop an analytical framework for transformational ethics, one whereby we can specifically reflect on transformational ethics of film. And I advance this framework expressly in response to the project of film as philosophy and the compelling ethical agenda that it engenders. I will thus constantly seek to underline the expository value that the proposed framework has for extracting the transformational ethics of film-philosophy: it offers a critical vocabulary with which to express and expound an often undeclared motive of personal transformation that we encounter in various conceptions of film as philosophy.

To reiterate, my contribution with this framework to film-philosophy is of a meta-critical nature. It offers not yet another theory of film-philosophy, but an ethically significant perspective on existing theories. It opens up the project of film-philosophy on a new ethical plane.

To better appreciate what we may glean from such an opening up of film-philosophy, I take my cue from two already established meta-critical projects: (a) sociological meta-theorizing, particularly as defended by George Ritzer and Shanyang Zhao; and (b) meta-hermeneutics, as argued for by Liesbeth Korthals Altes in the fields of narrative- and literary studies. Even though these projects are somewhat removed from my own field of interest, they each still suggest important strategies, and incentives for my own meta-reflections on film-philosophy.

### 2.1 Meta-Theory

My aims with this thesis line up surprisingly well with how theorists like George Ritzer and Shanyang Zhao see the function of meta-theory in sociology (e.g. Ritzer, 2001; Zhao, 2001). Like many other fields, sociology has its qualms about theoretical abstractions and ‘grand’ perspectives. As Ritzer (2001: 13) points out, given many social theorists’ hostility towards excessive abstraction, theory about theory, which is perceived as doubly abstract, only breeds further animosity. Yet in spite of this resistance – and also because of it – Ritzer and Zhao argue resolutely for the legitimacy and importance of the meta-theoretical endeavor. Broadly speaking, if theorizing is understood as a ‘journey to an unfamiliar territory, then meta-theorizing represents frequent pauses for rest, consulting maps, revising travel plans, or even having second thoughts about the final destination’ (Zhao, 2001: 392). Second-order theorizing, both these theorists insist, forms an indispensable, even inescapable, part of first-order theorizing. Meta-theory makes the journey of theory possible. And for this reason the systematic study of theory deserves to be taken as an independent and significant scholarly endeavor – whether in sociology or, for that matter, film-philosophy.

Ritzer (2001: 18) goes on to distinguish three types of meta-theoretical reflection. The first type of meta-theorizing (*Mu*) is simply meant to produce more of a

thorough understanding of extant theory. The second type serves as a prelude to theory development – extant theory is analyzed with the aim of establishing a new theory of the same order (*Mp*). And meta-theorizing of the third type aims to establish a second order meta-theory, an overarching theoretical perspective that somehow encompasses extant theories (*Mo*). Though I certainly feel drawn to Ritzer's second type (I offer some thoughts on this in the conclusion of the thesis), I would describe my meta-theoretical aims here as mostly straddling his first and third types. With my framework I seek to fashion a second-order vantage point from which to evaluate a particular set of ethical conceptions at work in film-philosophy. My primary aim, therefore, is to theorize an overarching ethical perspective on extant theories of film-philosophy (*Mo*), which inevitably also broadens our understanding of the individual theories involved (*Mu*).

Yet you may still ask how meta-theory of the first- and third types – which remain bound to higher-order analysis – actually help advance the field that it brings under analysis. The contribution made by such meta-theoretical work, now following Zhao (2001: 387), can best be summarized as (a) making sense of- and (b) giving direction to those theories that it takes as its subject matter. Below I briefly elaborate on these two aspects in terms of the contribution that I endeavor to make to film as philosophy.

## **Making Ethical Sense of Theories of Film-Philosophy**

With regard to making better sense of film as philosophy, my meta-appraisal most importantly gives insight into how the debate on the whole is driven by often unacknowledged ethical ambitions. It is not only that theorists are attracted to the idea of film as philosophy for ethical reasons. I seek to demonstrate, as explained earlier, that questions of value and ethics can in fact not be avoided when theorizing film as a form of philosophy.

My analysis next makes clear the extent to which these ethical ambitions of film-philosophy conform to a general motive of personal transformation. Personal transformation turns up as perhaps the most persistent reference point for the value that philosophers ascribe to film as philosophy. Time and again philosophers paint an ideal scenario in which film, by virtue of doing philosophy, sets up possible self-transformation for the willing viewer – to possibly attain a transformed state of greater insight, awareness, sensitivity, or openness to the world. By laying bare this concern with personal transformation, therefore, I intend to characterize a particular ethical interest behind the project of film-philosophy.

My analysis further differentiates film-philosophy's concern with personal transformation by tracing how, from one case to another, this overall motive is distinguished by marked strands of transformational ethics. Naturally, philosophers differ on how and why personal transformation through film is to be realized, and these assumptions translate into different forms of transformational ethics. That said, however, the ethics that philosophers suggest with their theories of film-philosophy are by no means arbitrary, and I indeed show how they emerge along

foreseeable lines. One factor to take into account here is that the basic parameters of ethical-transformational discourse, as isolated by my framework of analysis, seem to be reasonably set. That is to say – and here Visagie enters the scene – that there is good reason to assume on the basis of work he has done in fields other than film-philosophy, that their ethical discourses will mostly follow and translate topoi of long-established transformationalist discourses. Accordingly, I indicate how the ethics of film-philosophy reiterates topoi spelled out by the framework as I adapt it from Visagie. Another noteworthy factor is that philosophers' transformational ethics follow directly from the kind of philosophical capacities that philosophers attribute to film: distinct conceptions of how films can do philosophy produce matching kinds of transformational ethics. By drawing these connections, I show how theoretical debates on the nature of film as philosophy set a delimitable scope for the practical, ethical significance that we may attach to film.

### **Giving an Ethical Direction to Theories of Film-Philosophy**

Alongside my aim to make ethical sense of theories of film-philosophy, I hope that my findings will encourage a more pronounced ethical orientation within the debate itself. The meta-perspective and framework that I develop here thus serves to envisage and plot an ethical course along which the debate can still develop further.

On the question of how films can do philosophy, as I have explained, the debate has hit an inevitable dead-end. Philosophers produce competing conceptions of film as philosophy because they rely on diverse assumptions about what 'philosophy' (and, for that matter, a 'film') is, or should be. What these various assumptions and conceptions of film-philosophy have in common, however, is that they all affirm some supposed value to both philosophy and its potential incarnations in film. I therefore propose that the debate will be best carried forward on an ethical plane: that is, the debate must actively seek out those assumptions of value and ethics that theories of film-philosophy rely on, *and* often take for granted, *and*, ultimately, cannot avoid. What is the value of philosophy and how does film add to it? Why do we want films to do philosophy in the first place? And what, ideally, do we want such films to bring about? With these questions, we respond to the question of how films do philosophy in a much needed way: one that does not start out from forms or contents of philosophy, but from the value and ethical function that we (wish to) ascribe to it.

Of course, one may respond to these value-questions of film-philosophy in a host of ways. With this thesis, I present one major category of such responses, by underlining personal transformation as an overall value that philosophers most often attach to film-philosophy. That is, I show how often transformational valuations of film *already* occur 'out there' in the project of film-philosophy. And the recurrence of these valuations, clearly, gestures us not only towards film ethics, but the transformational *kind* of film ethics that demands more attention from proponents of film-philosophy. We cannot deny the perennial attraction of the ideal of personal transformation, an ideal that, among many other things, moves

us to also do philosophy. Yet when we reflect on film, it is not enough to only be moved by this ideal. Doing philosophy demands that we explicitly consider it, critically evaluate it, theorize its possibility.

The framework that I propose for making ethical sense of film-philosophy at a meta-critical level, therefore, at the same time offers itself as a heuristic for future film-ethical theorizing. It gives us the basis for an ethical program that promises a new coherence in the field: a core set of transformational concepts and questions, which bring together an array of approaches to film-philosophy, and which can be variously unfolded by each of these approaches that it extends to.

## 2.2 Meta-Hermeneutics

Another critical program that I find useful for framing the aims of my project is that of ‘meta-hermeneutics’, as formulated by Liesbeth Korthals Altes (2013; 2014: 95–99, 249–252). Korthals Altes is interested in the uses of meta-hermeneutics as a distinct research perspective on questions of ethics and narrative. As she explains, meta-hermeneutic analysis takes a step back from the ethical analysis and interpretation of narratives, and instead considers the interpretations themselves – their diversity, as well as the ethical standards, judgements and procedures that these interpretations rely upon. Put simply, meta-hermeneutics asks how and why interpreters arrive at their various interpretations. Or, closer to home, it asks how and why philosophers arrive at their various findings about films doing philosophy.

I see in my own framework a potent tool for doing the sort of ‘meta-interpretations’ that Korthals Altes advocates. Understood as such, my project is to examine typical interpretative- and evaluative pathways that philosophers resort to when they reflect on the philosophical functions of film – especially the pathways along which they construe the ethical-transformational affordances that they assign to film. The pertinence of meta-hermeneutics to film-philosophy will be most evident in Chapter 4, on the cinema of Terrence Malick, where different readings of the same films – *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World* (2005), most notably – make plain the diversity of interpretative pathways that philosophers follow. Korthals Altes (2013: 37–40) distinguishes a number of foci for meta-hermeneutic inquiry, most of which feature in my examinations of film-philosophical interpretations of Malick. First and foremost, meta-hermeneutic analysis seeks to reconstruct different interpretative pathways for assigning meaning and value. Whereas philosophers engage in processes of philosophical meaning-making and value-attribution, I break down these different processes by tracing the *topoi*, values, and typical lines of reasoning that philosophers resort to. Such interpretative pathways are, in turn, co-constituted by a range of subsidiary factors that I will also take into account. For instance, my meta-hermeneutic analyses highlight the prototypical, value-laden conceptions of ‘philosophy’ that determine philosophers’ interpretations of films as philosophy. By doing this, my analyses pick out particular biases and pre-interpretative interests rooted

in the theories (or broader philosophical paradigms) that I perceive to guide their interpretations. And, still, there is more for me to consider: philosophers' conceptions of film and what it is that a filmmaker should be and do; filmic and extra-filmic cues that predispose philosophers to particular conclusions; their appreciation of a particular filmmaker and the priming effect that such a filmmaking persona has; and philosophers' concepts of the viewer's self and subjectivity, including assumptions about ideal ethical posturing of the viewer who is to be transformed by film.

To do this kind of work, to track the ethical interests that manifest themselves in philosophers' interpretations of films doing philosophy, is *not* intended as some confrontation that unmasks supposedly ulterior motives on the part of these scholars. It is rather an attempt at understanding, elucidating how films function for philosophers, how their interpretations of films function – also to uncover what philosophers consider important markers of meaning in film, and how they go about in attributing value to them. And in doing so, I shed but a speck of light on the greater human project of meaning-making around film.

### 2.3 On Case Studies

I need to say a word about the case studies that I will construct. My cases will be of two distinct types. In the first set of cases, presented in Chapter 3, I deal purely with various theories of film-philosophy. That is, I examine theorists and the general positions that they espouse, I draw out the transformational interests foregrounded in their positions, and I demonstrate the value of my framework for translating these interests into an ethics of transformation – but throughout all of this I give little attention to what these philosophers say about particular films. In contrast, in my case studies of the second type – as found in Chapter 4 – I examine conceptions of film-philosophy as they have been applied to one particular filmmaker and a corresponding set of films. Many philosophers in the field eschew generalized claims about film-philosophy, insisting that it is rather a matter of showing how specific films can do specific things of philosophical worth. This makes it necessary for me to also analyze the analyses made by philosophers of particular films. Yet with this shift in emphasis from theoretical positions to specific films, I maintain my primary, meta-critical goals: I examine the transformational ethics that come into play when philosophers, from their respective positions, approach and analyze the films. In these cases, then, I still try to heed a clear distance between what philosophers (and filmmakers) claim about films, on the one hand, and what I will observe and argue about their claims from a meta-level of analysis, on the other. What does make these analyses different, however, is that they tend to be more 'hands-on', meaning that they involve the more delicate meta-hermeneutic detective work of tracing what I perceive to be philosophers' interpretative pathways, their ethical assumptions, and implicit value-attributions, while keeping in view how these interpretative procedures connect to particular features of the films and filmmaker in question. There is much to gain from this painstaking work. By delving into the ways philosophers



go about particular films, and comparing these, we can better understand the filmic motifs, devices, and styles that they find most attractive for purposes of self-transformation through film.

### 3. Overview of Chapters

For readers who would like to know where we will be heading, I conclude this introduction with a snapshot of each chapter to follow.

In Chapter 1, *'Going Meta' on Film-Philosophy: Opening up the Field*, I delimit and chart the film as philosophy debate as this thesis' main field of inquiry. Most of the philosophers who I introduce here will be revisited throughout the thesis. They include Robert Sinnerbrink, Thomas Wartenberg, Noël Carroll, Stephen Mulhall, Daniel Frampton, John Mullarkey, Simon Critchley, Bruce Russell, Berys Gaut, Dan Flory, Christopher Grau, and Chris Falzon – not forgetting, of course, the film-philosophy forerunners, Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell, alongside Vivian Sobchack, with her inputs from the related field of film (as) phenomenology. I refrain from any talk about their ethics at this point, in order to first introduce readers to the players and their positions in the field. But I make this survey far more than a mere introductory outing. With it, I in fact make my opening meta-moves: to situate and connect the main positions on the nature of film-philosophy within a synoptic perspective, which helps us take stock of the multiplicity of approaches to film-philosophy as well as the diverse strategies and underlying commitments that bring them about.

I distinguish two essential axes around which to reflect on the premise that films can engage with or in philosophy: (a) the claimed degree of that engagement and (b) the claimed conditions of the engagement. Existing treatments of the film as philosophy debate for the most part focus only on the former axis, which concerns the extent to which films are thought to engage with and contribute to philosophy. From this perspective, philosophers conceive of the film-philosophy engagement as, roughly speaking, either a 'weak', 'moderate' or 'bold' one. However, this still says nothing about the supposed conditions that enable films to engage with/in philosophy. From the perspective of the latter axis, therefore, I go on to distinguish a range of conditions that philosophers suppose film must meet in order to 'do' philosophy:

- film has to serve as an illustration of philosophy
- film has to achieve a philosophical argument
- film must perform a philosophical thought experiment
- film elicits philosophical thinking in the viewer
- film must elicit a form of self-reflection in the viewer

- film itself must engage in philosophical thinking
- film must engage in its own distinct form of cinematic thinking

I close Chapter 1 by proposing that the above conditions for film-philosophy, as posed by philosophers, can still be related to a more basic set of contexts: firstly, film-philosophy conceived of as a form of Knowledge; secondly, as eliciting or enacting some form of Subjectivity; thirdly, as instantiating some form of creative Power, and, lastly, as a disclosure or present-making of Nature. The foundational contexts of Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power, and Nature, I argue, help us take a further step towards a more integrated appraisal of various approaches to the question of film as philosophy.

My primary claim about the project of film-philosophy, as sketched in the first chapter, is that it recurrently exhibits an ethical motive of personal transformation. However, before assessing the evidence for my claim, Chapter 2 first establishes the framework that will help me flesh out transformational ethics of film as a motive.

Chapter 2, titled *When Philosophers Join Fight Club: A Framework for Transformational Ethics and Film*, is devoted to an excursion into transformational ethics. I take my main inspiration from South-African philosopher Johann Visagie, who theorizes it as a special category of ethical discourse more generally. In the first part of the chapter, I introduce and explain Visagie's unique take on the subject. He argues that there is an inevitable grammar to transformationalist discourse: it speaks of means, it speaks of ends, it speaks of objects of transformation. It is these basic options and parameters, which typify transformational ethics, that Visagie endeavors to pin down. He thus abstracts and differentiates the five following dimensions within the ethics of transformation:

- the posited mode or basic means through which a subject is transformed
- the concrete technique through which general modes are enacted
- the locus or part of the subject that is the target of transformational work
- the value or ideal state that the transformation is meant to realize
- and the wider motivational context that provides a particular rationale for personal transformation

I furthermore go into a number of links between Visagie's theory and the deeply influential ethics of Michel Foucault, noting also certain critical enhancements that Visagie brings to Foucault's ethical project. Drawing this connection unearths new points of relevance to Foucauldian ethics, which, unlike his archaeological and genealogical works, have gathered relatively little attention from film scholars.

In the second half of the chapter, I hone Visagie's theory both for the purpose of analyzing transformational ethics of film and for doing such ethically focused meta-analyses of theories of film-philosophy. I thus show how his concepts and distinctions provide heuristic tools with which to distinguish different strands of a transformational ethics of film – and envisionings of the cinemakeover – as highlighted by the project of film-philosophy.

In this chapter, my discussions of transformational ethics will find a continual soundboard in David Fincher's cult classic, *Fight Club* (1999). One reason for its inclusion is that *Fight Club*'s rich tapestry of attempted self-transformations display vivid examples of the theme under scrutiny. Furthermore, *Fight Club*'s reception offers a means to playfully reveal the various ethical-transformational conceptions that transpire when philosophers argue for a film's philosophical significance. So, to conclude the chapter, I take a brief excursion to show how *Fight Club*'s ethical preoccupations appear to echo and reinforce the transformational ideals held by the film's varied interpreters – be it film philosophers, or real-life *Fight Club* copy cats.

With Chapter 3, titled *How Films are Thought to Do More Than 'Think': Film-Philosophy's Slogans for Self-Transformation*, readers will finally get to the proof of the pudding regarding my ethical framework and what it can tell us about film-philosophy. I return to the representative philosophers and their respective conceptions of film-philosophy introduced in Chapter 1, but this time to point out the recurrent motive of personal transformation that each of them bears. From each of these cases I extract a particular vision of self-transformation through film, which I reconstruct as a collection of types of transformational ethics, distinguished from one another by emblematic slogans. On the one hand, we can distinguish film-philosophy's ethics of self-concentration: these ethics construe film as a means to 'Know Yourself' (Wartenberg, Falzon), 'Remind Yourself' (Carroll), and 'Sense Your Senses' (Sobchack). On the other hand, the field furthermore features a set of more daring transformational ethics of self-expansion: they present film as a way to 'Expand Your Mind' (Mulhall), 'Blow Your Mind' (Sinnerbrink, Frampton), and even 'Lose Your Self' (Deleuze). In an *intermezzo*, I also consider the transformational ethics of Stanley Cavell in terms of a number of similar slogans. Diverse as these emblems may be, they all proceed from a common transformational motive shared by various approaches to film-philosophy. By placing these images alongside one another, I aim to conjure up an overall picture of the cinemakeover as molded to the interests of the project of film-philosophy.

Within this picture emerging from the project of film-philosophy, there is still a further crucial dimension of the cinemakeover that the chapter must ultimately address: the issue of what I call 'preparatory ethics'. In thinking the cinemakeover, philosophers clearly assume a sufficiently prepared film viewer, an ideal viewer or model viewer who has already done the self-transformation of being adequately receptive to the impact of film. And although I, too, take this preparatory dimension to be indispensable to the cinemakeover, I point out

how it simultaneously threatens to undermine the very notion: for it raises tricky questions about the extent to which *film* then is crucial, or even necessary, in our efforts at self-transformation.

With the cases in Chapter 4, *There's Something About Malick: From Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation*, my investigations branch out to a particular body of films – the cinema of Terrence Malick – where I consider the ethico-philosophical attractions that these films hold, and the typical ways in which film philosophers respond to them.

Practically any philosopher who entertains the idea of film as philosophy finds a muse in Malick. I ask what exactly about the filmmaker's oeuvre produces the special chemistry that we see between Malick and film-philosophy. My first movement is to propose that Malick's widely perceived 'contemplative style' acts as a key catalyst for philosophers' fascination with his films. I then proceed to detail the diversity of stylistic devices and effects in terms of which philosophers appraise his contemplative appeal.

The second movement of my analysis in this chapter is to illuminate the decidedly ethical interests that accompany these configurations of Malick's style and effects. While not forgetting the role of his narrative fixation and enigmatic 'authorial image', I argue that Malick's style reflects and magnifies the motive of personal transformation that is more widely at work within the project of film-philosophy. The philosophical achievements of Malick's style, as commentators see it, always entail transformational effects on the viewer: his devices not only move us to contemplation, but potentially instill in us a greater sense of awareness, openness, and connectedness. These essentially value-laden interpretations of his style I illustrate with reference to the three stylistic elements that feature most in philosophical writings on Malick: (a) his visual renderings of nature, (b) his use of voice-overs and (c) the 'perspective-effects' that he is said to achieve.

To end off the thesis, I round up a few central insights as I reflect on the meta-journey that this thesis has made me accomplish. My reflections deal also with the discontents of the meta-position; as well as the need and the advantages of switching between the 'meta'-hat and other hats that one could wear for doing first-order transformational ethics of film. Looking back moreover makes one discern new alleys and avenues for further research; and, in closing, I hope to suggest some of the most promising routes on which the cinemakeover might head in the future.

# Chapter 1

## **‘Going Meta’ on Film-Philosophy: Opening up the Field**

This chapter lays the table for the dinner that is the rest of this thesis. The proverbial feast that I am promising entails, of course: various instances of transformational ethics, which I track down for the sake of putting together a particular display of the ‘cinemakeover’ – an image, that is, of how we may use films for personal transformation. Yet before we can get to that menu, we first need to be clear about the table around which we are actually gathering: because my tracking down of transformational ethics will be exclusively within the theoretical project of ‘film as philosophy’ or ‘film-philosophy’. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to chart the main contours of this project within which I do my meta-analytical work. The markers that I lay down on the table will guide my analyses throughout the rest of the thesis. This holds especially true for the conclusion of the chapter, where I embed my charting of film-philosophy within a set of fundamental ontological horizons that frame the project.

A few quick provisos are relevant here: my analysis in this chapter is not a historical account of film-philosophy, nor is it an overview along the lines of influential theorists and their arguments (e.g. Wartenberg, 2011b; Falzon, 2013; Sinnerbrink, 2013). Moreover, though the chapter may seem to fill the slot of a conventional ‘literature review’, my ambitions for it are in fact much greater. In the pages that follow, I am taking the first, crucial steps of my own meta-theoretical project with respect to the project of film-philosophy, as I will distinguish (and plot in relation to one another) the various conceptions of film-philosophy that together comprise this project. As noted, the resulting constellation of conceptions, with their key assumptions, will provide fundamental reference points to the transformational ethics of film that I explore later in the thesis. But it is my contention that the mapping arrived at in this chapter also aids film-philosophy as such – that is, apart from any questions of transformational ethics – by drawing analytical lines and connections along which debate can be more constructively carried forward. I am not aware of any similar existing meta-theoretical appraisal of film as philosophy, and certainly not one with conciliatory ambitions for the diverse approaches comprising the debate.

The chapter moves through the following waypoints. At the outset, I define and contextualize film-philosophy within the broader field of Philosophy of Film (Section 1). In doing so, I also develop the more specialized sense in which I speak of ‘film-philosophy’ in this thesis (Sections 1 and 2). Next, I proceed to arrange a series of diverse conceptions of film-philosophy along two basic ‘axes’: firstly, the

degree to which film is claimed to do philosophy; and, secondly, the condition(s) posed for film to be able to do philosophy (Sections 3 and 4). In conclusion, I take a step towards consolidating the various conceptions identified, by situating them against the already mentioned set of ontological horizons that they appear to invoke (Section 5).

## 1. A Two-Way Street:

### Philosophy of Film & Film-Philosophy

To start with a working definition, the term ‘film-philosophy’ is shorthand for ‘film as philosophy’, which, in turn, encapsulates various possible claims that films can do or contribute to philosophy. Considered as a theoretical practice, that is, a practice of film philosophers, ‘film-philosophy’ may be described as the use of film(s) for (doing) philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the term refers to a by now maturing approach, even a subfield, within the broader discipline of ‘Philosophy of Film’ or ‘Film Philosophy’ (without the hyphen). Yet how exactly do we delineate film-philosophy within this overall field? One way of looking at the field of Philosophy of Film – as usefully outlined by Wartenberg (2011b) – is to distinguish its ‘internal’ questions from its ‘external’ questions.<sup>2</sup> The internal questions of Philosophy of Film address the foundations of film itself: What is the nature of cinema as a medium? What is the ontological status of film? What makes cinema an art – and a distinct art form at that? Of course, classical film theorists have long been posing these questions.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the external questions of Philosophy of Film (an abstracted category which, of course, cannot be wholly detached

1 Although many forms of ‘film’ may be at stake in ‘film-philosophy’ my discussions will be roughly restricted to narrative fiction film. This corresponds with a recognized tendency in the field to focus more on the latter (cf. Carroll, 2013: 161; Livingston, 2008: 591). Without any doubt, strong arguments can be made for the philosophical contributions and significance of non-fiction film. Yet it is precisely for this reason that film-philosophy as a *debate* gravitates towards fiction film. Unlike the documentary, visual essay or experimental film, (popular) fiction films are taken to have a less obvious connection with philosophy. This has made the question of specifically fiction film’s philosophical capacities an attractive one for philosophers to grapple with.

2 See Buckland (1998) for a comparable distinction between ‘internal-’ and ‘external perspectives’ on film. For Buckland internal (or ‘poetic-’) perspectives involve an intrinsic approach to film that seeks to clarify its inner-workings in isolation from socio-cultural, historical or moral contexts. External perspectives, in turn, study the relations between film and various aspects of the world ‘outside’ of film by focusing on its intertwinements with such significant contexts.

3 Despite the obvious overlap between Philosophy of Film and what has traditionally been practiced as ‘film theory’ (cf. Wartenberg, 2011b; Botz-Bornstein, 2011), many Anglo-American philosophers intentionally distance themselves from ‘Continental inspired’ film theory and critically formulate ‘philosophy of film’ as an alternative befitting the Anglo-American tradition. As Wartenberg (2011b) explains:

“The problem is that the sub-field of film theory within film studies has been dominated by a range of theoretical commitments that many Anglo-American philosophers do not share. Many such philosophers have therefore felt a need not just to make minor revisions in the field and its understanding of film but rather to make a new beginning in the study of film that does not share the problematic assumptions of film theory itself. For this reason, as well as the earlier-cited view of film as a legitimate topic within aesthetics, they have felt it important to develop a philosophically informed mode of thinking about film”.

from the 'internal questions') look outwards from film, to address the relations between film and the various fundamental domains with which it is inevitably entangled. These questions are also 'external' in the additional sense that they naturally come from outside of the classical purview of 'film theory', narrowly understood. Indeed, philosophers are the ones who typically raise these questions: What is the relation between film and its 'authors'? How does film more generally relate to personhood? How does film cohere with human cognition, emotions or consciousness? What is the ethical value of film? How does film interact with socio-cultural contexts and social domination? And, lastly, how does film relate to, engage with or even contribute to forms of knowledge? The last of these questions – the relation between film and knowledge – leads us to one of the most philosophically intriguing strands of these external questions: the reflexive question of the relation between film and philosophy itself.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between film and philosophy? The very endeavor of Philosophy of Film of course already presupposes a basic understanding of this relationship: that film is simply one of the countless things in the world at which our philosophical reflection can be directed. This – what could also be called 'philosophy *about* film' – is the most general and taken-for-granted conception of the relationship between film and philosophy: that of philosophy taking film as its object of study (cf. Botz-Bornstein, 2011; Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 1). Understandably, it emphasizes the agency of philosophical reflection directed at film; that of philosophy engaging with film. Film is thus drawn into the 'workings' of philosophy and is thereby subjected to the aims and procedures of philosophical activity.

Yet, in the last two decades, considerable attention and debate have been devoted to the possibility of inverting this conventional understanding (cf. Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 1). This marks the overt emergence of film-philosophy. While the film work of Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell – perhaps the unofficial 'godfathers' of film-philosophy – has certainly laid much of the groundwork, the late 1990's and onwards witnessed a drastic upsurge of the view that film is more than the mere passive object upon which philosophy is exercised: films have the ability to make their own, uniquely cinematic, contributions to philosophical understanding; film can serve as a distinctive source of philosophical thinking or knowledge (Wartenberg, 2011b; Sinnerbrink, 2013). The transition, moreover, is characterized by a growing interest in how cinematic fiction, and especially mainstream commercial cinema, may have philosophical capacities (cf. Carroll, 2013: 161; Livingston, 2008: 591). This idea goes by many names – 'film as philosophy' (Smith & Wartenberg, 2006; Wartenberg, 2011a), 'cinema as philosophy' (Livingston, 2006; 2008; 2009) 'cinematic philosophy' (Wartenberg, 2011a), 'philosophy through film' (Falzon, 2013), 'film-philosophy' (Colman, 2009; Carel & Tuck, 2011; Sinnerbrink, 2011a; Sinnerbrink, 2013) or even 'filmosophy'

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4 Though I take the relation between film and philosophy as a form of knowledge to be the most obvious path, there are further fundamental contexts, in addition to that of knowledge, along which to trace the relationship between film and philosophy. See Section 5 in this chapter.

(Frampton, 2006a). Regardless of their names, they all converge on the view that ‘philosophy’ (whichever way it is understood) can be conceived of from the point of view of film; and that, instead of merely being subjected to pre-existing theoretical agendas, film should be allowed to articulate its own ‘philosophicalness’ on its *own* terms.<sup>5</sup> Especially according to the hotly debated ‘bold thesis’ of film-philosophy, as Paisley Livingston (2006) coined it, film has certain philosophical capacities that are held to be intrinsically part of the distinctively multi-modal nature of the medium. Put differently, philosophy (or some quality thereof) can be uniquely incarnated by the cinematic process – which entails that film has the capacity to make genuine contributions to philosophical understanding, by distinctively cinematic means. What this inverted perspective adopted by philosophers therefore drives home, is that the relationship between film and philosophy is something of a ‘two-way street’: it can be just as much conceived in terms of film engaging with/in philosophy, as the other way around.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as we will see, endorsers of ‘bold’ film-philosophy even claim that any ‘philosophy about film’ that does not sufficiently account for the reciprocal reflective agency of film (‘aimed’ back at philosophy) is fundamentally deficient.<sup>7</sup>

In light of the above then, I speak of ‘film-philosophy’ to refer to the relationship between film and philosophy approached from the perspective of film. (To use a theological notion, one may call this philosophy ‘made in the image of’ film, and not the other way around.) With ‘film’ fixed before ‘philosophy’, the term essentially denotes the idea of ‘film engaging with/in philosophy’. Now, as one would expect, there is a host of views on what exactly the nature of this engagement may (or may not) be. It is therefore important to note that, because the idea that

5 This claim is admittedly more characteristic of ‘bolder’ versions of the idea that films can do or be philosophy, as we will get to (see Section 3.3). See Carel & Tuck (2011:2), Cox & Levine (2011:10), Mulhall (2008:7–8), Sinnerbrink (2011a: 2, 128; 2011c: 25–26, 32–33) and Frampton (2006a: 9–11) for examples of this line of reasoning.

6 In emphasizing the two-way relationship between film and philosophy I draw a distinction similar to that made by Botz-Bornstein (2011), Falzon (2013), Colman (2009) and Sinnerbrink (2011a) among others. For Botz-Bornstein (2011) there is, on the one hand, the general occurrence of film undergoing philosophical examination (‘philosophy about film’), but, on the other, is also the possibility of film helping to develop a kind of philosophical reflection (‘film as philosophy’) which can be applied to various subjects. He rightly notes that in practice these two approaches, as he describes them, are naturally intertwined: “Film as philosophic experience or philosophy as a filmic experience often appear as two sides of the same coin” (2011). Falzon (2013) distinguishes an understanding of film “not so much as an object of philosophical reflection but as a medium for engaging in philosophy”. Colman (2009: 14) offers yet another variation of this distinction: “Philosophy offers specific methods for film analysis, and the medium of film in turn offers specific models for philosophical reflection”. And in similar vein Sinnerbrink (2011a: 7) proposes that ‘film-philosophy’, unlike ‘philosophy of film’, is “a style of philosophical exploration that questions the common tendency to philosophically privilege conceptual theorization over film aesthetics”.

7 Note that I have only singled out one basic model involving two directions of agency within the film-philosophy relationship. I am well aware that such a dynamic relationship may manifest itself in many (much more complex) ways; and that even a metaphor as basic as that of a ‘relationship’ has its limitations and may require supplementary models and perspectives. I also recognize that the two interactions ‘philosophy engaging with film’ and ‘film engaging with/in philosophy’ are co-dependent. (Reflection on the possibility of ‘film as philosophy’, after all, presupposes philosophical reflection on the nature of film and hence the activity of ‘philosophy of film’.)



film can engage with/in philosophy takes on so many forms, ‘film-philosophy’ serves as an encapsulating concept for what is a general viewpoint shared by different, even disparate, philosophical conceptions of film. It encapsulates any possible conception of how film may actively relate to, engage with, or be a form of philosophy. Hence, ‘film-philosophy’, as I use it, is already a meta-theoretical concept. It invokes an abstracted group of conceptions of film, joined together by their shared view that film has a capacity to be of value to the enterprise of philosophy. ‘Film-philosophy’ thus bespeaks a feature common to different theoretical postulations and claims about film, and not necessarily (what I take to be, at least) an inherent feature of film itself.

Owing to this encapsulating work that the notion does, the hyphen in ‘film-philosophy’ is highly loaded, as it substitutes an entire range of possible meanings and approaches (Colman, 2009: 3). If anything, the hyphen functions as a kind of ellipsis by provisionally indicating a relationship without committing to any definition of it (Warr, 2013: 109). The problem with this is that in the practice of film-philosophy, when scholars simply use films to do philosophy, the hyphen in ‘film-philosophy’ is mostly not recognized for the loaded, meta-theoretical placeholder that it in fact is. Rather than pore over the numerous potential conceptions that may figure in film-hyphen-philosophy, the practice of film-philosophy takes this indefinite connecting-space for granted, and unquestioningly gets on with the business of simply interpreting a film’s philosophical relevance. As Thomas Wartenberg (2006: 19) explains, “instead of proceeding with explicit theoretical discussions of the legitimacy of using film as a vehicle for philosophy, the general tendency has been for philosophers to use film as a springboard for discussions of subjects of philosophical interest while paying only scant attention to the theoretical issues generated by this practice”. Notwithstanding concerns voiced regarding the under-theorized grounds upon which the burgeoning practice of film-philosophy takes place (also see Wartenberg, 2003: 139, 141), non-reflexive, pop-philosophical exegeses of movies, in particular, still show little signs of subsiding.<sup>8</sup>

Over the last fifteen years, a shift in scholarly attention from ‘film-philosophy’ as (unquestioned) practice towards ‘film-philosophy’ as problem – indeed, as a subject of debate – has however become progressively evident. We see increasing attempts at theoretically substantiating film’s (possible) engagement with/in philosophy – that which the loaded hyphen often obscures. Together, such efforts

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8 *The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series*, which features a range of ‘X and Philosophy’ titles – where ‘X’ can stand for anything from *Alien* to *X-Men* – is emblematic of this practice of film-philosophy. Murray Smith (2010) offers an assessment of the trend similar to that highlighted by Wartenberg:

“[I]n spite of the torrent of material, there has been – ironically – rather little philosophical reflection on the basis for this wave of enthusiasm for PopPhi. Philosophers on the whole have been eager to dive into philosophical interpretations of films, casting aside the caution they might routinely exercise with regard to more traditional philosophical goals. The debate has been dominated by an ‘applied’ approach to the philosophy of popular culture, with very little attention to underlying questions about the nature of philosophical activity and the sense in which it can be sustained by films and other popular media”.

at substantiation make up what I call film-philosophy as a ‘theoretical project’: several theoretical accounts that more purposely address the question of how film may do philosophy, rather than just presuming philosophical capacities on the part of film. To this project, film-philosophy is essentially a question, as it probes the philosophical status of film: to what extent, and on what grounds, can we claim films to be philosophical or even be a form of philosophy? The answers that philosophers formulate in response – that is, their various conceptions or theories of film-philosophy – are attempts at ‘filling in’ what the elusive hyphen of film-philosophy leaves unsaid. What are those answers? And, equally important, how do they relate to one another within the overall project? This is the meta-picture that I endeavor to sketch below.

## 2. Film-Philosophy’s Two Axes of Engagement

While many a film-philosophical interpretation neglects to account for the grounds upon which films make their supposed philosophical contributions, the theoretical project of film-philosophy represents attempts at doing just that. In this project, even if not all the participants I single out may perceive themselves as forming part of it, philosophers advance distinct conceptions or theories of film-philosophy; conceptions, that is, of *how* film(s) do or do not, and can or cannot engage with, or in, philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

How does one go about the meta-analysis of identifying and interrelating such a variety of conceptions? I propose to distinguish two distinct axes at play within film’s postulated engagement with/in philosophy, as symbolized by the connecting hyphen in ‘film-philosophy’. The two axes of this engagement are:

- the degree of engagement
- the condition of engagement

The degree-axis deals with the extent to which film is understood to engage with and contribute to philosophy: in other words, does the philosopher pose a weak-, moderate- or bold engagement between film and philosophy? The condition-axis involves the claimed or assumed conditions that enable (or, for some, prohibit) film to engage with/in philosophy. While existing assessments of

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<sup>9</sup> A brief clarification of my use of the notions philosophy, theory and meta-theory may be useful. While I am prone to use ‘philosophy’ and ‘theory’ as synonyms (insofar as I take them to share fundamental aspirations of illumination and explanation), I will for the sake of clarity reserve the term ‘theory’ for (what, in essence, are ‘meta-philosophical’) accounts of the nature of the relationship between film and philosophy. The terms ‘a theory of film-philosophy’ or ‘the theorization of film-philosophy’ therefore refers to a theoretical explanation or description of the film-philosophy engagement. And since I will, in turn, discuss and analyze respective theories of film-philosophy, I label my own perspectives on them as being of a ‘meta-theoretical’ nature. Yet I still use the term ‘theory’ in the most general and consensual possible sense; and strictly dissociate it from the kind of (Continental, 1970s, ‘SLAB’) ‘theory’ that has come under fire from analytic-cognitivist film philosophers.

the film as philosophy debate revolves around distinctions along the first axis, I have no knowledge of any dedicated examination existing of the debate along the second axis. Usually, this axis finds itself conflated with the first; or it is at least not sufficiently distinguished, for example, in typologies of film-philosophy that primarily focus on degrees of engagement.<sup>10</sup> However, I find it crucial to keep in view the distinct claims that the two axes deal with. Whereas the first axis, regarding degrees of engagement, involves the extent to which film can ‘be’ philosophy, which is primarily measured by its assumed contribution or value to the enterprise of philosophy, the second axis involves the conditions of engagement which give film the means to be philosophy – irrespective of the (weak, moderate or bold) extent to which it is ‘philosophy’.

In my view, the clarification of conditions of engagement as a distinct dimension of theories of film-philosophy, in harmony with that of the degrees of engagement, promises a richer, more productive meta-picture of key conceptions and their interrelations within the overall project. As Murray Smith (2010) observes, the “field lacks [...] anything like a properly developed ‘metaphilosophy’ of film”. A finer sensitivity to the conditions of engagement posed by theories is an important step towards that end. Indeed, conditions of engagement posed by philosophers are always tethered to significant presuppositions at work within their theories of film-philosophy. Debates are headed nowhere unless we, as philosophers, can get a firmer meta-theoretical grip on the (related, complementary or inconsistent) assumptions that guide the different claims of how film engages with/in philosophy. And it is precisely to those assumptions that an appraisal of various conditions of engagement leads us. This is what I hope to demonstrate with the analysis that we now embark upon. But let us begin by briefly considering the film-philosophy relationship in terms of discrete degrees of engagement.

### **3. Degrees of Engagement: Weak, Moderate & Bold**

A first prominent ‘axis’ of the theorization of film-philosophy concerns the extent to which film is claimed to engage with/in philosophy – a line of inquiry that has attracted a considerable amount of debate (see Smith & Wartenberg, 2006; Livingston, 2008; Cox & Levine, 2011: 1–22; Wartenberg, 2011a; Falzon, 2013; Sinnerbrink, 2013). From this vantage point, film’s relation to philosophy as described and debated by philosophers of film is approached as being of different intensities. Various takes on the philosophical status of film can thus be construed as a question of degree: from weaker claims that films can only offer illustrations

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10 Wartenberg’s (2011a; 2016) most recent overviews of different conceptions of film-philosophy, for example, are explicitly structured around arguments for and against various degrees of engagement – the four theoretical positions that he distinguishes being those of (a) ‘extreme anti-cinematic philosophy’, (b) ‘extreme pro-cinematic philosophy’, (c) ‘moderate anti-cinematic philosophy’ and, his own, (d) ‘moderate pro-cinematic philosophy’. Other similar overviews (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2013; Falzon, 2013; McClelland, 2011), in my view, focus on arguments related to degrees of engagement and do not sufficiently distinguish and make explicit arguments for and against particular conditions of engagement.

of heuristic value to bold claims which hold that films can actually do or be philosophy. And the stronger the degree – that is, the stronger the sense that film is philosophical – the greater a film’s supposed contribution to philosophy is taken to be.<sup>11</sup>

While the various degrees of engagement no doubt form a continuum, I will for the sake of brevity describe this axis by only roughly distinguishing three general degrees: film-philosophy as a weak-, a moderate-, and a bold engagement.<sup>12</sup> Defenders of a merely ‘weak engagement’ of film with philosophy oppose any significant or strong sense in which film can be philosophy. Advocates of a ‘bold engagement’ on the opposite side of the spectrum go so far as suggesting that films can do philosophy; that film has the potential to be its own independent form of philosophy in ways comparable to standard verbal philosophical discourse or in a mode entirely unique to film. And, somewhere in the middle, are various theories of a ‘moderate engagement’: they recognize the potential of films to be philosophy but seek to avoid the (*a priori*) bold, global or even sweeping claims which tend to characterize the ‘bold’ position.

### 3.1 A Weak Engagement: ‘Film as (Illustration of) Philosophy’

There are a range of well-rehearsed *a priori* arguments against any strong claims of film as philosophy, though no one seems to have a problem with the idea that film can be an illustrative, heuristic or educational resource to philosophy (Livingston & Plantinga, 2009: xviii; Wartenberg, 2011a: 17).<sup>13</sup> This ‘weak engagement’ is indeed the most uncontroversial sense in which films can ‘be’ philosophy: they can offer illustrations of (predetermined) philosophical ideas, themes or theories.<sup>14</sup> According to this view, film-narratives and especially popular narratives can be a useful heuristic or pedagogical resource for philosophy by being a means for depiction, clarification or reflection (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 119–120; 2011c: 32; Falzon, 2013). Film can make a contribution to philosophy “by illustrating philosophical ideas, exploring situations and problems of general philosophical

11 See, for instance, Sinnerbrink (2013: 207) who summarizes the ‘film as philosophy’ thesis (in the work of Thomas Wartenberg and Steven Mulhall) as involving the argument “that film can make creative contributions to our philosophical understanding through cinematic means”.

12 See Wartenberg (2011a) for a related typology that goes further by also distinguishing weaker and stronger stances within the ‘moderate’ position.

13 *Philosophy goes to the Movies*, by Christopher Falzon (2002) or *Philosophy through Film*, by Mary Litch (2010) are two well-known examples of film-philosophy as a heuristic-educational practice. Falzon (2002: 3, 16), for instance, explains that his book uses ‘cinematic material’ for illustrating and discussing philosophical themes; and that it can serve as a resource in philosophy lectures and discussions.

14 This claim refers to the implicit portrayal of general philosophical themes. Films can of course also be ‘philosophical’ in a much more obvious – and widely acknowledged – sense: namely when they explicitly deal with philosophy. For instance, a film may be about a philosopher and his/her ideas – like Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein* (1993), the documentary *Derrida* (Kirby Dick & Amy Ziering, 2002) or, more recently, *Hannah Arendt* (Margarethe von Trotta, 2012). Or one may alternatively find instances where characters explicitly discuss recognized philosophical ideas, as in Richard Linklater’s *Waking life* (2001). See Falzon (2013).

interest, or eliciting sophisticated criticism and analysis by suitably engaged theorists” (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 120). A film does not have to explicitly utilize a philosophical position for its concrete scenarios to be effective as illustrations (cf. Falzon, 2002: 15). To defenders of a ‘weak engagement’ in film-philosophy *this* is as far as the philosophical capacities of film can go. These theorists deny to film a position of being philosophy in any stronger sense, and oppose claims that film can contribute to philosophy in ways that are exclusive to the cinematic medium. Apart from explicitly (verbally) voicing philosophical arguments or theories, or more generally offering pedagogically useful material which prompts philosophical activity, these theorists argue that films cannot do philosophy. This so-called ‘philosophical disenfranchisement of film’ (Wartenberg, 2007: 16; Sinnerbrink, 2011c) rests on a few recurring objections to the idea of film doing philosophy, which can be summarized as follows:

- ‘Platonic’ objections related to representation
- the explicitness objection
- the generality objection
- the imposition objection
- objections related to the different structuring interests of philosophy versus film (Falzon, 2013; Wartenberg, 2007: 16–31; Smith, 2006)

Firstly, the well-known ‘Platonic objection’ to film as philosophy holds that visual images and representations, akin to the shadows on the wall in Plato’s myth of the cave, are mere (illusory) appearances, not reality, and cannot be a source of true knowledge – which would be the aim of film-philosophy (Falzon, 2013; Wartenberg, 2007: 15–16).

Secondly, according to the explicitness objection film lacks the explicitness to present the precise claims which characterize philosophical thought (Wartenberg, 2007: 16). Murray Smith (2006: 40)<sup>15</sup>, for example, argues that the inherent ambiguity of film, as with art in general, precludes it from the clarity and explicitness that philosophy requires.<sup>16</sup>

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15 For Smith (2006: 40) artistic meaning and experience are characterized by “sufficient complexity and indirection” that resist restatement in the clear, unequivocal terms indicative of “the abstract conceptual character of philosophy” (ibid.).

16 One counter-objection to the ‘explicitness objection’ is its (apparently Analytic-philosophical) assumption that philosophical discourse is necessarily clear and explicit. Quite on the contrary, most texts from the classical philosophical ‘canon’ (for example, Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Rousseau or Hegel) often require, much like films, intensive philosophical analysis and interpretation to formulate and clarify (different perspectives on) arguments and theses in these texts. In addition to this Carroll (2006: 181) succinctly points out that “a taste for explicitness over implicitness marks a difference in philosophical style and not the distinction between philosophy and something else that is supposedly not philosophy”.

Thirdly, the generality objection – which also has a Platonic ‘ring’ to it – holds that individual film-narratives, with their specific depictions, scenarios, characters and actions cannot present the abstract, universal and generalized claims which are essential to philosophy (Wartenberg, 2007: 24).

Fourthly, the imposition objection refers to any notion of films ‘doing philosophy’ as the activity of the philosopher – also involving theoretical frameworks, presuppositions, etc. – that is imposed onto the film.<sup>17</sup> Since the philosophizing is done by the philosopher using film, and not the film itself, a film cannot be philosophy in its own right, nor can it independently contribute to philosophical knowledge (Wartenberg, 2007: 25).

The final objection goes that philosophical texts and films have distinct (and perhaps even irreconcilable) structuring interests; they have essentially different concerns or goals. Smith (2006: 39), a representative also of this objection, argues that although films do have epistemic (or philosophical-) dimensions, they are – unlike philosophical texts – subjected to the films’ primary aesthetic aspirations. Even if the same trope appears in both a film and a philosophical theory, the trope has essentially different functions in the two types of discourses (Wartenberg, 2011a: 11).<sup>18</sup>

Mention should lastly be made of Paisley Livingston’s ‘problem of paraphrase’, which although not typically listed as a ‘standard’ objection to film as philosophy, has also been influential in this context of criticism. Livingston (2006: 12; 2008: 600–601) argues that the ‘bold thesis’ of film as philosophy – which he formulates as such: that capacities belonging exclusively to the cinematic medium offer films the means to make original and independent contributions to philosophy – runs into an apparently insoluble dilemma. The problem, in short, is an evidentiary one. The bold claim that a film makes a philosophical contribution needs to be substantiated with a (verbal) explanation of what that contribution is. Yet if this contribution can be paraphrased, its supposedly (visual) cinematic nature

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17 One major difficulty with the ‘imposition objection’ is its apparent denial of the givenness of interpretation. The so-called ‘imposition’ of the philosopher’s views on the film – which would be much better stated as ‘interpretation’ – is as necessary and unavoidable as it is in the case of reading a philosophical text. A written philosophical text obviously does not ‘speak’ for itself and relies on the work of an interpreter. Yet the imposition objection seems to require from films to ‘do philosophy’ all by themselves. Objecting to imposition, as Falzon (2013) emphasizes, should rather be the issue of whether or not a philosophical interpretation of a film is adequate or acceptable. This can be established on the reasonable assumption that interpretations need not be arbitrary. The adequacy of such interpretations should ideally take into account not only creators/filmmakers’ intentions, but also relevant reception contexts and recognition of constraints related to the design of the film itself (*ibid.*).

18 One can however simply respond by saying that the philosophical dimension of film (one among many others) does not have to be its leading- or qualifying interest for it to nevertheless be of philosophical significance. Falzon (2013) echoes this in saying that, although films obviously do much more than engage with philosophical matters, this does not in itself preclude the possibility that they might, in addition to other things, do precisely that. Likewise Carroll (2013: 177) affirms that most films can have multiple purposes and that this view is compatible with assertion that philosophizing is one of those purposes. He also rightly holds that “it is not evident that entertainment and philosophical instruction must always be construed as opposites” (*ibid.*).

is betrayed. Alternatively, it may be claimed that this exclusively cinematic contribution to philosophy cannot be paraphrased. Then, in effect, we should doubt its very existence since the claimed contribution lacks adequate evidence. Livingston (2006: 15–17) concludes that both the conditions of exclusivity (i.e. the medium specificity) and the (epistemic) originality of the bold thesis need to be weakened to formulate more adequate notions of how film can make its philosophical mark. Livingston's appeal brings me to a second group of theories, which propose a 'moderate engagement' between film and philosophy.

### 3.2 A Moderate Engagement: 'Film (to some extent) as Philosophy'

In between the limits of outright denying and enthusiastically granting film the status of being philosophy lies a variety of moderate positions. These positions generally hold that films can do more than the 'mere illustration' of philosophy – one typical view being that they may also adopt a reflective attitude towards and do something with the things they show us. I briefly mention two examples in this regard. A film's mobilization of philosophically relevant assumptions and themes is considered as an uncontroversial, even weak, sense in which a film can be philosophical, since such implicit contents of film rely on the philosopher to unpack and explore the general philosophical issues which are raised (cf. Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 2; Falzon, 2002: 7, 15). Yet Christopher Grau (2006: 119, 128–129) holds that, in the course of raising philosophical themes, a film may go one step further by also implicitly presenting a philosophical position on those issues.<sup>19</sup> "That is, it does not just raise certain deep questions, it suggests answers to those questions" (ibid.:119).<sup>20</sup> Similarly Daniel Shaw (2006: 112, 117) claims that, on "extremely rare occasions", a film can be said to do philosophy if it furthers a philosophical theory by asking deeper questions or proposing new perspectives that have not been asked or proposed before.<sup>21</sup> Both theorists are therefore concerned with how film may go further than simply portraying a philosophical theory or theme.

The group of theories that I am concerned with here proposes a 'moderate' engagement with/in philosophy insofar as they generally wish to avoid global, *a priori* assertions of the philosophical abilities of film. Theorists involved tend to be circumspect in specifying strict criteria for the restricted cases that may count as films actually doing philosophy. And, not surprisingly, this is accompanied

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19 Grau analyses *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004) as an instance of a film adopting its own philosophical position on ethical-moral issues.

20 With that, Grau makes it clear that philosophical interpretation is still required to render the implicit thematic nuances of such a film explicit (2006: 128–129).

21 Shaw considers *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) as an example of this. For him director Spike Jonze and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman are "doing philosophy" to the extent that our "understanding of the problem of personal identity was deepened and enhanced because the filmmakers mapped out existentialist paths of thought" (2006: 117).

by a soberness about how much of a contribution film can make to philosophy. Noël Carroll (2013: 162), for example, makes it clear that only some films can promote philosophical insight; and on the question of whether films can actually do philosophy he admits to his “intuition that authentic cases are rare” (2006: 184). Thomas Wartenberg’s (2007; 2011) widely recognized ‘moderate thesis’ of films doing philosophy is even more indicative of this self-critical restraint. For him, film can be used for significant philosophical purposes, but we should at the same time remain realistic about these powers of film. The possibility of film as philosophy – what he refers to as ‘philosophy screened’ or ‘cinematic philosophy’ – remains an open, empirical one. In Wartenberg’s own attempt at addressing this question, he cautiously considers how films can function in the form of generally accepted philosophical methods (2007: 9, 31).<sup>22</sup> His most often cited claim is that some films can perform philosophical thought experiments (2003; 2007: 55–75).<sup>23</sup> Yet Wartenberg (2007: 31, 133–134) insists that such instances need to be argued for and indicated in a local, particular and empirical manner which emphasizes how individual films can respectively instantiate specific philosophical techniques.

One rather strict qualification which moderate stances repeatedly resort to, is worth singling out: one can only speak of ‘film as philosophy’ if the filmmaker(s) somehow intended to use a film for doing philosophy.<sup>24</sup> A widespread commitment to intentionalism already shows itself in a preference for the phrase ‘philosophy *through* film’ (Wartenberg, 2007: 12; Carroll, 2013: 3; Falzon, 2013; Cox & Levine, 2011), which implies that the medium is used as *a means* to express (the filmmaker’s) philosophical ideas.<sup>25</sup> Paisley Livingston’s (2008; 2009) account of a moderate film-philosophy engagement has however emerged as one of the most explicit and rigorous versions of such intentionalism in the context of film-philosophy (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 117, 125). Whereas Wartenberg sets comparable ‘creator-oriented’ constraints on interpretations for film-philosophy, for instance, Livingston considers these to be too loosely framed (2008: 593–596; 2009: 87–91). Livingston starts out from the understanding that “neither

22 Wartenberg’s work addresses what he claims to be three different *modes* of cinematic philosophy: (1) films that illustrate philosophy; (2) films that present philosophical thought experiments; and (3) (avant-garde, experimental) films that perform real cinematic experiments (2007: 32–132; 2011: 17–22).

23 Carroll (2002) was perhaps first to point out how the devices of thought experiments and counterexamples may be forms of knowledge production in the fictional-narrative contexts of literature, film, theatre, etc.

24 Those who explicitly adopt an intentionalist position on film-philosophy of course have their carefully calculated reasons – so much so that they are happy to go against the still dominant anti-authorialism of literary studies and film studies, which goes back to Roland Barthes’ proclamation of ‘the death of the author’ (1977) and, before that, the New Critics’ rejection of authorial intent as ‘the intentional fallacy’ (see Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946; Brooks, 1951; Eliot, 1982 [1919]). Not that we should see them as lone voices in the wilderness, though. The death of the author thesis has always drawn its share of criticism, which as of late has been on the increase. For a recent and influential critique thereof, see Seán Burke’s *The Death and Return of the Author* (2008).

25 Although specifically dealing with avant-garde, “structural” films Ponech (2006) relies on similar intentionalist conceptions. He does not regard these films as works of philosophy. “Rather, they are vehicles for their makers’ philosophically pertinent ideas about cinema’s nature” (2006: 1).



texts nor films really do philosophy, it is *people* who articulate and convey philosophical ideas and arguments using these and other expressive devices" (2008: 593).<sup>26</sup> Hence his conclusion that bolder versions of film-philosophy (in addition to running into the 'problem of paraphrase' – see Section 3.1 above) tend to privilege what he labels as imaginative 'as-if' or 'extrapolative' interpretative approaches, which mobilize elements in a film as a means for creatively exploring and elaborating one's own philosophical-theoretical conceptions (2008: 598–599; 2009: 195–198). Though by no means without heuristic philosophical value, these audience-centered interpretative projects impose on the film the philosophizing (and imposition) of the interpreter. Hence, his preference for an intentionalist perspective: that one can only arrive at a notion of film doing philosophy through interpretations aimed at "the elucidation of the *actual filmmaker's* philosophizing" (2008: 599).<sup>27</sup> Since, for Livingston (2009: 199), the "film-maker provides evidence of his or her philosophical interests and background and offers interpreters a way into this framework", he does admit that his approach must shoulder "a heavy evidentiary burden" (*ibid.*). And, although a film's content (and a filmmaker's intentions) need not be philosophical, there are ultimately some "cases where the film-maker, or team of film-makers, has something genuinely valuable to express about a philosophical topic and has successfully done so with a film" (*ibid.*).<sup>28</sup> For Livingston to accept that a film is an instance or act of philosophy the necessary textual or biographical evidence therefore needs to be present, and that is: clear indications that the filmmaker intended to (and successfully did) explore recognized philosophical notions in an artistically significant way (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 128).<sup>29</sup> Yet, even in such instances, claims of the originality and exclusivity

26 This view, according to Livingston (2008: 593), "helpfully releases us from literally attributing thoughts and deeds to motion picture displays". He elaborates on this particular stance as such: "films or audiovisual displays do not literally have thoughts or goals and cannot raise questions or attempt to answer them. A film does not have any beliefs, so it cannot hold or promote views about metaphysical topics, such as the nature of space, time, or causation. On the assumption that concepts are thoughts or modes of classification, a film does not have, entertain, or create any concepts. Authors who describe films as independently proposing or somehow incarnating an innovative metaphysics or some other philosophical stance are in fact projecting their own ideas onto the audio-visual display" (2009: 194).

27 He does however qualify this as a 'partial intentionalism', since "intentions determine some, but not all, of the semantic properties of at least some works of art" (2009: 93). Consequently Livingston espouses, as an interpretative principle, a 'meshing condition' on authorial intent by evaluating how successfully the filmmaker's intentions are 'meshed' with the contents and structures of a film (see Livingston, 2009: 99–121).

28 Livingston considers the work of Ingmar Bergman to be a very clear example of 'film as philosophy' which meets his strict intentionalist conditions. He devotes considerable attention to explicit biographical evidence of how the relatively unknown Finnish psychologist Eino Kaila influenced Ingmar Bergman's philosophical aspirations in his filmmaking (see 2009: 125–193). Other examples that Livingston cites are the 'personalist' inspired films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Heideggerian influences in Terrence Malick's corpus of work (2008: 598).

29 Sinnerbrink (2011a: 129–130) singles out three problems with Livingston's intentionalist account of 'film as philosophy': (a) it is overly intentionalist in that it neglects broader socio-historical contexts in film production as well as the necessity of active interpretation in contexts of reception. (b) Livingston does not leave room for the possibility that intentionality can be displayed within the work itself; meaning that we can, and often have no choice but to, attribute certain intentions to a film in order to make sense of

of the contributions made by ‘philosophy through film’ should be more modest and viable – persistent hallmarks of a ‘moderate’ stance (see Livingston, 2008: 601; 2009: 200). Coupled with that, Livingston (2009: 200) echoes a frequent plea within the broader theoretical project of film-philosophy: that we should eschew “sweeping pronouncements” about cinema’s philosophical significance in favor of “more careful studies of particular cases and topics [which] are more likely to yield reliable and credible results” (ibid.).

### 3.3 A Bold Engagement: ‘Film as Philosophy’

Film-philosophy, conceived as a bold engagement, holds that film does not simply offer practical illustrations or reflect philosophical themes but can actively engage in philosophizing (broadly understood) in its own terms and in an independent manner (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 120). This means that films (or certain ones, at least) can just as much do philosophy (albeit in their own distinctive way) as traditional philosophical texts can and, in doing so, such cinematic performances of philosophy can contribute to the larger project of philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Film, according to this view, thus offers another medium to philosophy (Wartenberg, 2011a: 13; Falzon, 2013). This position also includes the more radical view that film enacts a distinctive kind of ‘cinematic thinking’ that actively resists traditional philosophical terms and interpretations (e.g. Frampton, 2006a; Sinnerbrink, 2011a; 2011c).

The respective projects of Gilles Deleuze (1986; 1989) and Stanley Cavell (1979; 1981; 1996) are generally considered to be the two most prominent contemporary sources for the idea that films can in some way do philosophy (cf. Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 2; Livingston, 2008: 592); although one could cite further sources such as Vivian Sobchack and her related insistence on film’s capacity to do phenomenology (see Sobchack, 2009; 2011: 191–192). Nevertheless, it is Stephen Mulhall’s philosophical commentaries on the *Alien* film series that have become the emblem of more recent claims that a potentially ‘bold engagement’ exists between film and philosophy. Mulhall’s unambiguous statement of intent in the Introduction of *On Film* (2008) is often cited as *the* exemplar of an extreme conception of film-philosophy:

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it – irrespective of whether explicit intent on the part of the filmmaker can be accounted for. (c) Lastly, Livingston precludes the possibility that films can independently do philosophy by making the very idea of film as philosophy dependent on pre-existing philosophical ideas that the filmmaker is supposed to portray. Sinnerbrink (2011a: 130) argues that “this is to prejudge the ways in which it might be possible for film to be, or be regarded as, independently philosophical”.

30 Livingston (2006; 2008), who was first to label and critically clarify the ‘bold thesis’ of film-philosophy, describes its claim as such: “films can make independent, innovative and significant contributions to philosophy by means unique to the cinematic medium (such as montage and sound-image relations), where such contributions are independent in the sense that they are inherent in the film and not based on verbally articulated philosophizing” (2008: 592).

“I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the way philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy’s raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – films as philosophizing” (2008: 4).

Mulhall (2008: 7, 130) explains that his consideration of how films ‘philosophize’ takes on three interrelated forms<sup>31</sup>: (a) ‘film as philosophizing’, meaning that films can engage with and contribute to philosophical themes and problems; (b) ‘philosophy of film’, referring to film’s ability to reflect on questions of its own medium; and (c) ‘film in the condition of philosophy’ referring to how film can also engage with its own conditions of possibility, its status as fiction, its relations to related films and genres, etc.<sup>32</sup> But he insists that claims about film’s ability to do philosophy should not be formulated on the basis of general theoretical stances, but rather on detailed readings and interpretations of individual films (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 122). Mulhall (2008: 129–155) therefore pleads for a ‘priority of the particular’ in reaction to the charges of his critics, who hastily assume that his views on film as philosophy are global claims.

Robert Sinnerbrink (2011a: 123) – who proposes his own bold film-philosophy of ‘cinematic thinking’ – supports and elaborates this view by stating his intention to respond to the aesthetic singularity and specific nature of individual films. For Sinnerbrink (2011a: 141) the “philosophical dimensions of film [...] are enacted or performed rather than posited or proven”, which leads him to the claim that “the question of ‘film as philosophy’ cannot be decided by theoretical argument alone” (ibid.). As a result he seeks to develop the claims of his approach on the basis of detailed, philosophically informed film criticism (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 10, 137, 141 ff.).<sup>33</sup>

Film-philosophical projects concerned with formulating bold notions of ‘film as philosophy’ are by near default repudiations (often explicitly so) of the so-called Platonic prejudice against art (and film) as a source of illumination (cf. Falzon,

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31 To my mind, the distinction between two of these forms of philosophizing – film doing ‘philosophy of film’ versus ‘film in the condition of philosophy’ – is not entirely clear. Also see Sinnerbrink (2013: 209), who notes related ambiguities in Mulhall’s account.

32 See Carroll (2006; 2013: 203–220) for similar claims that films specifically do ‘philosophy of film’ insofar as they add to our understanding of the medium of film (as Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity* (1970) is argued to do) and film narration (as he claims about Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000)) respectively.

33 Prominent ‘moderate’ theories of film as philosophy, as discussed above, are also characterized by a demand for the ‘priority of the particular’ (cf. Wartenberg, 2007: 31, 133–134; Livingston, 2010: 200). So on this question, Wartenberg (2011: 14–16), for example, exhibits a very similar stance to that of Mulhall and Sinnerbrink: that *a priori* theorizing cannot settle the question of the extent to which film can be philosophy; a more empirical, tentative attitude should prevail through the careful analysis and interpretation of individual films.

2013).<sup>34</sup> Philosophers who adhere to stronger claims of film as doing or embodying philosophy also tend to be critical of the ‘unequal’ or ‘hierarchical’ relation which generally emerges in philosophical engagements with film, where film is typically the lesser ‘junior partner’, ‘handmaiden’ or ‘instrument’ of philosophy (Carel & Tuck, 2011: 2; Cox & Levine, 2011: 10; Sinnerbrink, 2011c: 32–32; Frampton, 2006a: 9–10). Sinnerbrink (2011a: 4, 8, 128; 2011c: 25) invokes Arthur Danto in his designation of the ‘philosophical disenfranchisement of film’ as those chronic tendencies to subordinate the aesthetic as an inferior mode of knowing which requires ‘pure’ philosophical thought to analyze, organize, clarify and ultimately *complete* it. “In the difficult marriage between philosophy and film, philosophy ‘wears the trousers’ (to use J.L. Austin’s rather off-colour phrase), deciding the terms of engagement and judging the worthiness of its cinematic partner in the mirror of philosophy’s own standards” (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 128). Sinnerbrink (2011c: 26, 33) makes it clear that, if it is simply assumed that any meeting of film and philosophy should involve translating film into a philosophically acceptable meta-language, film loses its aesthetic specificity and complexity by being reductively subsumed within a theoretical framework. Carel & Tuck (2011: 2) summarizes this as a situation in which film simply becomes “the object of study and as such is reduced to a thing placed under a pre-existing and fully-developed philosophical gaze, rather than seen as a more troubling site of thought and experience in its own right, one which has equal potential to expose the problems and limitations of a given philosophical method”. For Mulhall (2008: 7–8), it is a matter of philosophers treating films as mere passive objects to which theoretical constructions (originating outside of the film and often the field of film studies) can be applied. As a result film becomes a means of merely confirming the truth to which the theoretical apparatus is already committed.

We therefore find in the camp of ‘bold’ theories an acute sensitivity towards what I have earlier labelled the direction of engagement: philosophy of film should move beyond philosophy engaging with film, ‘philosophy about film’, to equally recognize its complementary reversal – ‘film as philosophy’, film’s ability to engage with/in philosophy. The apparent remedy for this neglect is that films should be allowed to ‘speak for themselves’, in their own, uniquely cinematic, terms. Mulhall (2008: 8), for instance, claims that the mentioned (theoretically imposing and reductive) approaches overlook what films themselves may have to contribute to our philosophical understanding of those very films; that they might offer a particular account of themselves. These features may just as much contribute to the philosophical exploration of issues as pre-established theories do and may even be a means of putting those very theories into question.<sup>35</sup> He again stresses

34 See my reference to ‘Platonic objections’ under Section 3.1.

35 One should however be skeptical of how any form of philosophical thought in a film can be discerned without inevitably relying on any pre-existing philosophical perspective (framework, theory, etc.) whatsoever. John Mullarkey (2011: 87–88) is equally unconvinced:

“Too often, however, when philosophers claim to find indigenous philosophical value in film, it is only on account of refracting it through their own thought: film philosophizes because it accords with a favored model of extant philosophy. [...] [G]iven the essentialist,

the 'priority of the particular' in consequently suggesting that detailed readings of individual films (which are doing philosophy) are ways of questioning the general theories that philosophers bring to film (2008: 8). The enterprise of film is in fact a way of holding philosophy to the self-questioning that it requires of itself (2008: 145). Sinnerbrink picks up on this view in stressing that the film-philosophy relationship should be seen as a mutually transformative one (e.g. 2011a: ix). This is intended to acknowledge the active role that film may have in this meeting: cinematic thinking, with its own modes and qualities of aesthetic experience, can be seen as resisting (conventional) theorizing and thereby has the potential of opening new ways of thinking to philosophy (cf. Frampton, 2006a: 10–11). There is thus urgency in stating not only the reality of but also the need for film engaging with/in philosophy. The argument seems to be that the potential philosophical contribution of film amounts to much more than a handy option – it is a necessity without which philosophy is in lack. Daniel Frampton (2006a: 9) sums it all up with the question: "If the starting point for these philosophers is 'what can film do for philosophy?', how long will it take for them to realize what film offers philosophy?"

### 3.4 A Reconsideration of Degree: 'Engaging in' versus 'Engaging with Philosophy'

My description of theories situated along this axis of film's engagement of philosophy – focusing on the extent of engagement – can however do with a further specification. Meta-analysis of film-philosophy in terms of the claimed degree of engagement requires that one sometimes uncouple the conjunction of 'with' and 'in' within the term 'film engaging with/in philosophy', as I have used it up to this point. After all, the proposition that a film engages *with* philosophy – irrespective of whether film's perceived engagement is 'weak', 'moderate' or 'bold' – is very different from saying that it engages *in* philosophy. While both conceptions require definite conditions for engagement, the latter requires film to somehow conform to, or 'become', philosophy in a way that the former does not.<sup>36</sup>

Although I do believe that this distinction holds across film-philosophy as a general theoretical project, it is admittedly not persistently explicit nor always relevant. Yet it seems to grow in significance the further one moves up along this axis towards 'bolder' theories of the film-philosophy relationship. A comparison between the conceptions of Mulhall and Sinnerbrink, as briefly touched on

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all-encompassing nature of most philosophies of film, even those that seemingly allow film its own mind and thought cannot avoid reducing it to illustrations of extant philosophy. If film thinks, it is not in its own way but in philosophy's way. [...] What frequently claim to be 'open' readings of film as philosophy still remain pre-figured philosophical interpretations".

36 Although he does not specifically address the issue in this way, I am nevertheless indebted to Christopher Falzon (2013) for leading me to this important distinction in theorizations of how film(s) may relate and contribute to philosophy.

above, makes for a particularly clear case in point. As will still be elaborated upon later, both theorists claim particular films to engage in a form of reflection. But while for Mulhall (2008: 4) this reflection involves films “thinking seriously and systematically” about philosophical issues “in just the way philosophers do” (ibid.), Sinnerbrink works from the understanding that film’s distinctive kind of reflection is quite unlike that of conventional philosophy. For Sinnerbrink (2011a: 139) ‘cinematic thinking’ offers the possibility of “a non-conceptual or affective thinking in images that resists cognitive closure or theoretical subsumption”. In this case, it is precisely the dissimilarity and otherness of a unique cinematic reflection that grants it the agency to contribute to standard philosophical reflection.<sup>37</sup> For Sinnerbrink (2011c: 38) film therefore does not have to engage *in* – conventional forms, features or qualities of – philosophy for it to be able to engage *with* and thereby transform philosophy.<sup>38</sup> Although I will still resort to the umbrella-reference, ‘film engaging with/in philosophy’, I nevertheless do so with the understanding that there is, at the very least, two types of engagement at stake here. And although theories on both sides of this distinction are concerned with the extent of film’s supposed contribution to philosophy, some of them hold that films only do so precisely by *not* becoming philosophy.

#### 4. Conditions of Engagement

In addition to the question of the ‘degree of engagement’, theories of film-philosophy should also be considered along a complementary ‘axis’ that consists of putative conditions for film’s engagement with/in philosophy. This axis involves an essentially different claim, as there has to be something that allows film to engage with/in philosophy – irrespective of the supposed degree of this engagement. Any theory of film-philosophy offers an account of what it considers to be distinctive means whereby film may engage with, or perhaps even be (a form of), philosophy. A meta-theoretical ‘plotting’ on the two axes – that of the ‘degree of engagement’ correlated with the ‘conditions of engagement’ – can therefore show how a group of theories may be equally bold in their claim that film can do philosophy, yet differ in the supposed conditions that allow for this. And, conversely, some theories may single out similar conditions yet reach different conclusions on the extent to which this condition grants film its perceived philosophical abilities.

In evaluating theories along this axis I am therefore specifically interested in what they posit as the enabling conditions for film to relate to philosophy and somehow contribute to philosophical reflection. These conditions involve the

37 Falzon (2013) makes the insightful point that Mulhall’s account of how films ‘philosophize’ makes filmic reflection “too similar to philosophy to do anything distinctly cinematic” while Sinnerbrink notion of a distinctively ‘cinematic’ kind of thinking runs the risk of being “too different from philosophy to do anything recognizably philosophical” (ibid.).

38 One may speculate that this difference between Mulhall and Sinnerbrink could be traced back to a similar difference in the approaches of Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. Mulhall shows an obvious affinity for the former while Sinnerbrink – with respect to how he characterizes ‘cinematic thinking’, at least – sides more with the latter.

claimed properties, capacities or related contexts of film(s) which supposedly enable and constitute its active relationship with philosophy. The examination of enabling conditions will moreover take special interest in ‘bolder’ notions of film-philosophy (claiming some version of ‘film as philosophy’), as such cases are required to (ideally) be more explicit about what exactly affords film its philosophical powers.

In assessing claims of how certain elements of film enable it to uniquely ‘partake’ in, or at the very least align with, philosophy, we are inevitably confronted with the much larger question of what precisely is meant by ‘philosophy’. Unsurprisingly, one finds that different notions of ‘philosophy’ – or, at the very least, a more ambiguous aesthetic or poetic ‘philosophical-ness’ – often serve as unquestioned points of departure which set an agenda for how a particular theory construes the interaction of film and philosophy. A meta-theoretical appraisal of film-philosophy therefore needs to be sensitive to the possible assumptions at work in any theory’s understanding of ‘philosophy’ (cf. Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 2).<sup>39</sup> The pertinence hereof in debates can be seen, for example, in the way detractors of the idea of ‘film as philosophy’ get accused of a too narrow, reductive a view of what ‘philosophy’ is (e.g. Mulhall, 2008: 130–146; Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 117; Carroll, 2013: 174). Such accusations tell us that any theory of film-philosophy necessarily has to offer some (implicit or explicit) meta-philosophical account of what it regards ‘philosophy’ to be (cf. Smith, 2010; Falzon, 2013). Yet the same applies to what is meant by ‘film’ or ‘cinema’. Hence, our assessments should also not lose sight of the parallel assumptions and definitions that also go into a theorist’s understanding of the ‘film-’ in ‘film-philosophy’.

In what follows, I briefly discuss the conditions for films to engage with/in philosophy as they emerge in various theories of the film-philosophy relationship. I start with the less controversial conditions for film-philosophy – which roughly correspond with ‘weak’ and ‘moderate’ positions on the axis of ‘degrees of engagement’ – and then proceed to somewhat more radical conditions associated with ‘bolder’ theoretical stances. Finally, I conclude my analysis with an attempt at relating the listed conditions to a set of more basic horizons.

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39 To briefly mention one example: a major distinction that can be drawn in terms of such assumptions is the difference between ‘philosophy’ as a verb and ‘philosophy’ as a noun – philosophy as something that you do, an activity or even a process, versus philosophy as subject matter, a relatively independent body of knowledge or discourse characterized by its own themes and interests. As will become clear below, philosophers of film by and large prefer to approach philosophy (and consequently the philosophical capacities of film) as a verb, an action, as doing something. Analytic philosophers tend to focus on film’s potential to perform arguments, while Continentally-inclined philosophers emphasize film-philosophy as process, action and even creation. Yet what the philosophy-as-verb perspective overlooks is that the act of philosophizing (whether done by a person or a film) still presupposes *something* that one philosophizes about, the noun-aspect of ‘philosophy’, which involves a certain subject matter. Hence it should be clear that the neglect of different senses of ‘philosophy’ can result in impoverished, one-sided notions of film-philosophy.

## 4.1 Film as Illustration & Representation

A first and widely assumed condition for film to engage with/in philosophy is its ability to illustrate philosophical ideas – even if this is taken to only achieve a ‘weak’ heuristic relation with philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that the very idea of representation has increasingly been drawn into question<sup>41</sup>, many approaches (often implicitly) rely on what can broadly be construed as the representational capacities of film as a basic condition for film-philosophy (e.g. Falzon, 2002; Litch, 2010).

One may however ask, in wanting to specify this condition, what exactly do films (have to) represent to gain philosophical value. An obvious option is that films can represent actual philosophical discourse by, for example, quoting recognized philosophical texts – as Woody Allen is often claimed to do to (e.g. Shaw, 2006: 112–113). Yet a film that merely exemplifies an established philosophical theory or concept without somehow developing and furthering the theory cannot be said to engage with philosophy in any significant way (ibid.: 113). Such a film does not offer anything philosophically original; it does not so much ‘make’ philosophy as it is simply recounting it (Carroll, 2006: 174).

Another option is that a film represents philosophically relevant themes and issues through its narratives. To begin with, it may be that a film stages a narrative that is directly relatable to a recognized philosophical text – as, for example, Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1970) presents Plato’s allegory of the cave and, in doing so, can be argued to add a socio-critical dimension to Plato’s epistemology (Falzon, 2002: 19, 23).<sup>42</sup> Along similar lines, Irving Singer (2008) identifies the mobilization and portrayal of myth as a fruitful condition for film’s involvement with philosophy. As a special narrative that “performs a crucial role in cinematic art and even philosophy itself”, myth can serve as “components in the meaningfulness conveyed through cinematic techniques” and can therefore be “pertinent to the philosophic importance that films of merit may achieve” (ibid.: 2–3).<sup>43</sup>

Yet most philosophical analyses do not see the need for a direct connection between a film’s narrative and some philosophical work: they simply approach narrative scenarios in films as inevitably raising themes which are relevant to philosophical inquiry, without needing to have a direct relation to any established

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40 See Section 3.1 for more details on the film-philosophy relation as a ‘weak engagement’.

41 See, for one of many examples, Vaughan (2010: 6) on French philosophy of film’s methodological rejection of representation as basis for cinematic expression and interpretation.

42 The cinematic depiction of scenarios which resemble philosophical thought experiments is another example of how films can utilize actual narratives from philosophical discourse. See Section 4.2.3 for more on how films can embody thought experiments.

43 Stanley Cavell (e.g. 1979: 39–41) has also devoted attention to the philosophical relevance of film’s intersection with myth. Cavell, for instance, tells us that film offers the mythic wish for invisibility (as in Plato’s account of the Ring of Gyges) by projecting and re-creating the world allowing us to “to view it unseen (1979: 40)”. This invisibility and absence of ours to the film world is related to how film gives expression to our modern condition of skepticism (see Section 4.3.2 for more detail).



piece of philosophy. To mention but one example: in wanting to show how 'popular fictions' can do 'popular philosophy', Noël Carroll (2013: 183–192) argues that *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) is a contribution to the philosophy of love. By that he does not refer to any philosophy in particular, but rather to how the film can simply be 'philosophically revelatory' to the general public, its target audience, by enabling these viewers to discover some pathologies to which romantic love is prone (Carroll, 2013: 184, 192). He argues that the film achieves this through a narrative structure that comprises a 'double romance' arising from the sequential juxtaposition of two love affairs (2013: 185). The film's philosophical contribution is therefore not articulated by a character or voice-over narrator. It is rather the film's structure of parallel romances that draws the viewer into appreciating how fantasy, as a natural part of romantic love, can also become distorted to the extent that it undermines love (2013: 186, 192).

The claim that a film's *narrative* makes a philosophical contribution is not the same as stating that the contribution is made on the basis of a distinctly cinematic representation. That would require that a film makes its philosophical contribution through representing its narrative, if not in a medium-specific manner, at least in a manner that foregrounds the experiential resources at its disposal. This is indeed the view that many theorists hold: that the cinematic means of representation that gives philosophical value to the narratives films portray; that the medium somehow adds to or augments the philosophical themes raised by the narratives in films.<sup>44</sup> Cox & Levine (2011: 10–12) points out that film-form can simply do some things better than standard philosophical writing: by achieving greater nuance and perspective, cinematic representation of philosophical issues can sometimes be more suitably (emotionally, morally) engaging. Carroll (2013: 161–182) goes one step further: in an analysis of *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) he does address the cinematic means of representation and claims that it makes out a significant part of the film's philosophical claims. For him the aesthetic complexities of the film – involving, among other things, the film's subtle reliance on horror imagery – foster viewers' necessary emotional engagement through which philosophical understanding is ultimately achieved (2013: 177). Hence, the conditions of this film's philosophical exploration of aging – and the existential costs of its denial – are thus not only that of narrative representation but also the distinctly cinematic character of its representations.

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44 Although Carroll in the *Vertigo* example cited above is admittedly only concerned with the philosophical potential of popular fiction and not cinema *per se*, that example nevertheless accords with a broader tendency to reduce films (and their supposed philosophical contributions) to their narrative features alone. To mention one clear example: When Wartenberg (2007: 93) concludes that (with reference to how *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* acts as a counter-example to utilitarianist tenets) that "fiction films can present [philosophical] arguments through their narratives", he still patently neglects the question how the medium itself may play its role in all of this. For exactly the same claim would hold for the film's written screenplay. This undermines his stated aim, which is to defend the idea of film as capable of philosophy (2007: 4), as this implies films have philosophical capabilities by virtue of them being films, and not simply narratives or fictions. This tendency to reduce film's philosophical capacities to its narrative-textual properties has however received deserved critical attention (e.g. Mullarkey, 2009b: 15–28).

## 4.2 Philosophical Methods

### A Methodological Characterization of Philosophy

Especially Anglo-American philosophers have persistently dealt with the cinematic instantiation of philosophical methods or -techniques as a condition for films to do philosophy. This second general condition has been the explicit concern of Thomas Wartenberg's (2007; 2011a) attempts at showing instances when films can be said to do philosophy. Wartenberg (2007: 31) intentionally proceeds from a "methodological characterization" in seeking to address this question. He readily acknowledges other conceptions of philosophy – like that of addressing 'eternal questions' of basic human concern, or being a 'meta-discipline' that asks questions of other disciplines. Yet he rejects specifications of philosophy based on its subject matter in favor of what he takes to be a suitably uncontentious conception of philosophy: philosophy as simply involving characteristic forms, methods or techniques through which it addresses its subject matter.<sup>45</sup> So if it can be shown, as Wartenberg claims to do, that some films can successfully 'screen' philosophical techniques – an argument, a thought experiment or a counter-example, for instance – then it can be said that these films are doing philosophy (Wartenberg, 2007: 29–31).<sup>46</sup>

Below, I briefly address the argument and the thought experiment as two philosophical techniques that have received the most attention as potential conditions for film doing philosophy.

### Argument

Debates over the philosophical status of film have often hovered around the condition of argumentation: Can a film – and particularly a popular fiction film – do philosophy by enacting its own argument(s) in a way that is true to the form of film?

Detractors of this idea generally argue that film does not measure up to what they consider to be the qualifying features of argumentation. For them, claims of film being or doing philosophy are at best metaphorical – film as a predominantly visual and narrative art cannot give reasons, make arguments or draw conclusions,

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45 Although certain more idiosyncratic definitions of philosophy would make his task easier, Wartenberg (2011a: 22) explains that his methodological characterization is precisely intended to "avoid adopting a contested view of philosophy from which to argue that, according to that very specific understanding of what philosophy is, a film could be philosophy". He also makes it clear that his 'methodological characterization' is by no means a complete (or systematic) account of how films can do or be philosophy (see Wartenberg, 2011a: 22).

46 Yet, although these are referred to as 'philosophical' techniques, Wartenberg (2007: 31) does concede that the techniques – even though characteristic of philosophical thinking – cannot be seen as the exclusive domain of philosophy. Hence, his 'methodological characterization' needs to be supplemented with definitions of philosophy in terms of its subject matter. This will give the techniques the necessary content that will justify saying that they are philosophical techniques raising philosophical matters.

hence it cannot be philosophy in the proper sense (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 117).<sup>47</sup> One example is Bruce Russell's (2005) account of the 'philosophical limits of film', according to which film's philosophical contribution is limited to raising philosophical questions and – in cases of sufficient explicitness – offering counterexamples to proposed necessary truths. But he stresses that a film cannot establish a philosophical thesis because, firstly, the particular examples that a film presents are not sufficiently generalizable and, secondly, elements of an imaginary, fictional world do not necessarily correspond to the actual world and therefore cannot offer real evidence or data. The former objection – referred to earlier as the 'generality objection' (see Section 2.1) – is an instance of a more general skepticism about whether film can present suitable reasons or evidence for justified belief (cf. Carroll, 2006: 175–176). While perhaps not working with such a tightly defined notion of philosophical argumentation, Julian Baggini's (2003) criticism of Mulhall's work on the *Alien* tetralogy proceeds along similar lines. Baggini, for instance, emphasizes that "for philosophy to be anything more than an exchange of opinions, it must involve the giving of good reasons for accepting or rejecting the position under discussion" (ibid.). Although many films and works of literature do offer compelling symbolic representations of the world, most do not provide reasons for us to accept these representations as accurate. And Baggini also finds such reasons to be lacking in the quartet of *Alien* films.<sup>48</sup>

Film may however be seen as engaging in argumentation if notions of what counts as an 'argument' – or, more generally, 'rationality' – become less restrictive. This is the obvious route that supporters of the condition of argumentation take against overly 'logicistic' standards set by its detractors.<sup>49</sup> I highlight two examples. Stephen Mulhall clearly appeals to a wider notion of cinematic argument by arguing that doing philosophy can take more forms than only that of narrowly construed arguments or "reason-giving" (2008: 137).<sup>50</sup> A shift from 'reason-giving' to mere 'reasoning' opens up considerably more possibilities for film. Firstly, instead of offering arguments, film may reorient, even re-envision, the pre-existing 'space' within which arguments can take place (ibid.: 137–138).<sup>51</sup> Secondly,

47 Verbal philosophical arguments in film – as are typically found in dialogue in films by Woody Allen – are not considered to be exclusive to the cinematic medium and therefore do not count.

48 Baggini (2003) does not altogether deny the possibility of film giving ('showing') sufficient reasons for accepting a philosophical point, since he does consider *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) to be a successful example of this.

49 I hold 'logicism' to involve the overestimation of logic to the extent that it reduces (and thereby distorts) the nature of philosophy, reason, knowledge, etc. to logical principles alone. An adherence to logicism, in this case, wrongly entails that 'arguments', narrowly construed, are the sole building blocks of (philosophical) knowledge; that arguments are to be strictly separated from affect and imagination; that they unaffectedly transcend cultural-historical (and even ideological) contexts; and that arguments are devoid of pre-argumentative loyalties and commitments.

50 See Section 2.3 for more details on Mulhall's 'bold' conception of film as philosophy.

51 Mulhall (2008: 137–138) explains that whenever one has arguments with reasons 'for' and 'against' some position, one always presupposes a shared space of thought, determined by the givenness of the topic and the shared sense of its nature and importance. A film's philosophical contribution can therefore reside in re-conceiving this space of arguments by presenting alternative or novel ways of thinking about the

since opposing arguments often arise from different commitments as to ‘what determines our world’, or ‘what is most important to human life’, a film can engage at the pre-argumentative level of commitments or guiding assumptions that are at work in arguments (*ibid.*: 140–142). By casting a unique vision or a specific symbolic representation of our world, a film may question or challenge certain philosophical, ontological, or ethical priorities by asking us to look at things from a different perspective. And, thirdly, Mulhall asserts that film has more resources for achieving such engagements and re-envisionings of philosophical claims. As we do with our interlocutors, film can make appeals to the heart, to one’s affective responses and to one’s imagination and thereby enhance understanding by addressing our affections and sensibilities (*ibid.*:141).<sup>52</sup>

Noël Carroll (2013: 170–172) offers another example of appealing to a more loosely construed notion of ‘argument’ in defending the idea that films may perform philosophical argumentation. Carroll notes that explicit argumentation is an essential feature of philosophizing: “Nietzsche’s aphorisms and Wittgenstein’s puzzles are usually accepted as philosophy, although they typically come unaccompanied by argument” (*ibid.*: 170). Yet Carroll then points out that detractors of film’s argumentative abilities are looking for argumentation in the wrong place. The argument, as such, does not lie in the film but in the minds of viewers – films may provide the material that enables viewers to reason and to reach the relevant philosophical insight by themselves (*ibid.*: 171–172, 179, 215). For Carroll, certain films have a ‘maieutic’ (a notion pertaining to the action of a midwife who draws an infant from the mother’s body) character insofar as they elicit the reasoning required to reach a particular philosophical claim or insight (*ibid.*: 171, 186, 215). Argumentation is consequently delegated to the viewer. Hence, Carroll (*ibid.*: 171, 180, 186) concludes, filmic argument much rather proceeds in the manner of a rhetorical question – arguably a philosophical method in its own right. A series of rhetorical questions can further a philosophical thesis, since “[i]t elicits conclusions by recruiting the ratiocination and the standing beliefs of the audience to do the pertinent work of reasoning and analysis” (*ibid.*: 186). Therefore, contrary to the intentionalism of other ‘moderate’ stances (see Section 3.2), Carroll makes central the involvement of the viewer in completing the film’s argument and thereby bringing its particular philosophical insights home.

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topic – thereby affecting the range of arguments and positions available to the topic, which still requires a certain accountability to reasonableness (Mulhall, 2008: 131, 137–138). Baggini (2003), even though critical of Mulhall, nevertheless seems to agree with him on this point: he points out that it is too limiting to conceive of philosophy as “being solely or even mainly about the construction of arguments, with conclusions that follow from premises” and that “in order to reason well from sound premises one first needs to identify those features of the world which are most pertinent to the problem at hand” (*ibid.*). This kind of identification itself is of course not in the form of deductive argument.

52 For Mulhall (2008: 141) such appeals to the ‘heart’ can also be reasonable since our emotions and imaginations are closely interwoven with our rational faculties and they can be answerable to rationality.

## Thought Experiment

Theorists who look toward philosophical methods as condition for film-philosophy also underline that films can perform philosophical thought experiments, to which the engaging, narrative nature of films is considered to be much more suited to than argumentation in any stricter sense.

Thomas Wartenberg (2003; 2007: 55–75; 2011: 18–21) has repeatedly considered the staging of thought experiments as a means for films to do philosophy. For example, he argues that the philosophical significance of *The Matrix* (Lana & Lilly Wachoski, 1999) lies in its screening of René Descartes' classic thought experiment of the 'evil demon' scenario (Wartenberg, 2007: 56). In the same way that Descartes' thought experiment invites us to imagine a malicious and all-powerful demon that deceives us into accepting a dream as reality, the film portrays a situation in which malicious machines hold humanity captive in an elaborate illusion called 'the Matrix'. Hence, the film just as much presents a scenario in which the deception hypothesis is true. Yet, for Wartenberg, the film goes beyond being a sheer analogy of Descartes' thought experiment: the film is structured so that viewers participate in the main protagonist's false reality and the ensuing removal thereof; and thereby viewers are led to question beliefs about their own reality (Wartenberg, 2007: 73–74). So by showing a situation in which skepticism about external reality is justified, and supporting that possible situation through a digital, visual, and narrative 'deception' of the viewer, *The Matrix* is not simply illustrating philosophy but in fact doing philosophy, concludes Wartenberg. He furthermore sees the staging of counter-examples as part of the thought experimental mode of films doing philosophy (2011: 19; 2007: 76–93). In this case, especially, the individuality of film-narratives does not deny them the ability to directly address the characteristically universal claims of philosophy. It is precisely the unique particularities of Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), for example, that enable it to act as a successful counter-example to the long held claim that acting immorally will make one unhappy (Wartenberg, 2011a: 19). In such instances, Wartenberg maintains, one can once again conclude that film is doing philosophy.

With these claims we however remain bound to the realm of narrative, addressing only how films become thought experiments through the narrative scenarios that they present. Yet theorists also apply this line of reasoning – that is, the thought experiment as condition for film to do philosophy – to experimental non-narrative films. Noël Carroll (2006) claims that Ernie Gehr's structural film, *Serene Velocity* (1970), is an example of philosophizing through the moving image; and that it achieves this feat by functioning as a philosophical thought experiment. For Carroll (2006:180) the thought experiment is "patently a form of argumentation" that "can also be designed to reach positive conclusions". But Carroll makes it clear that the thought experiment necessarily involves the reflective resources of the viewer/listener and that the resultant "argument, so to speak, transpires in the movement of thought in the reader's mind and not necessarily on the page

[or in the film]” (ibid.: 180).<sup>53</sup> In the case of *Serene Velocity*, the film’s rhythmic juxtaposition of moments of stillness and moments of movement draws the viewer into reflecting on the difference between photography and cinematography, while at the same time vividly foregrounding the possibility of movement in film (ibid.: 178). Hence the film acts as “a piece of conceptual of analysis” showing us that movement is an essential attribute of any instance that we may call film (ibid.: 179, 183). Wartenberg himself similarly turns towards structural avant-garde filmmaking as a distinct cinematic source of philosophical insight (2007: 117–132; 2011a: 21).<sup>54</sup> Wartenberg (2011a: 21) opts to distinguish films that perform ‘real cinematic experiments’ as a separate mode of film doing philosophy, from films that act as thought experiments<sup>55</sup> – unlike Carroll (2006: 189–181), who sees experimental films and thought experiments as both illuminating the same conceptual structures. However, the way Wartenberg appraises the philosophical potential of minimalistic structural films ultimately does not differ much from that of Carroll. For Wartenberg too these films have an inherent ability to confirm theses about the nature of film, since their structures are typically based on whatever can be taken as minimum criteria for a work to be considered a film (Wartenberg, 2011a: 21). Although, in terms of the place of stillness within film as moving image, his major example does stand in interesting counterpoint to Carroll’s mentioned case study: Wartenberg claims that Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1965) – consisting of a single seven hour long static shot of the Empire State Building – is a cinematic experiment that establishes the view that films, as so-called ‘moving images’, do not necessarily have to depict movement to be regarded as a film. If anything, *Empire* rather offers a novel depiction of stasis that is only possible on the basis of the medium’s (intentionally absent) capacity to depict movement (ibid.).<sup>56</sup>

53 Carroll (2006: 181) downplays the importance of an explanatory context for a thought experiment: “It is the thought experiment that does the philosophical work, that moves the mind of the prepared listener, and not the accompanying exegesis. Indeed, most often, the prepared listener may have no need for the exegesis”. He furthermore adds that the critics should not confuse the accompanying explanation for the actual argument: “It is the thought experiment that constitutes the argument, not the prosaic explanation of the thought experiment” (ibid.: 181).

54 See Choi (2006) and Ponech (2006) for related discussions of philosophical aspects of structural films.

55 Wartenberg (2011a: 21–22) points out that, from a philosophical perspective, the distinctive feature of the films concerned are that they are ‘genuine experiments’. One reason for this view is that, as real experiments, these films can fail: “They are experiments because they are attempts to construct films that lack many of the features of traditional films and, as such, they can fail by simply subtracting too much and therefore not counting as films” (ibid.: 21–22).

56 Both Carroll and Wartenberg’s contributions to the theme of experimental film as ‘philosophical experiment’ are however predated by the influential work of Annette Michelson (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2009: 160). For Michelson, a theorist of the avant-garde, the experimental film-work of filmmakers such as Paul Sharits, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs and Michael Snow is a novel continuation of issues raised by the historical avant-gardes such as Eisenstein, Vertov and Epstein. Michelson characterizes these filmmakers as believing in cinema as a force of knowledge, as described by Elsaesser & Hagener: “Their approach to film-making is philosophical, in that they are convinced that cinema can generate new knowledge about the world, a unique type of knowledge not to be acquired or transmitted in any other way” (ibid.).

### 4.3 Philosophical Thinking

A third prominently argued-for condition for films to engage with/in philosophy is that films can somehow stage or enact philosophical thought. Considering the work of classical theorists like Sergei Eisenstein (cinematic montage and 'shock to thought'), Hugo Münsterberg (cinema as mirroring mental processes) and Jean Epstein (cinema as 'intelligence machine'), among many others, one may be warranted to claim that there has always been something like a 'film-as-thought' tradition in film theory (cf. Botz-Bornstein, 2011).<sup>57</sup> More generally, this tradition may be said to theorize cinema as an extension, analogy or substitute of the human mind (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2009: 151–157). But in the context with which I am concerned here, the claim is rather that film can specifically assume a form of *philosophical* thinking; and that this serves as the condition for film's ability to do philosophy.

#### 'Thinking in Just the Way Philosophers Do'

As discussed before, Stephen Mulhall (2008) makes this claim in a bravely unambiguous fashion – stating that the films he deals with exhibit 'reflective engagement' to the extent that they can be said to 'philosophize' (see Section 3.3). As 'philosophy in action', these films are considered to 'think seriously and systematically', 'address questions', 'deploy and develop issues', 'critically evaluate theories', 'reflect on their own conditions' and even 'give account of themselves' (Mulhall, 2008:3–5, 7–9; cf. Livingston, 2008:592). Simon Critchley's philosophical commentary on *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998) displays similar assumptions about how film can engage in its own philosophical reflection. Critchley warns, much like Mulhall does, that reading the film through the philosophical meta-language of an established theory is to be concerned with ideas about the film, rather than with the film itself, and thereby to "miss what is specific to the medium of film" (2005: 139). For him, the film-art of director Terrence Malick demands that we let the film *itself* do the philosophizing; "that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories... and more a form of philosophizing, of reflection, reasoning and argument" (ibid.: 139).<sup>58</sup>

It is never absolutely clear in these cases whether a film's 'philosophical thinking' is meant to be taken in some figurative sense. Yet Mulhall, especially, gives us no reason to believe that this is a mere flurry of metaphorical rhetoric. A particularly telling claim is that the films concerned exercise their reflective abilities "in just

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57 In his synopsis of Continental Philosophy of film, Botz-Bornstein (2011) sees in 'Cinema as thought' theorists, as he calls it, a continuity between earlier theories of Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Mitry and Jean Epstein and more the contemporary 'cinematic thinking' theorized by Gilles Deleuze and, later, the likes of Daniel Frampton (see Section 4.5).

58 Malick's cinematic oeuvre is frequently labelled as having a 'contemplative' quality (Cavell, 1979: xiv–xvii; Frampton, 2006a: 74, 97, 193; Sinnerbrink, 2011d: 180, 190). Steve Rybin (2012) even devotes an entire study to his work as a paradigmatic instance of 'the thought of film'. More on this in Chapter 4.

the way philosophers do” (2008: 4). Hence, one can assume that this is a matter of film engaging *in* philosophy (and not ‘with philosophy’ – see Section 3.4) and that Mulhall is speaking of ‘philosophizing’ in a more or less conventional and *literal* sense. It is presumably for this reason that Mulhall takes these films “as making real contributions” to philosophical debates (ibid.). While there may be uncertainty about questions of literalness, there is little doubt over the strong, inherent agency that this approach attributes to ‘philosophizing’ films. One may even be justified in calling this a subjective agency insofar as Mulhall seems to intentionally personify films by, for example, considering them to be ‘preoccupied’, ‘obsessed’, ‘self-aware’ and even ‘making demands’ (ibid.: 3,4,9).<sup>59</sup> One should, of course, ask on account of what exactly films can have such a (reflective, philosophizing) agency, since it is not obvious that something other than human agents can be capable of philosophical activity (Wartenberg, 2006: 23n20). On this point Mulhall’s descriptions disappoint, as the supposed philosophical agency of film remains much more of a guiding assumption than a substantiated claim.

Another way of putting this problem is that the exact (ontological) locus of the film’s ‘philosophical thinking’, ‘-reflection’ or ‘-reasoning’ – and by implication the source or grounds of the film’s supposed agency – in accounts such as Mulhall’s is not readily apparent. How is film’s philosophical thinking constituted? It seems that there are three options (or some mixture thereof) at stake here: firstly, that the ‘philosophical thinking’ is somehow inherent to the medium of film and the cinematic-narrative process that it enacts; secondly, that the ‘philosophical thinking’ of a film is ultimately an expression of the filmmaker’s thinking; or, thirdly, that a film’s ‘philosophical thinking’ rather refers to thinking evoked in the viewer. Mulhall certainly comes across as wanting to convince us of the first option – that the thinking is predominantly inherent to the film. Yet indications of the second and third options repeatedly slip into his film analyses. In spite of his claim that films ‘philosophize’, for example, he exhibits an auteurist tendency to make the filmmaker’s intention<sup>60</sup> of decisive importance in explaining the philosophical perspective of a film.<sup>61</sup> At other times, Mulhall also undermines the alleged independent thinking of film by drawing the viewer’s reflective work into the equation. He would speak of films as inviting, ultimately, certain interpretations or thematic considerations *from us* (see 2008: 9, 30, 106, 254). In such instances, Mulhall seems to suggest that the philosophical thinking of

59 This reminds of how W.J.T. Mitchell (2006) approaches the power of images in (more or less literal) terms of their having ‘desires’, ‘drives’, ‘needs’ and ‘demands’ of their own.

60 With this, Mulhall goes against both his most central claim (that the films themselves philosophize) and a widespread sentiment still well expressed by Wimsatt and Beardsley’s ‘intentional fallacy’ – namely, that “the *design or intention of the author* is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (1946: 468 [emphasis added]).

61 Mulhall, for instance, speaks of director James Cameron’s “awareness of the fact that the film he is directing is investigating [...] a fundamental condition of possibility of films about the future” (cited in Livingston, 2008: 592). Mulhall therefore appears to suggest that the filmmaker consciously pursued a particular philosophical position. Also related to this is Mulhall’s propensity to draw comparisons between philosophically relevant themes in different works of the same film director (Livingston, 2008: 592).



film is basically that which takes effect in the viewer.<sup>62</sup> It thus remains unclear whether film only initiates philosophical thinking in its audience or whether film itself does the thinking (for us); alternatively, it could be that these two things are purposely assumed to overlap.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, there are instances where Mulhall also combines the two options above, notably so when he suggests that filmmakers intentionally address the reflectively receptive viewer in a philosophical way.<sup>64</sup> This leaves me wondering what role, if any, the supposed 'thinking' of the film itself plays in these instances. Therefore, I must admit, the nature of the 'philosophical thinking' enacted by film – while intriguing as a claimed condition for film to do philosophy – remains elusive and difficult to pin down in the oft-cited Mulhall who supposedly endorses the notion.

### Thinking Philosophical Problems

To broadly qualify the 'philosophical thinking' performed by films as 'explorative', 'evaluative', 'systematic' or 'self-reflexive' still does not spell out what film's philosophizing essentially involves, nor how it contributes to philosophy. Yet the field does offer some indications of what the 'substance' of a film's philosophical activity may more specifically involve. One notable specification of the nature of film's 'philosophical thinking' sees it as a matter of film engaging with/in some philosophical problem. This offers a way of clarifying what is at stake when someone like Mulhall claims that films 'reflect philosophically': it means that such films respond to a philosophical problem in a distinctly cinematic way. They therefore go beyond the illustration of philosophical problems by more concretely embodying, even addressing, such problems. Mulhall (2008: 3–5) indeed attests to this understanding by saying, for example, that the *Alien* films have a recurrent concern with question of the relation between human identity and embodiment.<sup>65</sup>

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62 In a review of Mulhall's book, Andersen (2003) plainly assumes that this is what Mulhall means: film's 'thinking' is synonymous with the thinking engendered in the viewer. He notes that the films, identified and analyzed by Mulhall, "call upon the viewer to ask questions about basic issues, to search for evidence, and to reflect not only on the world presented within the film but on its significance for making sense of the reality they face in the everyday world" (ibid.).

63 Compare Flory's (2009: 14–15) brief assessment of Mulhall (and Stanley Cavell, discussed below) in which he suggests an uncomfortable distinction between what one may call 'film provoking us to think' versus 'films doing some of this thinking for us'. Flory opts for a deliberate conflation of these two matters in speaking of the idea "that some films may encourage or even embody philosophical reflection" (2009: 14).

64 Mulhall, for example, speaks of director Ridley Scott as the one who brings viewers "to apply" a range of "psychological concepts" (2008: 30); and of David Fincher as the one who "asks the viewer to acknowledge" the perversity of certain desires and to question their own satisfactions (2008: 106).

65 For Mulhall the films' concern with this philosophical "question of individual integrity and its relation to the body, sexual difference and nature" (2008: 3) furthermore draws them into broader reflections on the nature of the cinematic medium: "in their reflections on human embodiment, they find themselves reflecting upon what makes it possible for them to engage in such reflections, upon the conditions for the possibility of film" (ibid.: 5). The *Alien* movies should therefore be thought of as at once 'film as philosophizing', 'philosophy of film' and 'film in the (self-reflexive) condition of philosophy' (ibid.: 7). Also see Section 3.3.

Here Mulhall's indebtedness to Stanley Cavell is perhaps at its clearest<sup>66</sup>, as Cavell's early work especially is arguably the paradigmatic example of approaching the 'thinking' of films in terms of how they contend with philosophical problems.<sup>67</sup> For Cavell, film (in particular, its photographic basis<sup>68</sup>) is deeply interwoven with the modern condition of skepticism: the philosophical question of whether our finite knowledge and experience withhold us from certainty about the nature of the ('outside') world and other minds.<sup>69</sup> Cavell famously locates film's philosophical value in it being "a moving image of skepticism" (1979: 188; 2005: 118). Yet in Cavell's account the cinematic engagement with a philosophical problem runs much deeper than the mere portrayal thereof – even in the case of films, like *The Matrix*, that arguably enact skeptical thought experiments of their own (see Section 4.2 above). For him film's engagement in and with skepticism is rather inherently tied to properties of the medium itself, its means of screening reality, and hence the very conditions of cinematic presentation and perception (Schmerheim, 2013a: 413; Rodowick, n.d.: 2–3). The function of the screen of cinema occupies a central place in this line of reasoning.<sup>70</sup> Cavell (1979: 24) draws on different senses of the term ('screen', not only as noun, but also as verb – as in 'to screen out') in describing the screen of cinema as a barrier between the projected film world and the world of the viewer (Schmerheim, 2013a: 414). The screen makes the audience invisible by *screening* viewers from the world of

66 Apart from the fact that Cavell is one of the few philosophers of film whose views Mulhall invokes, there is also a strong perception in the field that Mulhall represents a Cavellian approach. See, for example, Smith and Wartenberg (2006: 2).

67 Robert Sinnerbrink finds that Gilles Deleuze, like Stanley Cavell, also approaches the film-philosophy relationship in terms of their shared engagement with a philosophical problem. Whereas Cavell approaches film as an expression and possible overcoming of the problem of skepticism, Deleuze conceptualizes film in terms of the problem of nihilism and how it addresses our 'loss of belief in this world' (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 102, 113). Since, for Sinnerbrink (2011a: 115), the questions of skepticism and nihilism are closely related, he concludes that both Cavell and Deleuze "see cinema as offering creative responses to this shared problem". See also Mullarkey's (2009b: 78–80) account of shared problems between cinema and philosophy in Deleuze's work.

68 At the outset of the essay, *What Photography Calls Thinking*, Cavell (2005: 115) makes it clear that that he approaches photography through motion – that is, his views on photography more specifically pertains to the photographic basis of cinema.

69 Whereas the traditional doctrine of epistemological skepticism raises the possibility that we cannot know the world (beyond our own experience) as it truly is, Cavell emphasizes especially the ontological separation, even isolation, of the self which ensues from skepticism as a deep-seated condition of modernity. Skepticism, for Cavell, speaks of "some new, or new realization of, human distance from the world, or some withdrawal of the world, which philosophy interprets as a limitation in our capacity for knowing the world" (Cavell, 2005a: 116). The watershed 'realization', in the overall history of philosophy, was more or less heralded by René Descartes, as modern philosophy ever since has been synonymous with wanting to counteract the fall into skepticism. Wartenberg (2011b) however criticizes Cavell's insistence on the ongoing contemporary relevance of skepticism as being based on a 'highly idiosyncratic' approach to the history of modern philosophy.

70 This emphasis of the screen places Cavell within a well-developed tradition of screen studies and theorization, especially in the wake of the various screen technologies set off by the digital revolution. For an overview study on the (rapidly evolving) role of the screen both within film studies and society more broadly, see Dominique Chateau and José Moure's splendid edited volume, *Screens* (2016).

the film; and at the same time it *screens* the existence of the film world from the viewer (Cavell, 1979: 24). The screened reality of film and the audience thus exist in mutual absence to one another. In this way cinema's screening of the world expresses the modern skeptical attitude of a self, unhinged from our 'presentness' to the world, in which only the interposing 'screen' of subjectivity is present to this isolated self (Cavell, 1979: 22).<sup>71</sup> The very conditions of cinema as photographic medium thus instantiates our ontological distance and detachment from reality, "the modern fate to relate to the world by viewing it, taking views of it, as from behind the self" (Cavell, 1985: 116–117). By conveying the understanding that our only connection with the world is through our perceptions of it, film embodies the problem of skepticism (Rodowick, n.d.: 2). It is a 'moving image of skepticism' "because I see what is not before me, because our senses are satisfied with reality, while that reality does not exist (Cavell, 2005: 118)"<sup>72</sup>

Yet, film does *more* in this situation, as photographs still relate something of the real world to the film viewer. Here the extensive influence of André Bazin on Cavell's thought is significant.<sup>73</sup> Like Bazin, Cavell (1979: 16) stresses the photographic basis of film.<sup>74</sup> A photograph is essentially a photograph of reality. While a painting presents us with the 'likeness' of things, a photograph "presents us, we want to say, with the thing itself" (Cavell, 1979: 17). This intuitive ontological connection between a photograph and what is photographed is, Cavell tells us, something of a mystery that we struggle to adequately capture in language (ibid.: 17–20). Yet this does not withhold him from claiming that "a photograph emphasizes the existence of its subject, recording it" in a way that "it may be called a transcription" (2005: 118). So despite creating our skeptical state of ontological disconnection – the audience's absence to the film world and its simultaneous absence from us – the screening of the world at the same time makes its reality present to the viewer. Photographical 'transcriptions' of reality maintain the 'presentness' of the world (1979: 23). Cavell's view of the cinema is therefore more than an analogy or exemplification of skepticism: in addition to expressing the problem, film also addresses it, and in so doing shows us its possible overcoming. As Rodowick (n.d. 3) notes, "the almost perfect realization of skeptical perception is a way, paradoxically, of reconnecting us to the world and asserting its causal presence". This response to the problem of skepticism is realized through the conditions

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71 Since 'genre', for Cavell, is an extension of the *medium* of cinema he later also explores how skepticism comes into expression through specific genres of film – one example being what Cavell (1981) labels as the 'comedy of remarriage'.

72 It is worth pointing out that Cavell's ontological account of film is perhaps "less concerned with characterizing a medium than with understanding how our current ways of being in the world and relating to it are 'cinematic'" (Rodowick, n.d.: 2).

73 Smith & Wartenberg (2006: 2) notes Bazin's deep-seated influence on Cavell's work, while recognizing that Cavell's own approach has made the philosophical potential of film more prominent than it was for Bazin. Also see Eldridge (2014b) on the influence of Bazin on Cavell.

74 In fact, as Eldridge (2014b: 4) observes, Cavell's philosophy of film as such is concerned principally with photographically based movies. See Schmerheim (2013a) for some questions that this raises about the applicability of Cavell's views to digital cinema and animation.

of cinema as medium. The images of cinema are after all not hand-made, but achieved through the ‘automatism’ of photography. This entails that the automatic manufacturing of images of the world is achieved “by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction” (1979: 23).<sup>75</sup> Photography therefore promises an overcoming of skepticism’s subjective isolation by mechanically reproducing and presenting the world independently of human subjectivity.<sup>76</sup> Yet what we ultimately want from such a sense of the world’s ‘presentness’ is “not exactly a conviction of the world’s presence to us, but of our presence to it” (1979: 22). And here Cavell admits that the photographic medium falls short as a ‘solution’ to skepticism: it only “maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it” (ibid.). Photography’s overcoming of subjectivity is thus compromised insofar as it makes reality present to me while I am not present to it (ibid.: 23). For this reason, cinema can only offer us the direction to an answer, the hope for satisfying the human wish “to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation – a wish for the power to reach this world” (ibid.: 21)

Cavell offers a dramatic picture of how film can engage with philosophy on the basis of addressing a philosophical problem – in this case that of skepticism. Yet where does the ‘thinking’ of film fit into this picture? Commentators of Cavell tend to be quick to use the notion without telling us what exactly constitutes the moment of film’s ‘philosophical thinking’ (e.g. Eldridge, 2014b).<sup>77</sup> Cavell himself does not give a straight answer to this question. In speaking of the question of what a photograph is, Cavell (2005: 117) remarks that he is “likely to characterize this question as asking what a photograph is thinking about” or “what the text knows of itself”. And this thinking not only takes the form of “self-reference”

75 Eldridge (2014b) warns, in light of this claim, that one should not be tempted to conclude that Cavell (or Bazin) adheres to an uncomplicated naïve realism. Quoting Rothman and Keane (2000), he notes that an inescapable element of automatism in the making of photographs gives no basis to conclude that there is nothing but automatism in their making (2014b: 7). The aesthetic possibilities of the photographic medium still needs to be realized through creative agency (ibid.: 9).

76 One may read Cavell as saying that photography offers to our solipsistic subjective entrapment a connection with the world without the mediation of subjectivity; or, as Turvey (2008: 88) puts it, that it makes reality “present [...] in a manner that is free of human subjectivity”. Yet even if a photograph originates in the absence of subjectivity (and, in so doing, establishes an unmediated connection with the world) the act of beholding the photograph (which, by implication, connects us with the reality of which it is a transcription) cannot escape subjective constitution. It is perhaps for precisely this reason that Cavell is ambiguous on whether subjectivity can and indeed should be ‘escaped’. He not only speaks of acknowledging the “endless presence of the self” but also suggests (with reference to expressionism and romanticism in art) that subjectivity itself may be “the route back to our conviction in reality” (1979: 22). Cavell therefore seems to say that – while photography does achieve a certain presentness of the world – our attempts at addressing and escaping our isolated subjectivity will still unavoidably involve the exercising of that selfsame subjectivity. In art, for instance, we can start contending with the subjective isolation arising from our skeptical condition by representing our (subjective) acknowledgement of this condition (ibid.). Sinnerbrink (2011a: 106) appears to reach a similar conclusion in claiming that, for Cavell, visual art responds to the metaphysical isolation of skepticism by precisely being an expression of selfhood.

77 Eldridge (2014b) – known for his work on Cavell – somewhat bafflingly uses the notion of the ‘thought of movies’ (in characterizing Cavell’s philosophy of film) only in the title and opening line of his essay without addressing it again.

and "self-acknowledgement", but also "sometimes of its knowledge of others, of me" (ibid.).<sup>78</sup> In the context of the problem of skepticism one may infer that the 'thinking' of film has to do with the self-knowledge of its own skeptical status and the awareness with which it deals with this problem. And films probably also 'think' insofar as they knowingly acknowledge their conditioning of the viewer's skeptical position. We can nonetheless safely conclude that, for Cavell, the reflective powers of film first and foremost arise from the nature of *the medium*: Cavell stresses, with reference to *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Frank Capra, 1936), that in dealing with the thoughtful reflexivity of what comes across as a "gullible, sentimental, unintellectual film", he is "not speaking of the man Capra but of the power and glory of a medium, of what it knows of itself" (2005: 118). And it is presumably through this 'knowingness' of the medium that films have the potential to "reorient everything philosophy has said" (Cavell, 1996: xii); not offering philosophy any satisfying answers but 'directions to answers' and distinct 'ways to think' (Cavell, 2005a: 92; cf. Flory, 2009: 14–15).

#### 4.4 Self-Reflection

A fourth claimed condition for films to do philosophy involves their ability to elicit and facilitate experiences of self-reflection. This approach requires that one's understanding of 'philosophy' also makes room for the necessary self-examination and self-consciousness that go hand in hand with its practice. Since its earliest days Western philosophy was framed by the Socratic admonishment to 'know thyself', which entails that philosophical methods and arguments should in the first place be applied to one's own thought and experience. The reasoning is thus that whenever films inspire, guide or mediate relevant forms of self-reflection, they can be said to perform this important aspect of philosophy. This claim is in fact part and parcel of earlier discussed assertions that films engage in argumentation or enact a 'thinking' of their own, as the dividing line between the film's work and the reflective work of the viewer remains at best a porous one.<sup>79</sup> A common claim in this context, for instance, is that 'reflective' films play the role of the interlocutor by leading its viewers in a process of self-reflective philosophical questioning – notably a questioning of the viewer's beliefs (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2014b: 171; Carroll, 2006: 180; Flory, 2009: 5).

The condition of self-reflection for films to do philosophy is however more openly foregrounded in phenomenological approaches to film, which I would like to briefly illustrate in the terms set by Vivian Sobchack's influential film phenomenology. Here the question, of course, is not so much one of 'film as philosophy' but rather

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78 Cavell adds that the text's 'knowledge about me' does not have to denote anything personal. As an example he says that "the photograph tells me that I am subject, inherently but impersonally, to some version of hallucination" (2005: 117). He also tellingly refers to the notion of 'what the text knows of me' as an intuition.

79 Carroll's 'maieutic' characterization of filmic argumentation is a case in point. His position is that films can guide the reflective viewer to reaching particular philosophical insights and that, in so doing, the film's argument takes its form in the mind of the viewer. See Section 4.2.

‘film as phenomenology’ and how film may be said to partake in the practice of phenomenology as one particular philosophical tradition (cf. Sobchack, 2011: 191–192). Sobchack no doubt considers film to harbor self-sufficient phenomenological capacities. She invokes Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of film as an essentially ‘phenomenological art’, and offers an outline of what she considers to be historical predecessors of the idea of ‘film as phenomenology’ (Sobchack, 2009: 439–442). By using the conjunction of ‘phenomenology of film / film as phenomenology’ Sobchack furthermore makes it clear that any phenomenological account of film should be inherently harmonized with a recognition of the phenomenological performativity of film itself, that “the cinema enacts what is also being enacted by its viewer” (Sobchack, 2011: 192). The application of the phenomenological method to film and film’s own reciprocal ‘application’ of phenomenology are therefore two sides of the same coin – the one illuminates and ‘fleshes out’ the other (ibid.: 191–192).<sup>80</sup>

Sobchack however reserves for film a special stake in phenomenological inquiry insofar as it has unique ‘meta-phenomenological’ qualities: film stages an experience of our experience, and thereby serves as a telling phenomenology of our own phenomenology.<sup>81</sup> While phenomenology generally calls for the need to attend to phenomena as they are given to conscious experience, Sobchack emphasizes the distinctive *self-reflective* experience that necessarily accompanies our experience of cinema (Sorfa, 2013: 355). She analyses, for example, how the supposed ‘minimalism’ of Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993) – consisting of a single shot of the screen filled with the color blue, accompanied by a moving audio narrations of Jarman’s life – subjectively constitutes for its viewers “a meaningful experience of extreme self-reflection on the dynamics, habits, creativity, and plenitude of their own embodied perception” (2011: 204; cf. 2009: 437). Film – comprising a ‘double movement’ of both recording experience *and* offering itself as an experience (Sorfa, 2013: 353) – thus achieves what Sobchack (1992: 5) calls “experience expressing experience” as the means to the viewer’s phenomenological self-reflection.

How exactly does film realize this meta-level ‘leverage’ over our experience? For Sobchack film achieves this effect through an inter-subjective exchange between film and viewer, as she explicitly argues film to have its own perceptual, reflective and even experiential agency. Hence this account makes it patently clear that film acts as an active, autonomous subject in relation to the equally active film-spectator: the film experience entails “a film and its spectator as two active and differently situated viewers viewing in intersubjective, dialectical, and dialogic conjunction (2009: 443). Film is, just as much as its viewer, a perceptive and expressive actor and even an outright ‘subject’ (2009: 443; 2011: 192–193). Film is furthermore

80 Sobchack’s (2009: 439–444) conjunction of ‘phenomenology of film’ and ‘film as phenomenology’ parallels the distinction ‘philosophy of film’ versus ‘film-philosophy’ discussed earlier in this chapter. Her interrelating of film and phenomenology therefore reflects a broader bi-directionality of engagement that can be posited between film and philosophy (see Sections 1 and 2).

81 Although I find Frampton’s (2006a: 91) label for Sobchack’s approach to film useful, I should point out that Sobchack, as far as I am aware, does not use the term ‘meta-phenomenology’.

both subject *and* object at once, "an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood (1992:3–4). And through editing, film even demonstrates acts of reflection and meaning-making (2009: 437).

How, one may ask, can this kind of subjective agency inhere within film? Sobchack, first of all, eschews transcendental, incorporeal notions of phenomenology (Edmund Husserl) in favor of an existential phenomenology (particularly that of Merleau-Ponty) that emphasizes the contextual situatedness of consciousness (2009: 438, 443).<sup>82</sup> This line of thought is consequently extended to her understanding of the film-as-subject: the subjective agency of film – its capacity to express perception and reflection – is enabled by the "common structures of embodied existence" that precede and constitute film experience (1992: 5). The filmmaker, the film and the spectators *share* a capacity for and possession of experience, through the structures of embodied existence that they have in common. And their similar (perceptual, embodied, material, existential) modes of 'being-in-the-world' form the inter-subjective basis of cinematic communication (ibid.). Sobchack thus posits a deep-seated continuity (entailing also interaction and transition) between film and spectator inasmuch as they are equally constituted by a corporeal-material existence (Elsaesser & Hagenner, 2010: 119; Sobchack, 2011: 204).<sup>83</sup>

This gives a different inflection to the characterization of cinema as 'experience expressing experience', or what Sobchack alternatively terms as "the expression of experience by experience" (1992: 3): the particular perceptive and expressive capacities of cinema as technology "not only refer to embodied experience but also use embodied experience (of material enworldedness, orientation, movement, seeing, hearing, and reflection) as the medium of such reference" (2011: 192). Cinema thus *uses* experience (modes of embodied existence) to express experience. Cinema shows us (through the technological mediation of camera, projector and screen) acts of seeing, hearing and moving as both the original structures of existential being and also as the enabling, mediating substance of cinema's own 'language' (1992: 3–4, 11; 2008: 443). Film experience therefore involves a distinctive doubling of our structures of experience. The film viewer sees the film's visible images, for instance, both as *a world* and as the *seeing of a world*, since film not only represents but also performs the existential structure of sight (1992: 56).<sup>84</sup> The viewer's experience of a film is thus met by the film's own expression of the structures of experience that we share with it.

82 Yet irrespective of particular orientations and applications, Sobchack believes that there are "certain invariant philosophical premises that ground all phenomenological inquiry and the practice of its descriptive method" (2008: 435).

83 Sobchack nevertheless warns that this continuity, this shared 'double occupancy of cinematic space', should not entail a conflation of the film and the viewer. Film's own concretely bodied experience still stands against the viewer. The viewer perceives a film as "the space consciously and bodily inhabited and lived by an 'other' whose experience of being-in-the-world, however anonymous, is not precisely congruent with the viewer's own" (1992: 10).

84 This in fact points to three levels of interlacement, in Sobchack's account, between film experience and the

If we therefore ask what the conditions are for film to engage with/in phenomenology, Sobchack is really presenting us with two claims: the first condition relates to how film can have its own phenomenology (and thus engages *in* phenomenology); and the second relates to how film (as its own phenomenology) can in turn engage *with* and contribute to philosophical phenomenology. The first claim is that film's sharing in our experience – and more specifically our structures of embodied experience – is the enabling condition for film to enact its own phenomenology (or to enact what is also being enacted by its viewer, as Sobchack would typically put it). For this reason the meeting between a film and its viewer entails a dynamic, dialogic and dialectic engagement between “two perceptive and expressive subjects” (2011: 192–193). The second claim is that by staging for us an experience of (its) experience film can uniquely prompt processes of self-reflection on our own material, embodied experience (that we have in common with film). This marks film's unique contribution to philosophical phenomenology. A reflective posturing towards the self – in the experience of our experience, and the consciousness of our consciousness – is the most fundamental condition, the ‘ground zero’, of the practice of phenomenology.<sup>85</sup> For Sobchack, the ‘meta-phenomenological’ capacities of film can lead viewers to that experiential space in a special way.

## 4.5 Cinematic Thinking

A fifth and final prominent claim, relating to possible conditions of the film-philosophy engagement, is that film adopts a dynamic relation to philosophy by way of its own distinctive ‘cinematic thinking’. The designation ‘cinematic thinking’ (often entailing also broader notions of aesthetic experience or ‘thinking’<sup>86</sup>) admittedly encapsulates a variety of related approaches. Yet it is not unreasonable to conclude that this line of theorization, in its contemporary form, has a basic indebtedness to the influential film writing of Gilles Deleuze (1986; 1989), which has in many ways been a leading frame of reference – or, at the very least, a significant point of departure – for approaches claiming the philosophical value of ‘cinematic thinking’ (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 90–102, 137; Flaxman, 2000: 35–47; Huygens, 2007; Colman, 2011: 179–190).

Let me single out two general themes in Deleuze's thinking that I see as especially influential in the cinematic thinking approach to film-philosophy: the implications

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so-called ‘original structures of existential being’: film not only (a) represents direct perceptual-, embodied experience (b) by means of the modes and structures of this experience, but also (c) presents the direct experience of an embodied existence *as* the film (Sobchack, 1992: 9).

85 See for example Gallagher & Zahavi's (2010) discussion of different distinctions and phenomenological approaches to self-consciousness. Among other things, they distinguish an implicit ‘pre-reflective self-consciousness’ from a ‘reflective self-consciousness’ which takes the former as its attentional theme.

86 Daniel Frampton (2006a: 2), for example, in proposing his own version of cinematic thinking (see below), remarks that aesthetic experience as a form of knowledge should be considered as legitimate as theoretical thought. Sinnerbrink, likewise, accords a central place to aesthetic disclosure in his understanding of cinematic thinking as a novel form of thought (e.g. 2011c: 42–43).



of his immanentist outlook in conjunction with his understanding of philosophy as the creation of concepts. Deleuze's immanentist, anti-representationalist philosophy, to begin with, strictly rejects the notion of the transcendental subject and the division between subject and object (or between consciousness and its contents) that it entails. For Deleuze, as Elsaesser & Hagener (2009: 158) helpfully sums up, "cinema is material and immaterial, a form of becoming rather than a mode of signification or meaning, and he posits for it an immanence of being in which matter, motion and consciousness are inseparably intertwined". Images therefore function on a material-vitalist 'plane of immanence' that envelops subjectivity so radically that notions of its transcendence, interiority, separateness and even existence are rendered impossible. Deleuze effectively levels consciousness and cinema on the *same level* of existence (which he fleshes out in terms of matter, movement, force, energy, biology and neuro-physiology), allowing for sweeping unifications such as the well-known pronouncement that "the brain is the screen" (Deleuze, 2000: 366). This perspective has given impetus to characterizations of 'cinematic thinking' as not only being expressive of categories of immanence but, importantly, as being essentially distinct from other conventional senses of (our own) 'thinking'. Any claim that film 'thinks', in this context, should therefore *not* be taken as expressive of some subjective agency – as, for example, appears to be at play in the claim that films 'think philosophically' (Mulhall, Cavell). Cinematic thinking, on this account, rather emerges as a provocative Other to philosophical thinking: it is not conceptual but perceptual, affective and imagistic; and accordingly resists paraphrase into conventional philosophical terms. Cinematic thinking is its own, wholly independent, mode of reflection. Yet, as Falzon (2013) rightly points out, such a radical rendering of 'film as (its own) philosophy' does run the risk of making cinematic 'thinking' too different from philosophy for it to do anything recognizably philosophical. If so, film (conceived as an autonomous mode of 'cinematic reflection') would at best only offer a way of escaping or transcending – and not engaging with – philosophical thought.

The second influential Deleuzian theme is that philosophy as a practice – as a power or force, even, within Deleuze's process ontology of becoming – involves the creation and invention of concepts (e.g. Deleuze, 2005). Deleuze (2005: 34) tells us that philosophy *must* make concepts, as matter of necessity – and does most notably so when philosophy is provoked by the precepts and affects of cinema. For this reason, "A theory of cinema is not 'about' cinema, but about the concepts that cinema gives rise to" (1989: 280). Yet cinema works through sensation, it does not invent and create concepts, but 'blocks of movements/duration' (2005: 34). How is it, then, that Deleuze can manage to move, as he puts it, 'straight from' philosophy's terrain of concepts to cinema's terrain of sensations, percepts and affects? This two-way movement is the result of them sharing in similar problems, the 'same tremors', occurring in the different circumstances of 'totally different terrains' (2000: 367).<sup>87</sup> And the ways in which cinema seeks to

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<sup>87</sup> This puts Deleuze in the company Stanley Cavell inasmuch as he claims that films can relate to philosophy via their shared concern with certain philosophical problems. See Section 4.3.2 and Footnote 66 in particular.

resolve these problems, for itself, and by its own means, compel philosophy to look for its answers in the cinema (Deleuze, 2000: 367; Mullarkey, 2009b: 78).<sup>88</sup> This must not be taken as a reduction of the two terrains: philosophy and cinema still retain their ‘specialization of roles’; they function beside one another, in constant relay from one to the other; they are intertwined, but not in synthesis (Mullarkey, 2009b: 79–80). Yet Deleuze (2005: 34) nevertheless makes it clear that the potential for these terrains to intercommunicate is by function of each one’s own ‘creative activity’. Although Deleuze may be reluctant to associate the ‘thought’ of art with concepts *per se*, at least his two books devoted to cinema suggest that cinema does possess a conceptual power (Mullarkey, 2009b: 80).<sup>89</sup> “Cinema not only puts movement in the image, it also puts movement in the mind” (Deleuze, 2000:366). As the cinematic image produces “a shock to thought”, says Deleuze, the “automatic movement” of cinema gives rise to a “spiritual automation” in us (1989: 156). Through these movements, then, as part of an entire immanent existence of movement and becoming, cinema instigates the creation of concepts. The film-philosophical ‘tradition’ inspired by Deleuze – exemplified by the two cases I examine below – has followed suit in stressing what is at the same time the disruptive power and creative potential of cinematic thinking. And these philosophers seem to place a special emphasis on how the power of cinema ensues from its perceived distinctness and discontinuity from conventional forms of thought (as discussed above). It is because cinematic thinking is inherently perceptual, affective and imagistic – and not conceptual – that it can resist, challenge and transform philosophy and elicit new forms of thinking.

Moving forward, I discuss two paradigmatic examples of how ‘cinematic thinking’ is argued to be a condition for film to engage with philosophy.<sup>90</sup> I take both Robert Sinnerbrink’s ‘romantic film-philosophy’ and Daniel Frampton’s ‘filosophy’ to proceed from basic Deleuzian tenets (though by no means exclusively so), as laid out above. Hence, in both cases, claims of the supposed distinctness as well as creative power of cinematic thinking (in relation to philosophy) will be made clear.

88 Another way of looking at this is that, by working through problems in precisely cinematic terms, cinematic thought in fact presents philosophy with new problems. This, once again, marks a clear departure from approaches concerned with how films engages in philosophical thinking (see Sections 4.3 to 4.3.2): “Where the emphasis in the Cavellian tradition lies on the ability of film to embody philosophical thought, albeit in distinctive ways, on recognized philosophical problems... for Deleuze, the philosophical interest of film lies in its purported capacity to generate new philosophical concepts and problems” (Smith & Wartenberg, 2006: 2).

89 Mullarkey (2009b: 80) points out that Deleuze does not essentially equate concepts with thought. Deleuze, for example, deems philosophy, science and arts to be three different forms of ‘thought’ and effectively claims that ‘thinking’ can be done through concepts (philosophy), functions (science) or sensations (art). None of these have any privileged claim to his notion of ‘thought’ – art can, for instance, be ‘thoughtful’ without using concepts. Yet, while one must distinguish between thought and concept in Deleuze’s writings, Mullarkey finds that Deleuze’s two Cinema books grant cinema a more explicit ‘conceptual power’.

90 There are certainly many other film philosophers who find great inspiration in Deleuze’s thought – among them, Patricia Pisters, Elena del Río, Ronald Bogue, Felicity Colman, Gregory Flaxman, David Martin-Jones, and Paola Marrati, to name but a few.

### Cinematic Thinking in ‘Romantic film-philosophy’

Sinnerbrink (Sinnerbrink, 2011c: 26, 36–38; cf. Sinnerbrink, 2011d) proposes a ‘romantic film-philosophy’ that he wishes to distinguish by its questioning of the assumption (and prevailing tendency) that cinematic aesthetics should be subject to conceptual theorization – what he calls the ‘philosophical disenfranchisement’ of film.<sup>91</sup> His romantic film-philosophy instead “responds to film as a way of thinking, one that might even be understood as distinctively cinematic” (Sinnerbrink, 2011c: 26). This is intended as a much required restoration of film’s standing in relation to philosophy: film, in its complexity and philosophical self-reflectiveness, confronts philosophy with a thinking of its own. Cinematic thinking has the distinct qualities of an ‘intuitive’, ‘affective’, ‘aesthetic’ kind of reflection that invites yet resists translation into (standard) philosophical theory (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 152). Sinnerbrink moreover identifies it as ‘non-conceptual’, a ‘thinking in images’ that resists cognitive closure or a subsumption under theory (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 139). In addition to the clear Deleuzian tones in these descriptions, Sinnerbrink also demonstrates the marked influence of Heideggerian philosophy on his account of cinematic thinking: he argues that films are able to aesthetically (cinematically) disclose novel aspects of experience, to question normative frameworks, challenge given, established ways of seeing, and open up new ways of thinking (2011a: 141–142).<sup>92</sup>

For Sinnerbrink (2011a: 9–10, 138–139), cinematic thinking is mostly associated with ‘more challenging kinds of film’ and singles out the work of directors David Lynch, Lars von Trier and Terrence Malick as cases in point. Films like *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006), *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) and *The New World* (Terrence Malick, 2005) can evoke new ways of thinking and feeling through novel strategies of questioning and experimentation. “Such films [...] have aesthetic and cinematic qualities that prompt an experience conducive to thought; films that provoke, incite, or force us to think, even if we remain uncertain as to what kind of thinking (or writing) might be adequate to such an experience” (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 141–142). The challenge of these films is that, while they typically provoke philosophical reflection, they simultaneously evade philosophical appropriation, since they actively resist reduction to philosophical theories or translation into general abstractions, claims and arguments.<sup>93</sup> And, in doing so, they confront existing normative frameworks and open up alternative possibilities of thought. Sinnerbrink’s analysis of *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001) usefully illustrates this: rather than exploring scenarios of global illusion that draw attention to a

91 Sinnerbrink’s views on this ‘philosophical disenfranchisement’ was briefly covered in Section 3.3.

92 Coupled with his own explicit explorations of the possibilities of a ‘Heideggerian cinema’ (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2006; Sinnerbrink, 2014c), Sinnerbrink also draws heavily on Nikolas Kompridis’s (2006a; 2006b) Heideggerian inspired work on ‘philosophical romanticism’ and ‘world disclosure’.

93 Sinnerbrink (2011a: 181) elaborates this view with reference to *The New World*: “the film enacts a kind of cinematic thinking that invites philosophical and aesthetic responses, while articulating a kind of thinking that resists translation into a ready-made thesis, position or argument. It demands a way of thinking that is not entirely reducible to the philosophical, or which subtly transforms the ways in which we assume a traditional philosophical or theoretical response to the film might be expressed”.

distinction between appearance and reality, the film can be seen as bringing into question the very distinction between the real and the illusory, in order to explore an indeterminate zone between fantasy and reality (Sinnerbrink, 2005). Such exemplary instances of cinematic thinking, as far as our philosophical reflection on the films go, demand “a different way of thinking (and writing) philosophically with film”, one that especially relies on “robust and detailed philosophical film criticism” (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 10). Following Deleuze, Sinnerbrink consequently speaks of the ideal to ‘philosophize *with* film’ – and not ‘on’ or ‘about’ film – in wanting to highlight how cinematic thinking should claim an equal stake to the interaction between film and philosophy (e.g. 2011a: 8, 10, 65). The ideal is to avoid reducing film and philosophy to one another as the apparent key to the nature of their meeting is their distinctness; it is precisely film *and* philosophy, a dialogue, founded on how each one of these can critically alter our understanding of the other.

Naturally Sinnerbrink gives considerable attention to what film, as the hitherto ‘neglected party’, can bring to philosophy. A first main point is that, for Sinnerbrink, film does not contribute to philosophy, or ‘do’ philosophy, by becoming philosophy. The distinctness of cinematic thinking from our (conventional) philosophical reflections affords film an engagement *with* philosophy – and, importantly, not an engagement *in* philosophy (see Section 3.4). A second point is that Sinnerbrink repeatedly characterizes cinema’s influence over philosophy in terms of ‘challenge’ and ‘resistance’. This view is explicitly framed in terms of the Deleuzian claim that cinema can enact a ‘shock to thought’: cinema provokes us to reflect on the experience enabled by the film, yet at the same time resists any reduction to the abstract, general terms of a philosophical thesis or framework (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 137). Films that excel at cinematic thinking incite, even force, a (reflective, aesthetic) ‘experience of thinking’ of a nature that ‘overwhelms’ attempts at philosophical translation or paraphrase (ibid.: 142). This leads to a third major point regarding film’s engagement with philosophy: Sinnerbrink’s primary interest is how philosophy may be transformed through its encounter with film. “If we can speak of the becoming-philosophical of film, then perhaps we can also speak about the ‘becoming-cinematic’ of philosophy” (2011c: 29).<sup>94</sup> The ‘thinking dialogue’ between film and philosophy is therefore “a transformative engagement that helps elaborate the philosophy immanent within particular films, while prompting philosophy to respond creatively to the kind of thinking that cinema allows us to experience” (ibid.: 36).<sup>95</sup>

94 Sinnerbrink cites Cavell and Deleuze as two philosophers who, in continuing in a tradition of ‘philosophical romanticism’, have been interested this potential (transformation) of philosophy: “Both thinkers argue for a view of philosophy as a practice capable of both inheriting the past and disclosing future possibilities of thought; both are committed to philosophy’s task of thinking, or even creating, the New” (2011c: 29).

95 According their understanding of ‘film-philosophy’ as more of an academic field than the phenomenon of film as philosophy, Carel & Tuck (2011: 2–3) expresses similar interests in a mutually transformative ‘meeting’ between film (studies) and philosophy. They wish to see the meeting of film and philosophy not so much in the binary terms of a (failed or successful) assimilation, but as the expansion and broadening of a field of thought that becomes mapped and nourished by both the traditions of film and philosophy. The potentially transforming nature of this conjunction requires our preparedness to not only consider what

So how does the provocation of philosophy to respond to cinematic thinking then *change* philosophy? This, it would seem, remains largely an open question that is to be worked out by the practice of a romantic film-philosophy, which is intended to foster the transformative potential of the encounter between film and philosophy. Sinnerbrink (2011c: 38) gives us three essential guidelines for how romantic film-philosophy can achieve this:

“The first is that it avoids assuming that there is a readymade conceptual framework or theoretical approach that should be applied to a film to reveal its meaning or, alternatively, which the film is supposed to illustrate. The second is a sustained receptiveness to what film aesthetically discloses; an engagement with the aesthetic elements of film, the reflection it inspires, and to the way film resists immediate translation into theoretical argument. This kind of responsiveness to film’s forms of aesthetic disclosure, its distinctive ways of thinking, might involve, for example, consideration not only of its narrative aspects but its audiovisual rhythms, hermeneutic ambiguities, and capacity to both enact and evoke affective forms of thought. Third, and taking the above into account, is an openness to transforming how one can think and write philosophically about film, exploring ways in which we can find words to articulate what film allows us to experience, and elaborating upon what it ‘thinks’ in its own distinctive manner. Romantic film-philosophy is animated by the possibility that, rather than having its truth revealed by it, film might transform philosophy into the possibility of thinking ‘the New’”.

Central to Sinnerbrink’s vision for film-philosophy is the need to take one’s lead from film(s) with a greater openness to its specific forms of aesthetic disclosure. Philosophizing ‘with’ film is essentially an act of recognizing, drawing out and elaborating the ‘thought immanent within film’ (2011a: 181; 2011c: 40, 43).<sup>96</sup> Such translations between ‘media of thought’ (that is, between film and philosophy) are at once potential transformations of the thought involved (2011a: 181). The ‘romantic’ film critic or -theorist therefore acts as a mediator, even medium, between the philosophical and the cinematic. And by seeking novel, creative ways of expressing distinctly cinematic forms of thinking in a suitable philosophical idiom, the encounter between film and philosophy can become one in which our philosophical thinking – even our ‘experience of the modern world’ – is renewed and reformed (2011a: 7; 2011c: 43).

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philosophy can bring to our understanding of film, but also to what film can bring to our understanding of philosophy.

96 The excerpt above in fact shows how Sinnerbrink (2011c: 36) equates a film’s “aesthetic disclosure” with “its distinctive ways of thinking”.

## Cinematic Thinking in ‘Filmosophy’

Daniel Frampton’s *Filmosophy* (2006a) is by his own admission intended as a ‘manifesto-like’ provocation and paints an accordingly provocative picture of ‘cinematic thinking.’<sup>97</sup> Filmosophy is a call for a ‘thoughtful poetics of cinema,’ a ‘style of understanding film,’ the primary aim of which is to (re-) describe the film form (and ‘film-being’) in terms of film’s own thinking (2008: 369, 373). For Frampton (2006a: 6), “seeing film as thoughtful, as the dramatic decision of the film, helps us understand the many ways film can mean and affect”.

To achieve this filmsophy proposes a conception of ‘film-world creation’ based on Frampton’s self-devised concepts of the ‘filmind’ and its ‘film-thinking’. The ‘filmind’ is a theoretical originator of the images and sound in a film; and ‘film-thinking’ involves taking all actions of film form as the dramatic and intentional thinking of the filmind (ibid.: 8). Filmosophy thus requires that you see films ‘through’ these concepts, to the effect that it is film itself that thinks (2008: 366). The filmind is responsible for the simultaneous creation and refiguration of the film-world (consisting of recognizable people and objects) (2006a: 76, 80). It does so through film-thinking, which is the way that the filmind thinks – and thereby shows us – the film-world.<sup>98</sup> The filmind’s active attitude towards the film-world, its film-thinking, is always the ‘double thought’ of a simultaneous presentation and a refiguration, showing and interpreting, what is shown and how it is shown. Yet a film does not have experience *of* things (settings, characters), “it just has film-experience, or not even that, just film-thoughts” (ibid.: 89). The dual nature of the filmind thus entails that it both intends towards and, at the same time, ‘is’ the film-world that it thinks (ibid.: 90). Frampton emphasizes that the filmind should not be taken as an empirical entity, but as a re-orientating conceptual understanding, a theoretical postulation, of the origin of a film’s actions and events.<sup>99</sup> In this way he wishes to place the source of film-thinking ‘in’ the film itself. The filmind is therefore part of the film, the film itself, as it functions from a ‘trans-subjective’ (or ‘meta-subjective,’ neither subjective nor objective, nor limited to any subjectivity of narration or character) ‘non-place’ or ‘realm of perspective’ as the ultimate controlling force of the film-world. The film steers its own discourse (ibid.: 7, 73, 86–87). The filmind is therefore not transcendental, but rather “actual and active” as “we can actually ‘see the film thinking’” (ibid.: 93). It accounts for each film’s own individual character, style and identity. Each film is unique because it has its own filmind, autonomous and free to think and create as its wishes (ibid.: 83).

97 It is worth pointing out that Frampton was an initiator of the online journal, *Film-Philosophy*, the first academic journal devoted to the study of the field.

98 Frampton (2006a: 82) distinguishes three types of interrelated film-thinking: (a) basic film-thinking (the basic design of the film world, involving things like color-grading, frame ratio, etc., understood as a ‘default attitude’ that the filmind has towards its world and characters), (b) formal film-thinking (referring to traditional formal elements such as framing, movement, cutting, etc.) and (c) fluid film-thinking (the recreation of the film-world itself involving special effects, digital morphing, etc.).

99 Characters or narrators, according to filmsophy, can never completely originate a narrative as the filmind is always giving us its version of what they see or tell. The filmind is therefore all-enclosing, thinking, from a uniquely trans-subjective non-place, “for itself, or a narrator, or a character or whatever” (Frampton, 2006a: 87).

The place of the 'filmind' *vis-à-vis* the respective minds of the filmmaker and the film spectator however remains underdeveloped. Frampton admits that the filmind is 'always' created by filmmakers, who translate their motives and ideas into cinematic form by harnessing and using various strategies of film-thinking (ibid.: 75). But in the same breath he distinguishes the filmind from the filmmaker's intentions by appealing to the experience of the filmgoer: the claim being that the (making of the) film cannot transcend the more comprehensive concept of film-thinking insofar as artistic intentions cannot completely control the experiences of the filmgoer. This creates the impression that the filmind has some special relation with the viewer's freedom of subjective experience. But then Frampton also goes to great lengths to dissociate film-thinking and -experience from its human counterparts. He is critical of theorists like Vivian Sobchack who see an anthropomorphic, 'human-type' subjectivity in film subjectivity, as "it seems obvious that film 'experience' looks very different to our experience" (ibid.: 42). The inherent difference of the thinking of film naturally gets the most attention from Frampton. The notion of a thinking filmind, and indeed film as thinking, Frampton explains, should not be taken as a direct analogy between film and human thought, but rather a functional one: by shifting, blurring and slowing down, for example, film-thinking works in ways that ours do not (2008: 365); film 'thinks better than us', and it 'thinks beyond us', by showing us non-actual events and forms (2006a: 92); and film "reveals to us a way of thinking that we simply cannot replicate" (2008: 366). The unique reflective capacities and intentions of film thus warrants speaking of a film's own kind of thought that should be analyzed and studied in its own right (2006a: 7–9; 2008: 365–366). Yet this account of the film-thinking is hampered by a host of ambiguities and complications. Frampton (2006a: 93), for example, makes the somewhat contradictory claim that film performs its "own version of human thinking". And, in a later defense of his work, he appears to 'slightly' retract into a position according to which film-thinking is only "a slightly different kind of thinking" (Frampton, 2008: 365). Film-thinking is furthermore also seen as somehow encompassing feeling and emotion, as for him "film thinks and feels; but both can be termed as thinkings" (2006a: 96; cf. 2008: 7). And Frampton (2006a: 94–95), once again, suggests something of a continuity between filmind's thinking and that of the film-viewer. He argues that the film's enactment of thinking implies the thoughts that it causes in the filmgoer, since "film cannot create new thinking in the filmgoer without itself being said to think (ibid.: 94). What Frampton nevertheless appears to get at is that film-thinking is not reducible to human thought and that it involves *more than* the fact that it makes the filmgoer think. But this, he adds, should not be taken as saying that film-thinking is somehow better than human thought, nor that the thoughts of the filmgoer and film are completely incommensurable (2008: 366).

The matter of film-thinking's otherness again comes to the fore in Frampton's considerations of how film relates to philosophy. The ideas of film-thinking, lacking the specificity that would simply reduce film to language, represents a poetical thinking that achieves a different order of philosophical-ness; and by harnessing the 'languageless' 'non-conceptual' and 'imagistic thinking' of film,

“filmosophy attempts to find the *philosophical* in movements and forms of film” on the understanding that “film can add a new kind of thought to philosophy” (2006a: 10–11). Once again, one encounters the view (characteristic of theories on ‘cinematic thinking’) that it is a confrontation of differences, between film and philosophy, that allows for the production of such new thoughts.<sup>100</sup> This is evident from the somewhat dramatic lexicon that Frampton (ibid.: 98, 196) employs to describe the intellectual productivity of film-thinking: in addition to being an ‘emotional intelligence’ that is allusive, ambiguous, complex and tension-ridden, film-thinking is also characterized as ‘primal’, ‘archaic’, ‘messy’, ‘loose’, ‘evocative’, ‘fuzzy’, ‘non-rational’, ‘intuitive’ and ‘affective’; it moreover relies on ‘hints’, ‘vague notions of ideas’, ‘emotional ideas’, ‘feelings of thoughts’ and ‘fragments of concepts’. With these qualities Frampton apparently wishes to depict a thinking that is the opposite of traditional philosophical values. Yet he adds that these notions should not be taken as bad versions of clear logical thinking, but as thinking of a distinctly filmic nature, ‘film-ideas’ existing in a state of image, flow and flux (ibid.: 98).

The point for Frampton, as with Deleuze and Sinnerbrink discussed above, is that “[f]ilm should not try to become philosophy, and philosophy should not try to find itself in film” (2008: 373). Yet while film-thinking “bypasses logic and forms pure image-ideas”, film can nevertheless engage *with* philosophy (2006a: 198–199). Here Deleuze’s influence on Frampton is at its most apparent, as the creative aspect of cinematic thinking is also drawn into the picture. Frampton quotes the well-known Deleuzian claim that philosophy deals with the concepts that cinema gives rise to; and also tells us that film should be a ‘companion’ of philosophy in concept creation (ibid.: 11, 200). He goes even further in explicitly stating that: “The sense in which the filmind is ‘thinking’ is that of intention, creation and knowledge” (ibid.: 93).<sup>101</sup> But, at the same time, film simply offers a “different kind of creative thought”, not to be thought of as better than philosophy, but as “another kind of philosophy”, “an intuitive, affective philosophical event” (ibid.: 183–184; 2008: 372).<sup>102</sup> Frampton makes much of the directness with which film can affect our philosophical thought. Film produces “intuitive image-concepts...

100 Frampton (2008: 372) approvingly quotes Huygens (2008: 2) on this point: “it is not the merger of film into philosophy that matters but their differences; their autonomy should be maintained since it is precisely out of the confrontation of philosophy with the non-philosophical (science or art) that interesting new concepts can arise”.

101 Related to Frampton’s emphasis of the creative power of film is a very explicit recognition of a more general agency that it possesses – reminding somewhat of the rhetoric that Mulhall uses in talking about the ‘philosophizing’ film (see Section 4.3.1). Frampton, for example, describes film-thinking as a (cinematic) form of ‘behavior’, adding that what you encounter in a film reveals the ‘actions’ of the filmind (2006a: 95). And the ‘action-thoughts’ that characterize film-thinking is, in turn, referred to as a “force of creation” (ibid.: 196). This agency is furthermore specified in terms of the exercising of creative will. Hence the thinking-activities of the filmind are characterized with notions such as ‘intention’, ‘autonomous’, ‘selector’, ‘arranger’, ‘choosing’, ‘controlled’, ‘composing’ and ‘ordering’ (ibid.: 83). And this will of film is seemingly a free will, since these capacities are only possible on the basis of the exercising of choice. Frampton sums this up in saying: “Film cannot think without choice, judgement and belief” (ibid.: 97).

102 Frampton (2006a: 184) adds: “At the end of philosophy, beyond (or rather outside of) philosophy’s capability, filosophy is simply one separate route for philosophy”.



non-conceptual affects, fractured perspectives, that meet directly with our own minds" (ibid.: 200). Hence, Frampton considers film-thinking to be a "brutal, imagistic, direct reasoning" that give us "the feeling of ideas, philosophical inklings that are whispered to us" (ibid.: 98). In doing so, film functions as an "Eros' to philosophy's 'logos'" in that "it can provide a direct thinking of such abstract concepts as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, space" (ibid.: 200–201). Frampton concludes that the way that film orders and reasons through its images and signs shows it to be a 'post-metaphysical thinking': it enacts a direct reasoning without the language of metaphysics (ibid.: 183, 202–203). The film-concept, as a non-concept, the other to conventional philosophical concepts, may therefore exceed and question philosophy and may thereby provide a better understanding of certain philosophical areas (ibid.: 201). As is the case in Sinnerbrink's romantic film-philosophy, Frampton construes film-thinking's engagement with philosophy (and our thinking, in general) as something of a confrontation. "Film-thinking makes the filmgoer's logical thinking recognise its limits, its impower, its impotence. Film-thinking forces thought to think the unclear, blurry, dispersive, outside" (ibid.: 102). We would therefore do well, on Frampton's account, to adopt the frame of (film-)mind prescribed by filmosophy. And, instead of wanting to turn film into (our) philosophy, we should "simply look at the forms of film and listen to what cinema has to say" (2008: 373).

#### **4.6 A Reconsideration of Conditions? The Suspended Condition of 'Non-Philosophy'**

At the start of this survey of conditions for film to engage with/in philosophy, I noted that assumptions about what philosophy is (coupled with, as we have seen, specific views on the nature of film) tend to dictate how theorists approach the question of film's own philosophical resources. If, for instance, philosophy is taken as a matter of exercising certain philosophical techniques, then film can be said to do philosophy in cases where it enacts an argument or thought experiment. Or, if philosophy is primarily seen a kind of thinking, then one may conclude that films can think in ways that philosophers do. But the whole intention of 'film-philosophy', as I have explained it, is to be a reversal of perspectives – to approach philosophy from the point of view of film and ask what philosophy 'in the image of' film may look like. But are theorists of film-philosophy not simply subjecting film to the agenda of philosophy by tying it down to existing philosophical frameworks that determine the supposed conditions for film's being philosophical?

This objection, in short, captures John Mullarkey's (2009a; 2009b; 2011) intervention in the debate. His central criticism of the field is that the all-encompassing, essentialist nature of most theories of film-philosophy (and certainly all those discussed here) cannot avoid the reduction of film to illustrations of the theorist's preferred version of philosophy (2009a: 65; 2011: 88). This criticism is especially aimed at bolder claims of film's philosophical ability. "If film thinks", Mullarkey tells us, "it is not in its own way but in philosophy's way" (2011: 88). If a film is considered to 'philosophize', it only does so in correlation with some privileged

approach to philosophy (2009a: 66). While many film philosophers critically reject the imposition of general ‘philosophies of film’ (or ‘about film’) on individual films, Mullarkey holds that there is always a totalizing (exclusive, reductive, illustrative) ‘philosophy of film’ (or, again, ‘about film’) underlying a ‘film-philosophy’ that wants to make films ‘speak for themselves’. So while the likes of Mulhall, Critchley or Sinnerbrink intend to perform ‘open’ readings of a film, their understanding of the film’s ‘own’ philosophical views inevitably remain interpretations that are pre-figured by established philosophical points of view. Mullarkey, for example, mentions how Daniel Frampton, despite his sensitivity to the subjection of film to theory, nevertheless relies on the pre-existing theoretical model of Deleuze; and how Deleuze has his own established ontological preferences relating to a metaphysics of material forces (ibid.: 66–67).

Mullarkey’s proposal, in terms of the analysis in this chapter, is to get away from *any* supposed conditions for film to do philosophy, since these inevitably reduce what film’s thinking may be: “If film is to think, if film is to philosophize, then we must first of all get away from any definition (that is, philosophy) of film, as well as any definition of thinking, or indeed of philosophy itself” (2009a: 77). Taking his lead from Francois Laruelle, Mullarkey approaches film as ‘non-philosophy’ which involves a thinking ‘according to the Real’ (ibid.). The Real – and the Real of film, as one instance of thereof – can never be captured and exhausted by (any one) philosophy (2011: 89). This allows Mullarkey to venture – in what he admits to be a ‘speculative mode’ – towards his own tentative notion of the thinking of film: “the resistance of film to singular philosophies is a kind of thinking, or meta-thinking, all its own, precisely because it does not allow us to begin with a definition of thought or philosophy, or rather, it forces us to change our theory of what theory (thinking, philosophy) is” (2009a: 76). In light of my discussion of the ‘cinematic thinking’ approach, however, Mullarkey’s insistence on the ‘resistance’ and ‘force’ that film exercises with respect to philosophical theory is all too familiar (see Section 4.5 above). By considering film in terms of its ‘immanent event-ness’, ‘multi-modality’, ‘hybridity’ and ‘relationality’ (to single out just a few aspects that he considers to amount to the so-called ‘messiness’ of film) Mullarkey finds that film displays a distinct resistance to any singular (and by implication reductive) theory. Film compels us to think through its refusal to have reductive thoughts enforced upon it; and “such resistance to theory is itself philosophical and a source of new philosophy” (2009a: 74). Mullarkey thus adopts a similar position to that of Deleuze, Sinnerbrink and Frampton in that he considers (the ‘inexhaustibility’ of) film to have the power to enforce an essential rethinking and renewal of philosophy. And Mullarkey cannot deny that these theorists – despite the apparent reductions that he finds them to be guilty of – are also, in principle, just as committed to the view that the ‘becoming philosophical of film’ should be undetermined and open-ended. Mullarkey’s own stance is perhaps best seen as a radicalization of their claim that film gains its philosophical significance through its own distinctive and disruptive forms of ‘cinematic thinking’. He demands that claims of cinematic thinking’s independence be taken all the way: if we are serious about granting film its *own* (philosophically relevant) thinking, then we

are required to suspend our judgment of what that thinking may in fact be. This involves approaching 'film as philosophy' with a complete openness as to what 'philosophy' can become.

While Mullarkey's contribution may be seen as a lethal blow to the entire 'project' of theorizing the conditions for film-philosophy, one should ask whether his critical assessment is in fact not also making film 'an illustration' of a favored, 'pre-figured' philosophical point of view – and that he thereby succumbs to his own criticism.<sup>103</sup> Yet these considerations do not withhold me from adding Mullarkey's central argument to the 'axis of conditions' that I have outlined here. One strategy would be to simply classify his claim, as pointed out above, as the most extreme instance of the already identified 'cinematic thinking' condition. However, to do his argument more justice, one would do better to reserve a separate point with which to plot his approach – one at the imagined *end* of this axis. For it is inevitable that the debate would reach this point: the condition that Mullarkey claims is *no condition* – a 'non-condition' – insisting that the formulation of any condition will restrict the 'philosophy' that film may become. Film can therefore only be philosophical through being 'non-philosophy', which (in addition to the Laruellian sense of film being a 'non-philosophy'<sup>104</sup>), usefully captures the supposed need to negate and suspend our definitions in openness towards film's own becoming-philosophical.

103 Mullarkey, anticipating an obvious objection, points out that what he offers is not one more philosophy of film, but precisely a non-philosophy of film which he defines as 'a thinking according to the Real' (2009a: 77). (To briefly elaborate: his non-philosophy does not dismiss other philosophies as false representations but simply indicates each one's inherent limitation *vis-à-vis* its hold on the Real. Since each theory is therefore still partially right, and also part of and immanent to the process of film, non-philosophy embraces all theories in a 'democracy of thought' (2011: 91, 94). Mullarkey's approach is thus 'meta-theoretical', not in the sense of being a theory about theories, but by somewhat conveniently incorporating (all) other theoretical perspectives in its immanent thinking of the Real.) Yet one should be skeptical about whether Mullarkey truly puts this issue to rest. For example, after saying that we need to get away from all definitions if we are to say that films philosophize, he notes that (surely privileged) notions of film being 'multiple', 'relational' and 'evental' do not amount to definitions of film, but are 'at best' 'quasi-concepts' functioning as 'placeholders' that mark a partial openness to every (limited) definition of film (*ibid.*). A first question is whether these 'quasi-concepts' (which may be nothing more than an evasive rhetorical device) still in fact produce some definition(s) of film? But even if this is not the case, do Mullarkey's 'quasi-concepts' not show how he nevertheless proceeds from a pre-figured philosophical position (while we should 'get away from all definitions of philosophy')? The consequence of this is that he still refracts film through his (what I consider to be inevitable) adherence to established Continental philosophical traditions that emphasize notions of 'anti-transcendentalism', 'individuality', 'complexity', 'hybridity', 'becomingness' and 'the event', etc.? Perhaps because of such questions Mullarkey also quite explicitly opts for situating his claims on what he admits to be 'more speculative', meta-theoretical grounds: "What is offered is not the proof of a theory but the suggestion of a way of looking at films that is up to the reader to complete with his or her own examples" (Mullarkey, 2009b: 13).

104 Mullarkey (2011: 91) helpfully points out that the 'non-' in Laruelle's notion of 'non-philosophy' does not refer to an dialectic opposite or 'other' of philosophy, but to "an enlargement of the set of things that can count as thought, a set which includes extant philosophy, but also a host of what are often presently deemed (by philosophers) to be non-philosophies". Non-philosophy, as performative practice (a thinking, not 'of' the Real, but 'alongside' it), therefore seeks to work out what 'philosophy' becomes when 'thinking is everywhere' (including in film) (*ibid.*: 90–92).

## 5. Conclusion: Motives & Meta-perspectives

In this chapter I have offered an overview of theories of ‘film-philosophy’ with the aim of establishing what I take to be much needed meta-theoretical perspectives on this sub-field of Philosophy of Film. I started with the proposition to navigate through this theoretical landscape by distinguishing two meta-analytical axes. The first axis involves the claimed degree of engagement, the extent to which film engages with/in philosophy. I briefly distinguished three positions, i.e. film-philosophy as a ‘weak’ (Russell, Smith), ‘moderate’ (Wartenberg, Carroll, Livingston), and ‘bold’ engagement (Mulhall, Sinnerbrink, Frampton). I have furthermore pointed out that we importantly need to distinguish between theories claiming an ‘engagement in’ (Mulhall) versus an ‘engagement with’ philosophy (Sinnerbrink). This distinction, for example, produces two dissimilar notions of what a ‘bold’ engagement may involve and the distinction should therefore not be overlooked in the comparison of theories.

The second axis concerns the enabling means for films to engage with, or be, a form of philosophy: the conditions of engagement. Perhaps because it is so deeply intertwined with the first axis, this axis has not yet been sufficiently distinguished and clarified in assessments of the field so far. Yet it clearly cuts to the heart of the notion of film as philosophy: on the basis of *what*, we can ask any of the philosophers lined up here, can a film engage with/in philosophy? As I have demonstrated, the answers provided by the philosophers discussed here took a number of different forms: that film can illustrate philosophy, present arguments, and thought experiments (Wartenberg, Carroll, Falzon); perform philosophical thinking (Mulhall, Critchley, Cavell); elicit self-reflection (Sobchack); or even enact a ‘cinematic thinking’ of its own (Sinnerbrink, Frampton, Mullarkey, Deleuze).

However, to distinguish such an assortment of conditions for film-philosophy is still only a small step towards a ‘properly developed meta-philosophy’ that the debate is in need of (see Smith, 2010). Such a proper development, to my mind, would also involve the articulation of umbrella-concepts and terms that help relate these different claimed conditions and approaches to one another. A proper meta-theoretical account of film-philosophy should therefore yield perspectives that can facilitate a greater dialogue between its different approaches; in addition to clarifying incompatibilities between these approaches, these (meta) perspectives would need to highlight at least some ways in which these different approaches nevertheless cohere with one another (on a meta-level). One challenge in conceptualising such unifying meta-perspectives is that one needs have to get a tight grip on the respective assumptions that guide the different theories of film-philosophy. As we have repeatedly seen in this chapter – and perhaps most notably in my discussion of Mullarkey’s criticism of the field – all these theories proceed from definite (but partly implicit) assumptions about the nature of both film and, in particular, philosophy. Unlike Mullarkey, however, I take such assumptions to be an unavoidable part of any theorizing. Hence, I also see the role of meta-theory as an attempt at making such assumptions explicit, to frame them in a broader, synoptic view with the aim of correlating and perhaps even reconciling, to some

degree, the disparate commitments and positions that characterize the project of film-philosophy as charted here.

Therefore, as a manner of bringing the mapping enterprise undertaken in this chapter to a close, let me indicate what I think such a subsequent meta-theoretical development could look like. In doing so, I would also like to set the scene for the chapters to come. Here, I want to in a sense 'look beyond' the positions presented, and ask what is *more basically* at stake in the various conditions that are claimed to allow film its philosophical abilities. It seems to me that a small set of foundational contexts, or ultimate horizons, repeatedly show themselves as pivotal motives in the theorization of film-philosophy. As meta-theoretical abstractions, the kind of motives that I have in mind involve such ontologically foundational, encompassing horizons of reality that theories *need to* adopt some orientation towards them. For this reason, they can valuably encapsulate some of the pertinent assumptions at work in theories of film-philosophy. The three clearest of such motives, I find, are those of *Knowledge*, *Subjectivity* and *Power*, although the three can be usefully supplemented by the additional motive of *Nature*.<sup>105</sup> Although I do not want to be seen as constantly jumping on the 'meta' bandwagon, I recognize in these motives 'meta-conditions' that precede and motivate the more specific conditions for film-philosophy that came up in this chapter. Let me briefly indicate what I have in mind:

Firstly, the motive of Knowledge is especially central to the work of analytic-cognitivist philosophers of film. Many of their debates appear to assume that arguments, thought experiments or even illustrations of philosophy are objective forms of knowledge and that films can only be considered as doing philosophy if they assume a similar status (see Sections 4.1 and 4.2). Film-as-philosophy, for these philosophers, would entail that a film functions as a relatively self-sufficient knowledge artifact; much like a book or a taped lecture, it should be able to spell out its philosophical point of view in relative independence of its 'author'. Another way of putting it is that a film should have its own 'conceptual-' or 'intellectual competence' (Warr, 2013: 120). Related to this is the tendency to assume that a film can only be called 'philosophical' insofar as it relates to established philosophical knowledge (e.g. Shaw, 2006: 113; Livingston, 2009: 199). But, moving beyond the confines of analytic-cognitivist approaches, advocates of 'bolder' conceptions of film-philosophy also draw from this motive in claiming that films can generate renewed and indeed new forms of knowledge (cf. Colman, 2009: 8). Yet this convergence of analytic-cognitivist and more 'continentally' inspired approaches, within the context of Knowledge, also points to a significant difference between them: the former is more likely to speak of 'film engaging *in* philosophy' inasmuch as film serves as an alternative medium or 'expressive device' for dealing with established philosophical knowledge; the latter leans to the view that film rather 'engages with philosophy' by, among other things, producing new (forms of) knowledge.

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105 My formulation of these motives draws, in part, on Johann Visagie's theory of 'macromotives' (Visagie, 1996a). Note that – like him – I use capital letters to distinguish the abstracted, technical qualification of these motives. I elaborate somewhat more on these motives in Chapter 2 under Section 2.1.

Secondly, various claims that film engages with/in philosophy can be traced back to assumptions about a basic involvedness that film has with Subjectivity. There are roughly three overlapping variants of this theme: that film gains its philosophical abilities by either (a) expressing, (b) eliciting, or (c) enacting different manifestations of Subjectivity, which could range from ‘thinking’, as higher-order subjective process, to more basic forms of subjective experience. To begin with, a widespread preference for speaking of ‘philosophy through film’<sup>106</sup> not only reflects the view that films mediate Knowledge, but moreover that it (a) gives expression to the subjective intentions of the filmmaker(s). This particular appeal to Subjectivity, we have seen, is central to the intentionalist positions of Livingston and Wartenberg (see Section 3.2). Here the interrelatedness of the various motives also becomes clear: Livingston, for instance, stresses that a film can only count as philosophy when there is a (subjective) intention, on the part of the filmmaker, to engage with established philosophical knowledge (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 128). Carroll turns to the opposite side of the spectrum by claiming that a film-as-argument (b) elicits subjective reflective processes from the viewer (see Section 4.2). The film’s argument (Knowledge), for Carroll, is not in the film but in the minds of viewers. Hence, film’s ability to perform an argument relies, not on some subjective constitution of the film, but rather that of the viewer.<sup>107</sup> Mulhall, however, wishes to convince us that films themselves are somehow subjectively constituted in (c) enacting (presumably) subjective processes of ‘thinking seriously and systematically’, whereby they are said to philosophize (see Section 4.3). The supposed subjective processes inherent to film are thus emphasized more than their ‘contents’ of knowledge: the issue, for Mulhall, is not so much that film mediates or produces knowledge, but rather that films have the intentions of ‘questioning’, ‘exploring’ and ‘giving perspectives’. Yet I also pointed out that Mulhall, at times, identifies the philosophical achievements of films with how they guide the reflective experience (Subjectivity) of viewers. In Sobchack’s account of the phenomenological contributions of film, she interestingly combines all three of the above (i, ii and iii) when claiming that the filmmaker, film and filmgoer share in the same structures of embodied experience (see Section 4.4). In this case, film achieves philosophical relevance by at once expressing, eliciting and enacting subjective experience. Lastly, Cavell’s concern with film as ‘moving image of skepticism’ also clearly indicates the motive of Subjectivity insofar as it deals with our subjective isolation and the possible overcoming of that condition (see Section 4.3).

Thirdly: approaches that claim for film its own distinctive kind of thinking, varied as they may be, tend to have a shared reliance on a Power motive. This is not ‘power’ in a pejorative sense of ‘domination’, but rather in a more general and neutral or affirmative sense: the power of influence, formation or creation. While there are suggestions that the philosophical potential of film resides its influence

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Wartenberg (2007: 12), Carroll (2013: 3), Falzon (2013), and Cox & Levine (2011).

<sup>107</sup> Wartenberg argues along similar lines when he says that *The Matrix* succeeds as a thought experiment by letting the viewer share in the limited experience of the film’s protagonist.

over Subjective experience, most of the approaches concentrate on the relation between the Power that film exercises in relation to philosophy as Knowledge. The Deleuzian paradigm, under influence of its Nietzschean underpinnings, sees film as an extension of more general forces of becomingness. Both film and philosophy are distinct kinds of 'creative activity'; and film is taken to have a special function in the philosophical task of 'creating concepts' (see Section 4.5). Following Deleuze, the likes of Sinnerbrink and Frampton cast the Power inherent to 'cinematic thinking' in rather dramatic terms: film is claimed to 'challenge', 'resist' and even 'overwhelm' established forms of philosophical knowledge (see Section 4.5). Also Mullarkey draws on this context when pointing out that film's 'resistance' to theory is itself philosophical and, moreover, a source of 'new philosophy' (see Section 4.6). This highlights a prominent feature of Power as 'meta-condition' of film-philosophy: that it allows for various notions of how film may establish 'the new' in philosophy. Whereas the Cavellian 'moving image of skepticism', for example, is really a mediation of existing philosophical knowledge, Deleuzian notions of cinematic thinking merge the contexts of Power and Knowledge by considering film able to contribute to philosophy through the creation of radically new knowledge.

Although it may not have the same prominence in theories of film-philosophy as the preceding motives, a fourth one must be added here. This is the fundamental horizon of 'Nature', which should be taken in the most comprehensive sense of involving, not only 'the material' or 'physical' or 'bodily', but more broadly 'the world', 'reality' or 'the nature of things'. (In line with Cavell (e.g. 1979: 16) and Bazin, I roughly use 'nature' and 'reality' as synonyms in this context. Although the notion of 'the real' may usefully apply, I wish to avoid its various philosophical connotations that I do not associate myself with.) This motive is a key aspect of how, for example, Cavell understands film to contribute to philosophy (see Section 4.3). For Cavell (as for Bazin), film, as a photographic medium, gains its philosophical power through its inherent relatedness to the Nature of the world. In staging our condition of isolation or absence from Nature, film at the same time holds the promise of restoring our connection and 'presentness' to the world. There is also an element of the Nature motive in Sobchack's claim that film has Subjective agency by virtue of sharing the same material existence with the filmmaker and the viewer, as corresponding subjects. And the same horizon is at play in Mullarkey's contention that film, as 'the Real' (Nature), cannot be exhausted by singular theories (Knowledge).

In conclusion, identifying these underlying, foundational motives – Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power and Nature – helps to draw out important reference points for an ethical meta-analysis as intended in this thesis. Yet these motives also hold meta-theoretical merit to film as philosophy as a theoretical project over and above any of my ethical arguments. For one thing, this set of foundational motives offers the meta-theorist a springboard to a more cohesive picture of the overall project. In this set of motives, we have a useful means of clarifying not only essential distinctions but also relevant interrelations between different conceptions of film-philosophy. I am in particular thinking of how philosophy

as Knowledge retains an implied presence within conceptions of film-philosophy guided by the motives of Subjectivity and Power respectively. Tracing such a connection helps elucidate shared assumptions that different theories may have with respect to the claim that film can be a form of philosophy – and thereby lays bare potential common grounds upon which future theorizing of the question of film-philosophy can proceed. A discussion of horizons as fundamental as Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power, and Nature will inevitably bring to light all sorts of intimate connections among themselves. Thus, tracing their presences within – and among – diverse theories of film-philosophy, promises to lay bare similarly fundamental connections between otherwise dissimilar approaches.

Of course, the meta-analytical agenda of the rest of the thesis is a much more specific one, as I wish to cast the debate and broader project of film-philosophy within a distinctly ethical light. And, in order to move to this agenda: the notion of fundamental horizons is indeed the right track to be on. My attention now turns to what is in fact another fundamental horizon amongst those already discussed here, one that is perhaps not as conspicuous, but just as persistent. This is the inescapable human horizon of the self, faced with the need to change itself. The historically recurrent ideal, stemming from this horizon, is the motive of personal transformation. This motive makes an especially compelling series of appearances within the project of film-philosophy. As I will show, the claims that films can do or be philosophy always go hand in hand, somehow, with suggestions of self-transformation that viewers may achieve through film. Yet, in this context, the motive of personal transformation does not operate in isolation; the other four accentuate this motive in noticeable ways. Therefore, I will show that the ways in which philosophers construe film-philosophy in relation to the motive of Knowledge, or Subjectivity, or Power, largely determines the *kind of* personal transformation through film that they consequently suggest.

To be able to consider the ways in which the motive of personal transformation enters the project of film-philosophy, we first need to get a more general, analytical grip on this motive itself: to understand the multiform transformational ethics that it can inspire. With this in mind, then, we move on to Chapter 2, where I will construct my ethical framework of analysis.



# Chapter 2

## **When Philosophers Join *Fight Club*: A Framework for Transformational Ethics of Film**

### **1. A Framework for Fighters *and* Film Philosophers**

Having sketched and characterized various approaches to film-philosophy in Chapter 1, and in anticipation of detailing the transformational ethics of those approaches in the next chapter, I take the opportunity here – in what is a transitional chapter – to first formulate the ethical framework in terms of which I approach the project of film-philosophy. The framework that I will rely on is mainly indebted to a theory of transformational ethics developed by Johann Visagie (1999). It proposes a set of concepts with which to account for the most basic parameters and options available to any given ethic of personal transformation. The theory, as I adapt it, differentiates five frames which each addresses a distinct dimension of transformational ethics. These five frames zoom in on:

- the posited *technique* whereby transformation is to be effected
- the transformational *mode* that gets actualized by a technique
- the *value* or ideal state that defines transformation
- the *domain* or part of the subject to which transformational work is to be applied
- the *paradigm* that motivates a particular approach to personal transformation

As explained at the outset of the thesis, I present and develop this framework as an ethical perspective on the film as philosophy debate with two overall aims in mind. On the one hand, to draw out the tacit ethical dimensions that reside in established approaches and theories of film-philosophy. And, on the other, to open up an explicit ethical direction for the further development of the field. Visagie's theory provides me with a most useful heuristic for pursuing both these ends, as I will show at numerous junctures in this chapter and beyond.

To give readers an initial taste of how the ethical framework works, I introduce it here with reference to *Fight Club* (1999). This David Fincher film makes for an illuminating case, as the film's own preoccupations with the theme of personal transformation invites its interpreters – and among them meta-interpreters

like myself – into something of a dialogue related to this mutual interest. *Fight Club* the book, written by Chuck Palahniuk (1996), as well as the film that soon became a cult hit after its release in 1999, throws together an exciting potpourri of perspectives on transformational ethics – all of which can be scrutinized in terms of the framework that I propose. I therefore have in *Fight Club* a convenient sounding board for showing how I approach questions of transformational ethics in a film as well as its critical, philosophical reception.

The chapter will proceed as follows. First, I outline Visagie's theory of transformational ethics, with an emphasis on the concepts and distinctions valuable to this project. Since his work on transformational ethics remains unpublished, I take this as an opportunity to introduce his model and, in doing so, to also clarify some of its aspects (Section 2). I then proceed to recommend a variety of expansions and elaborations to fine-tune his approach to the notion of transformational ethics *of film*, which gives me a model for my own analyses of film-philosophy in the chapters to come (Section 3). I conclude the chapter with a post-script, in which I give my proposed framework a quick heuristic workout – with specific reference to *Fight Club*'s philosophical interpretations, alongside a few other relevant spheres of reception.

In choosing *Fight Club* as my sparring partner for this chapter, I ultimately would like to suggest that film philosophers – that is, those who explicitly concern themselves with film as philosophy – have *far more* in common with *Fight Club* than they, no doubt, would initially believe. I do not mean to suggest that these philosophers have any personal interest in underground brawls, or anarchist pranks like taking a leak in restaurant soup. However, in looking forward to the next chapter, I submit that they do share with the fictional Fight Club members a more basic enthusiasm over the ideal of personal transformation. Of course, the two groups envisage such transformations in markedly different ways: the Fight Club members seek self-transformation through fighting and destruction; the philosophers suggest that we can find it by viewing films (as philosophy). Yet, sometimes, as I eventually show, there is a compelling convergence of the two approaches, as some philosophers happen to find potential self-transformation by specifically viewing *Fight Club*.

## 2. Johann Visagie's Theory of Transformational Ethics

Johann Visagie's theory of transformational ethics (1999) provides the potent analytical tool that in this chapter I adapt for my analyses of film-philosophy. Since this particular theory has not been published before, I need to discuss it in considerable detail.<sup>108</sup> The South African philosopher developed this theory as

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<sup>108</sup> Visagie's theory of transformational ethics remains unpublished, despite his having published extensively on other topics, notably his own theory of ideology (1996b; 1998b; 2004) and a theory of philosophical conceptualization (e.g. 1998a, 2001, 2006b). The bulk of his thinking on transformational ethics is

a component (or ‘sub-theory’) of a more comprehensive philosophical project, which he calls ‘Discourse Archaeology’, in which he expounds an elaborate system of theories dealing with the fundamental conceptual grounds from which philosophically relevant discourses originate (see Visagie, 2001; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2006a). With his sub-theory of transformational ethics, Visagie endeavors to describe the most basic structures and continuities which underlie practices of personal transformation. As in the rest of his archaeological project, he gives an account of a specific kind of discourse: in this case transformational practices are taken as expressive of a distinct ethical discourse relating to self-formation and transformation.

To be clear, Visagie’s theory is not normative and therefore does not commit itself to any ‘ideal’ action or value of transformation. Nor is it an ‘explanatory theory’ in the sense that it aspires to tell us *why*, in some grand sense, people seek personal transformation or *how*, in empirical terms, such transformations may actually occur. Instead, he offers what I take to be a ‘descriptive theory’ – bearing in mind that a descriptive theory still provides explanations, only explanations of a different order. Visagie deems the syntactic analyses of generative grammar a fruitful model for the kind of descriptive analysis that he wishes to do: his theory seeks to explain transformational ethics by describing the essential options and parameters that inform any particular practice of personal transformation (see Visagie, 1999: 1–2). In terms of this analogy with Noam Chomsky’s linguistic theory of generative grammar that Visagie likes to draw, his analyses are of the general ‘deep-structures’ that ‘ground’ any individual ‘surface’ variation of ethical-transformational discourse.<sup>109</sup>

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concentrated in a single manuscript, titled *Transformational Ethics: The Structures of Self-Creation* (1999) – a project that he abandoned after completing a sole, unedited draft. Although this and other unpublished manuscripts are unavailable to the broader public, it has been at the disposal of Visagie’s students, and has featured in recent MA and PhD theses such as my own, Rossouw (2011), as well as Van Reenen (2013) and Schutte (2014). With that, my thanks to Johann for once again letting me use his unpublished material for this thesis.

109 Note, therefore, the double meaning of ‘transformational’, as Visagie himself also makes clear: apart from its obvious reference to the ethical work of personal change, the term also serves to connote the methodological insight that he gains from Noam Chomsky’s ‘transformational (generative) grammar’ (Visagie, 1999: 1). To detail the Chomskyan inspirations informing Visagie’s project, I find it necessary to quote Visagie at length:

“Although this description [that is, ‘transformational’ or ‘generative grammar’] has a precise theoretical significance for linguists, and although the role of transformations has undergone radical change in linguistic theory, the aspect that interests us here is the significance that Chomskyan ‘transformationalism’ has had for intrigued theorists from other fields. For what Chomsky seemed to them to be doing in his syntactic analyses, was to use *highly structured models* – often expressed as tree diagrams – allowing for great *conceptual precision* and even for formalized *rule systems*, all of which had the intent of bringing a new kind of *intellectual depth* to the study of the discipline in which he worked. This ‘depth’ had less to do with an exhaustive coverage of data, and more with making richly deductive assumptions on the basis of the available material, so as to render interesting explanations – and not only formal descriptions – of the latter possible. Such interesting explanations involved, among other things, searching behind the surface appearance of phenomena to find the relevant ‘deep structure’ from which they originate. If a ‘transformational’ grammar was once upon a time launched on a journey along

Visagie's endeavor, then, is perhaps best defined as 'meta-ethical', since he wants to account for every possible ethic of transformation by isolating the basic structures and elements that appear to be essential to them all. The fundamental terms in which he theorizes transformational ethics, we shall see, have heuristic value, that is, they come with the benefit of providing a (meta) analytical perspective, moreover, one that is highly adaptable – ideal for delineating ethical implications and positions within a theoretical debate, as I will do with film-philosophy. Take, for instance, in *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden's (Brad Pitt) observation: "Self-improvement is masturbation; self-destruction is the answer". Durden hereby denounces the shallowness of consumerist "self-improvement" from the perspective of its supposed antithesis, and his own preference, a life of liberating "self-destruction". However, with a sufficiently flexible understanding of transformational ethics – as I get from Visagie's approach – it is easy enough to recognize the underlying commonality between self-improvement and self-destruction. They both remain aspirations for *personal transformation*, even if they are very different in kind. Not unlike Tyler Durden, then, certain film philosophers claim that film should serve to overcome and 'lose' the self, instead of merely affirming or deepening individual selfhood (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3). Yet there is no reason to posit the former option as the *truer* ideal for transformation. Again, the framework can handle these options as two opposite directions in which the more basic ideal of self-transformation can find expression. The clarifications, creative connections, and mediations that such an adaptable framework affords is something that I emphasize throughout this chapter.

Another recurring topic: I will continually relate my considerations of Visagie's theory to Michel Foucault and his ethical work on the care of the self. The 'final Foucault', after all, remains a towering reference point that no discussion of transformational ethics can ignore (see, for example, Foucault, 1984; 1986: 25–32; 1988a; 1990; Veyne, 1993; O'Leary, 2002). Visagie indeed readily acknowledges the "directive importance" of Foucault's ethical project to his own theory of transformational ethics, which he says bears "some remarkable similarities" to that of Foucault (1999: i, 1n1).<sup>110</sup> Yet he is equally quick to stress that his own approach,

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paths and to destinations such as these, could we not wish to investigate the possibilities of having ethics – or perhaps a certain kind of ethics – embark upon a similar kind of journey? (ibid.)"

110 In a preface to his manuscript, Visagie in fact recounts how he came to discover most of these similarities only after developing his own theory. I quote in full:

"Years after the following manuscript was provisionally completed, and further work on it abandoned, I made a somewhat surprising discovery. I noticed, while reading a 1983 interview (conducted by Paul Rabinow and Herbert Dreyfus) with Foucault, that my analysis of the basic structure of transformational ethics shows some remarkable similarities to his own notion of a 'grid of intelligibility' or a 'scheme' in this regard. I realized that the last three of Foucault's four 'major aspects' of ethics, namely 'substance', 'mode of subjectivation', 'telos' and 'techniques' (or *ascesis*), largely correspond to what appears in my own structural analysis as (respectively) the 'paradigm frame', the 'value frame', and the 'technology-technique' complex. Although Foucault's approach motivated me to reconstruct the latter complex (in a way that differs from his informal descriptions), the other two 'nodes' of transformational analysis were in fact developed independently,

“in terms of its meta-theoretical presuppositions as well as its methodological models, differs much from Foucault’s approach and is even, in important respects, opposed to the latter” (1999: 1n1). In view of this nuanced association, I will make a point of drawing out the most pertinent points of agreement and disagreement between Visagie and Foucault, which should provide useful orientation to readers who are familiar with the latter. At times, I can add, my discussions will also cross paths with Pierre Hadot, who Foucault cites as a major influence on him (see Davidson, 1990). There is yet another incentive for involving Foucault as a virtual ‘partner in dialogue’ in this chapter: Foucault was not only a distinguished scholar of transformational ethics, but is also known as an experimenting practitioner of various strands of transformational ethics – a fact that likewise provides valuable food for thought.

## 2.1 Transformation as Motive, Ethic & Practice

Visagie’s approach to transformational ethics proceeds from an initial distinction with regards to personal transformation as a motive, an ethic and a practice. Even though he never addresses this tripartite rudiment head-on, he consistently resorts to what are obviously three distinct notions. To put it simply: (a) If a despondent pencil pusher, for instance, entertains the idea of reinventing himself, I think of him as being driven by a *motive* of personal transformation. (b) Whenever this motive finds expression in a particular formulation of how and why such self-change should be pursued, we have an *ethic* of transformation – like the idea of taking part in a ‘Fight Club’ to, say, inject the authenticity of blood and guts into one’s bland daily existence. (c) Yet both a motive and ethic are still distinct from the real *practice* of transformation, which would mean that the pencil pusher actually takes up hardcore fisticuffs as a manner of self-therapy.

Let me elaborate in slightly more formal terms what Visagie’s use of the notions of motive, ethic and practice each entail.

### Transformation as Motive

At the root of any particular ethic or practice of transformation Visagie posits an abstracted, trans-historical motive of personal transformation. In so doing he insists – rightly, I believe – on disentangling the comprehensive viewpoint of a general motive from the varied individual orientations and expressions that it may inspire. As an abstracted motive, the ideal of personal transformation involves any aspiration to change the self to some desired state, be it greater happiness, insight, awareness or care. Visagie assumes the motive to be effective in any discourse that aspires toward, or only even thematizes, the conscious ambition for a change in individual- or collective personhood. This change can go by a host of names: it can

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in an effort to investigate other ‘archaeological’ projects I had worked on (specifically ideology theory)” (Visagie, 1999: i).

See Visagie (2006) for more information on the rest of his noted ‘archeological’ projects.

be the ‘creation’, ‘formation’, ‘reconstitution’, ‘fashioning’, ‘cultivation’, ‘disciplining’, ‘maintenance’, ‘enhancement’ and, of course, ‘transformation’ of the self.

Visagie accepts that the quest for personal transformation, understood in this broad sense, appears to be a universal ideal. For this reason, he iterates that the appeal of personal transformation exerts its influence across particular eras and cultural-historical contexts. He notes, for example, the inception and growth of this ethical motive in early Greek philosophy, reaching an influential crescendo in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (1996a: 142). Especially in the Hellenistic and Roman contexts, he explains, philosophy was not only substantially concerned with ethics, but ethics itself primarily entailed the consideration of transformational practices. Yet Visagie adds that Eastern philosophical traditions (e.g. Hindu systems, Buddhist philosophy, Chinese Taoism) are equally imbued with “the very same ideal”, since they too “are all fundamentally involved with the art of disciplining the self” (ibid.). This very same appeal to personal transformation, I can add, shows itself in contexts as diverse as longstanding religious traditions, ‘new consciousness’ spiritual practices, pharmacology and drugs, psychological guidance, and the ever burgeoning interest in ‘trans-humanism’ as well as the most up-to-date technological quests for human enhancement – to name but a few.

For Visagie to stress the historical and cultural pervasiveness of personal transformation is not to deny the individuality of each contextual expression of this motive – these particularities must be duly recognized. But the theoretical balancing act required here is to still not lose sight of the continuity – an underlying basic motive of personal transformation – that runs throughout all individual, historically determined practices of self-transformation.

I should explain that Visagie deems the motive of personal transformation – and a handful of similar motives<sup>111</sup> – more than merely a trans-historical theme. He approaches the motive as an elemental ideology.<sup>112</sup> This is ‘ideology’ in the

111 The ‘back story’ here is that personal transformation forms part of an entire set of trans-historical motives that Visagie distinguishes. In fact, a great deal of his single manuscript, *Transformational Ethics: The Structures of Self-Creation* (1999), is concerned with developing these universal ‘macromotives’, as the broader theoretical context from which he approaches transformational ethics. His macromotives – of which personal transformation is one instance – are encompassing realities that in various ways throughout history are considered to be ‘ultimate values’ or ‘causes’. As “elemental forms of ideologies” (that “typically command our very highest respect and wonder”) macromotives drive not only individuals, but also collective behavior and even the cultural concerns that define entire epochs (Visagie, 2006a: 46; 1996a: 129). Visagie identifies the most evident macromotives as: Nature, Knowledge, Power, Personhood and Society – and he treats the ideal of personal transformation as one basic version or ‘face’ of the general motive of Personhood. I draw on these selfsame macromotives when I identify basic motives informing the different conditions for film-philosophy that philosophers pose (see Chapter 1, Section 5).

112 Visagie has done considerable work on the theory of ideology in contexts outside of transformational ethics (e.g. Visagie, 1994; 1996b; 1998b). Since I endorse his understanding of ideology, a brief elaboration thereof is needed. He uses the notion of ideology in the negative, critical sense as more or less developed from Marxist critical theory onwards. Yet, although he recognizes critical conceptions of ‘ideology’ as meaning (or symbolic forms) acting in the service of *social domination* (see Thompson, 1990), Visagie instead proceeds from a conception of ideology as *value- or discursive domination*. Ideology, from the latter perspective, refers to the tendency in dominating discourses to unjustifiably elevate certain values (like scientific knowledge,

critical sense: the motive of personal transformation, as Visagie sees it, typically makes itself felt as an idealization, an excessively valorized or absolutized ideal, which recurrently expresses itself as a 'grand narrative' or 'ultimate cause', and does so across cultural-historical divides (see Visagie, 1996a: 146–147; 1999: 2–3; 2006a: 48–50). There is thus a critical impetus behind Visagie's assessments of personal transformation, which leads him to speak mostly of the motive in terms of an ideological 'transformationalism'. From this critical standpoint he describes transformationalism as:

“[...] a cross-cultural ideology entailing an acute sensitivity to the importance of human subjectivity, particularly the importance for human individuals (alone or in groups) of striving after stylized change in the mode of thought and behavior, thus reaching a higher level of existence than 'ordinary' people, and in this process availing themselves of a set of specific methods” (2006a: 49).

## Transformation as Ethic

The general motive of personal transformation is inseparable from its incarnations in particular ethics and concrete practices of transformation. A transformational 'ethic', as I read Visagie, refers to an articulable conception of why and how self-change is to be achieved. Any person or community inspired by the ideal of personal transformation thus practices this ideal in accordance with an ethic, which offers specific motivations, credos, goals, guidelines and rules relating to their transformation. These specifications can be analyzed in terms of the five frames which I have mentioned and that I discuss below.

Although such an ethic is often explicitly formulated, it needs not be. Many forms of ethics of transformation do derive from discourses or 'manuals' with explicit transformational instructions – be it religious scripture, philosophical works, or self-help books that dish out 'chicken soup for the soul'. Yet any discourse can harbor a latent- or implied conception of self-change. In this regard, Visagie is mostly interested in the ways in which human actions and practices may be 'read' as expressive of a tacit ethic.<sup>113</sup> In fact, he accepts that no active pursuit of personal transformation can exist in the absence of at least an implicit ethic which informs it (see Visagie, 1999: 111).

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technological progress, ethnicity or, in this case, personal transformation) over other equally legitimate values, goals and norms. Ideology thus follows from the domination exerted when certain values become excessively autonomized – they become what Visagie (1998b: 132) dubs “hyper-values”. This results in the domination, distortion and invalidation of other values: the ideological subjection of these other values to hyper-values deprive them of their own relative autonomy and authority.

113 This relies on the assumption that actual actions and practices can indeed be analyzed as a form of discourse. On this point Visagie appeals to Paul Ricoeur's (1979) views on how human action can be fruitfully modeled upon and studied as 'text'. He cautions that one would not want to reduce human action to textuality, as Ricoeur also points out. So although he recognizes its partial nature, Visagie nevertheless finds in textuality a useful model for analyzing transformational practices (1999: 2, 2n4).

## Transformation as Practice

Although a transformational practice implies an ethic, the inverse does not apply. The motive, expressed in an ethic, does not automatically entail that transformation is practiced – the concrete actions that someone performs to achieve the goal of personal transformation remain a separate matter, as most smokers (and all lawyers) can confirm. ‘Practices’, in this context, refer to the various possible activities, routines, habits, as well as the adherence to rules and codes that may be exercised for the sake of self-change. It is particularly in this field that *Fight Club* strikes one as relentless.

The sphere of transformational practice brings Visagie to consider the practitioner, the hypothetical figure who he likes to call ‘the transformationalist’. He characterizes the transformationalist as having to make the ultimate choice between two ways of life: in layman’s terms, the choice between being a ‘professional’ or, alternatively, an ‘amateur’ practitioner of self-transformation (ibid.: 3, 129–130, 137). The first option is to commit oneself to an essentially abnormal lifestyle, seeing that the ‘professional’ stance is characterized by an exclusive, ‘full-time’ devotion to practicing transformation within all aspects of one’s life – something which usually goes against the dominant norms of a culture. This is the case, for instance, in the life of a Benedictine monk or someone who lives in a commune dedicated to a life of creating art. The part-time devotion of the ‘amateur’, on the other hand, may involve serious dedication to personal transformation, yet in a manner that does not exclude other standard economic, social and personal interests. Imagine for instance the individual who practices mindfulness and meditation for the sake of being more focused and productive at work. In such a case, the practice of transformation does not stake an overriding claim on someone’s life. It simply slots into what most people would otherwise regard as an everyday lifestyle.

## A Word on Theory

Visagie deploys the motive/ethic/practice distinction for the most part in the sphere of practical discourse – the practical guidelines, decision-making and actions that support personal transformation. Yet he recognizes personal transformation as a motive of both practical *and* theoretical reflection (ibid.: 2), and so gives some consideration to the latter, even though the analysis of theory, as such, falls beyond his scope of inquiry.

He highlights three different senses in which we can think of personal transformation as a motive to theoretical reflection. In the most elementary sense personal transformation can simply present itself as a theme for theoretical reflection. In such cases the idea and ideal of personal transformation, or the practicalities of its attainment, serve as the subject of theoretical description, analysis, explanation, and critical evaluation – much as it does for Hadot, the late Foucault, and explicit meta-analysts like Visagie and myself.

A second sense concerns personal transformation as the motive that drives the theorist. Here Visagie separates the theorist who only theorizes transformational



ethics (say, the ‘distanced theorist’) from what I will call the ‘committed theorist’ – someone who indeed also responds, at an intellectual or personal level, to the appeal of transformational ethics (ibid.: 47–48). The theorist who responds at an intellectual level, says Visagie, proceeds from some commitment to the view that “the transformation of the self is indeed a legitimate and worthwhile project for individuals to engage in” (ibid.: 48). The theorist who responds at a personal level, however, actually practices an ethic that he or she is personally convinced of, and so qualifies as a ‘transformationalist’, a conscious practitioner of self-transformation. It comes as no surprise that Visagie finds an arch model of the ‘committed theorist’ in the life of Foucault (see ibid.: 50–52). Although Foucault’s historico-philosophical analyses of transformational ethics could easily pass for the work of a ‘distanced theorist’, it is well publicized that he was also deeply committed to his own (theoretically informed) vision of personal transformation. Hence Visagie deems Foucault a theorist who practiced what he preached, in the sense that he resorted to personal experiments in self-creation, involving among other things sado-masochistic sexual practices and the use of drugs (ibid.: 117–118).<sup>114</sup>

The third and strongest sense in which Visagie relates a motive of personal transformation to theoretical reflection is the notion that theoretical reflection itself can be the *means* by which the theorist pursues self-transformation. For some ‘committed theorists’, therefore, it is the very theoretical work that they do – the reading, writing and all the other contemplative acts that go into it – that comprise their *practice* of transformation.

Once more, Visagie rolls out the example of Foucault, who saw his intellectual work as intimately tied to the problem of his own transformation, the “transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge” (Foucault, 1988c: 14, cited in Visagie, 1999: 51). Visagie notes in particular how Foucault saw his writing as instrumental to this ethical project, and how his use of writing is informed by a well-researched appreciation of a variety of techniques and genres of writing in the history of self-transformation (see ibid.: 51–53). This in turn raises the interesting question of the parallels that may exist between the style of reflection exhibited by Foucault’s theoretical writings, on the one hand, and the mode of existence that Foucault personally strove for. Visagie sees one such parallel in the findings of James Bernauer (1988: 67), who identifies in Foucault’s writings the practice of an intellectual freedom that is best described as “ecstatic thinking” – a worldly mysticism, a negative theology of sorts, aimed at escaping the prisons of thought and action that we inherit from the humanistic program. Clearly, this ecstatic mode in Foucault’s theoretical reflections echoes his private pursuit of transformation, which on one occasion was described by Foucault (1988b: 263) as “detaching oneself from oneself”. According to this finding in Foucault’s case, then, an aspiration for personal transformation does not only need to be a motive

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114 See, for example, James Miller’s *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (2000), which chronicles the philosopher’s personal preoccupations with various forms of self-transformation. Visagie also refers readers to David Macey’s *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (1993).

bringing forth theoretical reflection, but can find expression *in the very form* of the theoretical discourse that the theorist enunciates.

## 2.2 Frames of Analysis

With these preliminary perspectives in place, I now turn to the basic anatomy of transformational ethics. For Visagie, the kernel of any ethic or enactment of personal transformation is *a self that operates on itself*. This is much in line with Foucault's somewhat idiosyncratic understanding of 'ethics'<sup>115</sup>, which he delimits as the study of a self's relationship to itself (*rapport à soi*), and the ways in which this self-relation is meant to constitute the individual as moral subject (Davidson, 1986: 228).<sup>116</sup> And, not incidentally, Hadot (2002: 190) speaks of intensions of self-transformation in terms of a manner of "self-duplication" by which "the 'I' concentrates itself on itself". Yet the point is this: when one poses to this agreed upon "self-operating self" questions of its means and motivations, its objects and objectives, there emerges a clear set of dimensions in terms of which this kernel of self-transformation can be framed and elaborated.

Visagie's framework, as I adopt and adapt it, provides five frames of analysis that each brings into focus a distinct dimension of transformational ethics. The (a) *mode* and (b) *technique* frames are two complementary perspectives on the proposed means: the 'how?', of self-transformation; the (c) *value* frame examines the ends (the 'for what purpose?') that guide self-change; the (d) *domain* frame concerns the 'what?' of transformation, that perceived part of the self that is to be operated on; and the (e) *paradigm* frame roughly involves the 'why?' behind it all – the motivating context of an ethic. Again, Foucault arrives at a rather similar picture. Foucault (1984: 352–355; 1990: 26–28) distinguishes four major aspects of ethics, each of which can roughly be connected to the frames above: there is the ethical substance (domain), the mode of subjection (paradigm), the telos (value), and practices of the self or *askesis* (which Visagie differentiates in terms of modes and techniques).

I take these dimensions – involving the 'why', 'what', 'how' and 'to what end' of self-transformation – to make up the essential structure of transformational ethics. As I will show, Visagie's frames of analysis help specify the basic elements, parameters and 'options' that each of these dimensions consist of. His meta-ethical enterprise is therefore not only to spell out the fundamental dimensions that structure

115 Davidson (1986: 228) explains that Foucault considered 'ethics' (the self's relationship to itself) as one part of the more general study of 'morals'. In addition to ethics, morals comprises two further elements: people's morally relevant actions and the moral codes (determining rules) which are imposed on them.

116 That the self's relationship to itself is the locus of 'ethics', in Foucault's sense, finds backing in Pierre Hadot's account of the practice of *askesis* in Hellenistic philosophy. According to Hadot (2002: 190), all the Hellenistic schools appealed to "a kind of self-duplication", in which a concentrated 'I' refuses to be conflated with its desires and appetites, takes up a distance from the objects of its desires, and becomes aware of its power to become detached from them.

transformational ethics, but also to differentiate *within* those dimensions the basic alternatives that present themselves to any version of self-transformation.

### (a) Technique

A good place to start with Visagie's approach is the most self-evident dimension of transformational ethics – that of the transformational technique or exercise. Transformational techniques, quite simply, are the concrete procedures by which someone labors on or changes the self, or, alternatively, facilitates self-change for another. Such techniques can go by many names: in the Foucauldian scheme they are grouped under “technologies of the self” and would be called “ascetics” (*askesis*), which is ethical work, self-forming activity, the elaboration of oneself (see Foucault, 1984: 354–355; 1990: 27); Pierre Hadot (1995) would here instead opt for the notion of “spiritual exercises”.

Regardless of what you want to call them, techniques of transformation abound in *Fight Club*, our tutor case. As inherited from the novel, the film indulges in a clutter of conventional and less conventional samples of self-forming activity, typically presented in hyperbolic fashion. Most conspicuous in *Fight Club* is the technique of *fighting*, which will serve as an emblematic reference point to most of my analyses in this chapter. To identify fighting as a transformational technique – atypical as it may be, which may have brought the film its cult following – is to place it in the company of well-established practices: solitude, meditation, writing, reading, dialogue, walking, exercising, confession, chastity, fasting, ways of dressing, and taking drugs are some of the familiar techniques that Visagie singles out (see 1999: 131–134). Yet, unlike most of these techniques, the use of fighting in *Fight Club* renders the idea of self-forming activity into quite a *literal* affair: a group of alienated males “form” themselves by literally (de)forming each other in fist fights. (‘I will rearrange your face’, in this bizarre context, turns out to be a make-over people are actually looking for.) *Fight Club* thus illustrates self-formation exercised through consensual violence, a symbiotic give-and-take between hurting and letting yourself get hurt.

The blunt instrument of physical violence is but one of many further transformational techniques depicted in *Fight Club*. I highlight the most notable instances by way of a synopsis. The film starts with the insomniac narrator – commonly referred to as “Jack” – who recounts his unfulfilling, alienating life-style of ‘*retail therapy*’. Then, in a bid to treat his insomnia and alienation, Jack becomes addicted to the strangely therapeutic experience of attending medical *support groups* where he does not belong. While he does take part in the conventional psychological techniques like *confession* and *guided meditation*, Jack also uses his *voyeurism* in these support sessions as a self-tailored method for experiencing catharsis. Enters Tyler Durden – Jack’s charismatic second-self – whose hodgepodge of anti-establishment sentiments yield a corresponding selection of further transformational practices: Tyler prescribes *ascetic renunciations* of luxury and beauty; he devises offensive *pranks* that defy capitalist and consumerist mores; and begins to issue *Fight Club* members with specific *tests* (or “homework”, as he

puts it) that enable them to do the same. As the *Fight Club* degenerates into the fascist collective called “Project Mayhem”, Tyler becomes increasingly aggressive in the disciplinary techniques that he ministers: there are *vows of silence*, *rites of initiation*, strict *training regimens* and out-and-out military style *brainwashing*. In fact, the entire *Fight Club* narrative can be construed as a transformation-seeking *dialogue with self*, seeing that the film’s famous twist reveals Tyler to have been Jack’s twisted alter ego all along. This crisis ultimately culminates in the extreme transformational act of *self-violence*, when Jack shoots himself in order to kill off the tyranny of Tyler within him.

Clearly, the analysis of transformational ethics through the frame of techniques may take one into many kinds of details. Visagie, however, leaves much to the imagination and sketches only one or two basic strategies of analysis.

One option is to situate and specify techniques of transformation within a chain of sub-techniques. The technique of *meditation*, for example, is clearly a broad, inclusive category that can undergo numerous steps of specification: a major sub-category of meditation is a meditative *self-examination*, say of one’s inner-life and experiences; such self-examination can be exercised through *writing*, but can equally be pursued through things like reading, dialogue, doing art, interpreting dreams, etc.; the technique of writing may in turn take the form of a meticulous *recording of one’s experiences in a journal*; the procedure of journal-writing can furthermore be specified in terms of a particular *daily routine* and a set of *writing rules*; and so on. In this way, you arrive at a recursive series of techniques that makes plain a line of ‘options’ and ‘selections’ along which one can plot a particular technique of transformation.

The above example points to another basic analytical angle: to delineate the larger complex of techniques within which a transformational technique functions (Visagie, 1999: 138). Practically no technique is practiced in isolation from other co-techniques or sub-techniques. This applies as much to fighting as it does to meditation. For Tyler Durden, the technique of fighting should be practiced within an entire complex of supporting measures. Things like codes of confidentiality, seclusion, rule-keeping, camaraderie and ‘homework’ all serve to reinforce his transformational core business of bare fist fights. Most analyses of technique-complexes, as Visagie (1999: 131) makes clear, address precisely such hierarchical arrangements, in which one technique governs another in a ‘means-end’ kind of relationship. Here one can imagine for instance how regularly ascetic techniques like solitude and silence are practiced as a preparatory means to more effective meditation. Obviously, the analysis of transformational techniques may also require that one zooms in on an individual technique, whether to establish its general structures (e.g. the technique of fighting relies on consensual violence between at least two people) or to examine its particular implementation (e.g. “only two guys to a fight”; “no shirts, no shoes”; or “someone yells ‘stop!’, goes limp, taps out, the fight is over”). Visagie (1999: 135) mentions a number of aspects in terms of which a technique can be evaluated: among others, there is the social, the physical, the psychological, and the aesthetic. Nearly all Tyler Durden’s

rules for fighting, for example, pertains to the social interaction in and around the fights. Or, to give another example: when Visagie considers the technique of meditation, he distinguishes between the aspects of its 'physics' and its 'thematics'. "The former", he explains, "has to do with the physical aspects of the required meditation technique (posture and a suitable environment, breathing exercises, mantra and mandala techniques, visualization practices, etc.), the latter with the theme upon which is meditated, such as change or infinity or death" (1999: 132).

### **(b) Mode**

The essence of Visagie's analytical stance toward transformational techniques, however, comes to light through the correlative perspective of 'modes', which is the next frame that he distinguishes. Like techniques, the mode frame in Visagie's theory also concerns the 'how' of personal transformation, but deals with it in far more fundamental terms. So unlike techniques, then, the modes of personal transformation involve the most basic options or means available to subjects who aim to change themselves.

Following his understanding of a trans-historical motive of personal transformation, as discussed above, Visagie abstracts a set of distinct modes that each consistently realizes this motive in diverse contexts and times. Visagie (1999: 101–115) identifies the transformational modes of (a) contemplation, (b) mysticism, (c) asceticism, (d) temperance, (e) enduring hardship, (f) ministering, and (g) the refined pursuit of pleasure. Below I summarize each mode in terms of its essential imperative, coupled with the main ideas that Visagie formulates about it:

- *Contemplation: transformation through a form of reflection, consciousness or concentrated experience.* The classic figure of 'the contemplative', as Visagie views it, yearns for a continual withdrawal from the ordinary in wanting to routinely practice a concentrated or sustained state of reflection. Such contemplative activity may target more 'objective' entities, such as God or nature, or more 'subjective' terrains of one's own experiences (1999: 103). Such differences aside, Visagie sees the mode of contemplation as generally revered for its revelatory potential: whether by disclosing the novel, the spiritual or some 'truth' of reality or the self. In ancient philosophical circles it found expression in the Greek pursuit of *theoria* – notable, for example, in Pythagorean and Platonic ideals of the intellectual contemplation of the cosmic order as well as in the famous Aristotelian conception of the contemplative life as key to human flourishing. This heritage, I can add, had a lasting impact on the meditative practices in various traditions of Christianity – whether personal (e.g. prayer, meditation, reading, writing) or communal (e.g. meditative ritual and symbolism). And, of course, the mode of contemplation is also crucial to the kinds of states of mind which Eastern philosophies and religions seek to foster. In terms of its contemporary manifestations, Visagie points to

contemplative transformationalism in artistic exercises of creative reflection and reverie, psychological therapies, and the popular blooming of Eastern mindfulness practices in the West (ibid.: 104).

- *Mysticism: transformation through experiences of ecstasy or transcendence.* For Visagie, the mode of mysticism encompasses both radical and subtle forms of experiencing ecstasy (*ekstasis*), understood in its original sense of standing or being outside of oneself.<sup>117</sup> The ‘mystic’ is thus someone who reaches for that which is unknowable and inaccessible to supposedly ‘normal’ modes of experience. Visagie recognizes that ‘mysticism’ is traditionally only associated with exclusive, esoteric experiences of transcendence. Clearly, few people can lay claim to experiences such as ‘soul travelling’, transportations to another reality or extra-personal unification with ultimate Being. But such extraordinary quests can nevertheless be accommodated within a more general mode of transformation, according to which ‘mysticism’ embraces any attempt at overcoming the (perceived) limitations of ordinary thought and experience. This opens up our understanding of mysticism to variety of ‘everyday’ instances where this mode is also put to work. Visagie highlights the ‘democratization’ that mysticism has undergone in late modernity: transformational mysticism can now be practiced in the form of expert psychological guidance, ‘way out’ experiences that typically ‘defy description’ or ‘cannot be put into words’ (e.g. being in the wilderness, doing extreme sports, practicing tantric sex, etc.) and using consciousness altering drugs (1999: 106).
- *Asceticism: transformation through the giving up of things.* This ‘giving up of things’, Visagie explains, should be understood as relinquishing in the broadest, most comprehensive sense possible: it is at stake in any instance of doing away with something for the purpose of self-change – whether in the form of moral goodness, self-control, purity or salvation. Still he dissociates his understanding of ‘asceticism’ from the routine Foucauldian use of the term. In addition to the term’s familiar associations with radical abstinence, Foucault invokes the notion of ‘ascetics’ (*askesis*) to indicate the wide spectrum of techniques that he relates to the care and the changing of the self. Much of what Foucault calls ascetics fall outside the scope of Visagie’s delineation of asceticism as a

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<sup>117</sup> Visagie accepts that the mode of mysticism can be seen as an extension of that of contemplation – the dividing line between practices of contemplation and those of mysticism is not always clear. He cites the cases of Pythagoras, who was said to take “the juice of the poppy” to help induce states of mystical ecstasy in addition to his contemplation of the divine mathematical reality; and Plotinus who considered the contemplation of the beautiful as clearing the way for a consciousness-transcending union with ultimate reality (Visagie, 1999: 105). Yet while these two modes obviously overlap, mysticism nevertheless ‘takes the further step’ and therefore represents a distinct mode of transformation: whereas contemplation (even deep philosophical or theological reflection) still abides by certain given categories and distinctions of the mind, the mode of mysticism pursues subjective processes which go beyond the structures and boundaries that constitute our reflective- and experiential capacities.

distinct mode of transformation (1999: 101n19). Expressions of the ascetic mode may be as subtle as merely giving up things that are generally considered to be pleasurable, but can equally take on various extremes of self-inflicted pain – like relinquishing personal comfort, or bodily safety, or even one's very life. The ascetic mode can furthermore be viewed in terms of disciplining the self (again, understood in a wider sense), seeing that the latter inevitably boils down to ascetic processes of denial and restriction. Visagie notes the abounding presence of asceticism in ancient philosophical traditions of both the East and West (Diogenes' refusal to take a bath perhaps being the most infamous instance); and its importance to practically every religious tradition hardly needs stating (hermitages and monasticism being but two examples in the context of early and medieval Christianity). In contemporary secular contexts, the same imperative of asceticism persists in people committing to things like a highly stylized lifestyle, the proscriptive ethos of a particular social movement, or to things as commonplace as a strict diet, an exercise routine, or periods of 'unplugging' from the use of electronic devices.

- *Temperance: transformation through the avoidance of excess*: Whereas the ascetic may want to live without things such as environmental comfort, enjoyable refreshments, or sex, the practitioner of temperance is far less radical: he or she looks to rather use such things in a stylized, calculated and, most of all, sparing manner. Whereas the focus of ascetic activity is the avoidance of a set of ('lowly' regarded) things; the mode of temperance is rather focused on effecting states of balance through sober usage (1999: 108). When Visagie looks at antiquity he finds that – contrary to the elitist character of transformational ethics in this era – the mode of temperance is associated with the ordinary 'amateur' transformationalist. The philosophy of Epicurus is a prime example. While he is often labelled a hedonist, Epicurus' primary mode of interest is that of temperance – the enjoyment of only necessary, ordinary pleasures (plain food and drink, companionship) for the ultimate sake of sustaining calmness and avoiding emotional turmoil. Visagie (1999:110) notes that the idealization of this kind of emotional control is arguably still at stake in the modern youth cultural value of 'being cool'. Although 'being cool' is not strictly the practice of a transformational ethic, it nevertheless expresses "a certain aloofness and self-containment, a rejection of institutionalized 'normality', and an involvement with stylized appearance, which are all concerns that we know to be close to this ethic" (ibid.).
- *Endurance: transformation through using experiences of hardship for purposes of self-change*. The transformational mode of endurance, like temperance, can be seen as an extension of the ascetic. Yet it is the clear dissimilarity with regard to control that prompts Visagie to pose endurance as a distinct mode: while the ascetic intentionally designs circumstances of deprivation, the practitioner

of endurance merely finds herself in such circumstances. The practitioner of endurance effectively has no control over challenging conditions – ranging from discomfort to absolute suffering – but only over how she reacts to and is affected by them. “In choosing to experience a very difficult situation in a certain way”, Visagie explains, “the practitioner of endurance also performs a disciplinary molding of the self, in effect using his circumstances as a tool” (1999:107). He cites the Stoics as the paradigmatic representatives of this mode in the history of philosophy. Not only did they advocate the transformational endurance (‘Stoic indifference’) of all situations, but they also practiced preparatory meditative exercises (in which the mode of endurance thus enlists that of contemplation) whereby they imaginatively anticipated ‘the worst that could happen’ and tested and rehearsed their reaction to the latter (Visagie, 1999: 108; cf. Foucault, 1988a: 36–37). Likewise, the Greek Cynics advocated the endurance of things like hunger, cold, and insults for the sake of developing personal strength and independence (cf. Hadot, 2002: 190). For yet another example, Visagie (1999: 134) highlights the archetype of the ancient Zen disciple who has to endure severe tests from a master – a scenario that has become a master trope in martial arts movies.

- *Ministering: transformation through attending to others (or through being attended to).* The mode of ministering finds classical expression in the figure of the helper who structures his or her life around service to others in need, whether in a physical or spiritual sense. Visagie identifies practical aid and teaching as the two main historical outlets of transformational ministering (1999: 111). Compared to other modes, ministering makes especially clear the potential distortive effects of the ideal of personal transformation: in this case, the idea of ‘helping others’ suffers the contradiction of having to primarily satisfy the well-being of the helper. In this respect, Visagie notes the narcissism of pop-psychological discourses that prescribe helping others for the purpose of one’s own actualization – as when something like volunteer work is said to give you the so-called ‘helper’s high’ (ibid.: 112). Another characteristic of ministering is that it typically cooperates with other modes of transformation. One such alliance of modes, as Visagie singles out, is the transformational imperative to *minister* one’s *contemplative* exploits. In Plato’s recounting of the allegory of the cave, for example, Socrates beseeches the philosopher to return from his enlightened contemplation of the good – to ‘return to the cave’ – and to share his enlightened state with the rest of the ‘prisoners’ down below. Visagie detects the same notion of ministering contemplation in the Buddhist Bodhisattva-ideal: that the one who has attained enlightenment should turn back from a possible state of permanent nirvana in order to help those who are not yet liberated from suffering (ibid.: 111–112). What is missing from his account of ministering, however, is that Visagie never considers the mode of



ministering in terms of acts of receiving. Obviously, self-change can also be exercised through the inverse of ministering as he describes it: transformation, not through ministering, but through *letting yourself be ministered to*. This points to a significant dimension of personal transformation, which invariably relies on “the help of others” alongside, and even prior to, the individual’s “own means” of self-transformation (Foucault, 1988a: 18). Ministering is thus the only transformational mode that differentiates, as it were, into two possible directions: that is, ministering *to* the other, and receiving ministering *from* the other.

- *Pleasure: transformation through the use of pleasure.* While many efforts at transformation aim to resist pleasure, Visagie finds ample evidence that pleasurable experience itself is often used as a distinct instrument of self-change. Epicurus’ ethics, for example, gives instruction on the ordered experience of pleasure – focused on the controlled satisfaction of necessary natural desires – whereby one attains and maintains tranquility or calmness (1999:113). In nineteenth century dandyism Visagie finds an entirely different realization of transformational pleasure. Unlike the sober Epicurus, dandies such as Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde were devoted to the refined experience of pleasure – the cultivation of style, elegance, and beauty and the like – in an attempt to lead an artful existence (ibid.: 114). He also flags Michel Foucault as a representative of this mode, seeing that he personally explored the extraordinary (even ecstatic) pleasures of sado-masochistic sex as a novel means to self-invention (ibid.: 115).

The above modes capture the most essential ways of attempting the task of self-transformation, and they find their actualization in concrete techniques. Visagie in fact designates these elemental modes by the (Foucauldian) metaphoric label of ‘technologies’, in order to indicate that these elemental modes serve as enabling conditions for transformational activity. In these terms, therefore, ‘techniques’ are the realization of their underlying ‘technologies’.

Yet I must emphasize that Visagie draws an explicit, technical distinction between transformational ‘technologies’ (or ‘modes’, as I prefer to call them, for the sake of avoiding confusion) and ‘techniques’ – a distinction that is absent in the approaches of both Foucault and Hadot. Although Foucault tended to use the terms interchangeably, or refer to specific methods as ‘techniques’ and to more general classes of techniques as ‘technologies’, this nevertheless does not appear to be a formal distinction in his writings (see O’Farrell, 2005: 158–159). Visagie, to be sure, does not conceive of transformational modes as mere categories of techniques. He rather takes these modes to mark basic, diachronic continuities that run throughout historically situated practices of transformation; they are the persistent avenues through which personal transformation has been pursued to this very day (Visagie, 1999: 116). Foucault’s historicist assumptions, he will say, lead him to over-emphasize both the contingency and discontinuity of ‘epistemes’

(or epochal paradigms), and thus preclude the possibility of posing recurring diachronic transformational modes. Though not denying the historically specific, Visagie finds no problem in posing such elemental modes on the reasonable grounds of our human cognitive endowment, considering how they appear to be “related to very basic human attitudes and actions” (1999: 3). He faults Foucault for his antithetical separation of self-transformation from the idea of a relatively fixed human nature (2006: 50).

But what, then, do we gain from distinguishing transformational modes from concrete techniques? For one thing, the distinction affords greater explanatory ‘coverage’.<sup>118</sup> To analyze transformational ethics only in terms of their posited techniques, simply yields an endless list of individual techniques which, at best, can be bunched together in functional categories. With his comprehensive set of modes, Visagie adds a correlative perspective that cuts across individual permutations: he proposes basic actions that all techniques rely upon, and so introduces a systematizing vantage point that can account for any particular manner of practicing self-transformation – and, I would even say, anticipate those that we still do not know of.<sup>119</sup>

To examine transformational techniques in tandem with the mode frame allows for penetrating analytical maneuvers. Visagie makes much of how transformational techniques can be systematized from the perspective of their underlying modes. His discussion of transformational techniques thus revolves around differentiating them according to the respective modes within which they seem to be most ‘at home’: *Asceticism* (chastity, confession, disciplining the body, rejecting accepted standards in terms of home, clothing, food and drink, solitude, practicing silence, retreating from ordinary surroundings), *Temperance* (moderation in things like sex, drink, food, personal appearance, desire, anger, curiosity), *Contemplation* (self-examination: writing a journal, interpreting dreams; meditation of reality: walking, gardening, reading, listening to music), *Mysticism* (using mind-altering

118 I can point out that there have been other, perhaps informal, attempts at distinguishing similar sets of what Visagie would call transformational modes. Philosopher turned theologian Dallas Willard (1988), for instance, approaches spiritual disciplines around a division between “disciplines of abstinence” (thus in the mode of asceticism) and “disciplines of engagement”. Yet I find this distinction to collapse with the simple observation that asceticism is just as much a kind of engagement. His approach thus fails to delineate different possible modes (contemplative, mystical, ascetic, etc.) *within* what he calls transformational “engagement”. Another example comes from Richard Foster, who in his well-known *Celebration of Discipline* (1978) distinguishes between practices that are “inward”, “outward” or “corporate”. One needs only to consider the very first ‘inward discipline’ that Foster identifies, namely meditation, to see that these distinctions hold little water as essential modes. For while meditation may be directed inwards (towards the self or inner-experience), it may in other cases be focused outwards (towards God or nature); moreover it can be practiced individually or collectively, the latter of which can be construed as yet another form of ‘outwardness’. So, rather than defining essential modes, I take the issues raised by Foster’s categories to be better approached as schemas and structures that help characterize particular techniques.

119 Visagie accepts, as a matter of principle, that his set of transformational modes remains open to what may be overlooked additions. He nevertheless expresses confidence that, at the very least, this set covers the ‘classical’ modes in that they retain an ongoing cultural-historical prominence that extends back to (both Eastern and Western) antiquity (Visagie, 1999: 116).

drugs, self-relinquishing techniques, wildly ecstatic dance, mystical sexual union), *Endurance* (enduring personal or collective hardship, enduring tests of initiation), *Ministering* (teaching: conversation, dialogue, writing; giving practical aid: medical help, nursing, etc.), and *Pleasure* (ways of dressing, eating and drinking which induce a specialized sense of pleasure, self-revelation, intense sexual pleasure) (1999: 131–134). Such an initial differentiation of techniques according to modes can open up useful perspectives on *Fight Club*: it shows, for instance, the progression in how Jack trades the earlier techniques of *pleasure* (retail therapy, voyeurism) and *contemplation* (guided meditation, escapism) for the generally *ascetically* focused renunciations of comfort that qualify the later practices of his Fight Club.

However, I do not believe that Visagie intends this kind of heuristic ordering of techniques to be watertight. The ultimate benefit of the mode-technique distinction, as I see it, is that it enables the analyst to discern the multiple modes which are often at play within a single transformational technique. This is obviously what is at stake in a technique such as fighting: it simultaneously realizes elements of *asceticism*, *endurance*, *ministering*, and *pleasure*. And insofar as the Fight Club brawls involve certain states of mind and experiences of ecstasy, they even call upon the modes of *contemplation* and *mysticism*. So we have in this set of modes, I would say, a way of specifying distinct potential aspects of self-forming activity. Rather than to allocate the technique of fighting to a mode such as asceticism, it would be more revealing to think of transformational fighting as having, among others, an ascetic aspect.

### (c) Value

The value frame addresses transformational ethics in terms of the aims that guide self-change. For Visagie, this is a question of values: any transformational ethic advances a selection of values that capture the envisioned objective of personal transformation.

Classical examples of such transformational values include wisdom, serenity and goodness – but, classical as they are, one would not hope to get them from a fist fight. Naturally *Fight Club* dabbles in transformational values more befitting to its central theme: the fighters' practice of consensual violence can thus be read as an aspiration to freedom, authenticity, visceral awareness, to feeling 'more alive', a sense of connection, masculinity and solidarity, to name a few obvious possibilities.

It is worth re-emphasizing that Visagie wants to analyze the 'aimed-at' states of transformation – what Foucault (1984: 355) calls the *telos*, or goal, of one's work on the self – precisely in terms of the values that an ethic seeks to realize. So rather than accept a transformational outcome like redemption (or salvation) Visagie would opt to relate 'redemption' to more basic values that may undergird it. The redeemed state could for instance be one of *freedom*, as is apparently the desire of the Fight Club; in other cases it may be *innocence*, *purity*, *peace of mind*, or *unity*.

*with the Divine*. Likewise, the transformational telos of ‘immortality’ – sometimes mentioned by Foucault (ibid.) – Visagie would treat in terms of more basic desires for infinity, autonomy, or fullness of life. This manner of abstracting transformational values makes it easier for the analyst to relate the values of an ethic to larger cultural motives (value ‘regimes’) that fall outside a more immediate project of self-transformation.

To function as a transformational value needs not imply that a value is inherently transformational, or even ethical at that. The mentioned values pertaining to *Fight Club* clearly derive from much broader cultural interests, which have trickled down into the idiosyncratic transformational ambitions of a secret fighting society. Visagie thus reserves the technical specification for any value that gets appropriated by an overarching ideal of personal transformation, by which it acquires a special status as ‘transformational value’.

At this point one could have stopped with a simple precept, i.e. that the analysis of transformational values should be open to *any* value that may present itself as an aim of self-transformation – a position that I am happy to accept. But Visagie aims for more: he wants to arrive at “the standard values [...] that have always guided the practitioners of transformational ethics, across many different paradigms from ancient to modern times” (1999: 123). The working set of values that he thence arrives at reads as follows: happiness, fullness (fulfillment, completion), wholeness (integration, unity), perfection (purity), wisdom (insight, knowledge, truth, rationality), simplicity, serenity, beauty, goodness (care, morality, justice), freedom (independence, self-sufficiency) and individuality (1999: 123–129). This basic index of values, Visagie argues, functions as a unitary complex that gets individuated within any given context, meaning that values get interpreted, selected, combined and prioritized in different ways (1999: 123, 127–128).<sup>120</sup>

As with posing a trans-historical motive and corresponding modes of transformation, Visagie thus also wants to establish a set of general values that reaches across particular ethics and their contexts. Yet I am less convinced by the proposition when it comes to values. For although there are ‘classical’ values that seem to persist across centuries, and across cultures, I find it impossible to abstract a set of ‘base’ values that can sufficiently account for any possible value of transformation (as, I believe, can be done with transformational modes). And it is not only that Visagie’s list is bound to make glaring omissions – like the value of *awareness* (with its variations: presence, attentiveness, receptivity, openness), which is a widely recurring concern of transformation and also a prevalent one

120 Visagie also looks into whether ‘natural’ affinities may exist between transformational values and their modes of realization. Obviously one would not want to tie any value down to a given transformational mode, since, in principle at least, an ethic is free to have any link between its modes and values. Yet, on the basis of known transformational ethics, Visagie finds that certain values do coincide with some modes more than others. There thus appears to be special connections between the mode of *asceticism* and the values of purity and simplicity; between *contemplation* and the values of wisdom and rationality; between *mysticism* and wholeness or fullness; and between *ministering* and the values of goodness and justice (Visagie, 1999: 128–129).

in this thesis. More problematic still is that his selection of 'standard' values makes normative calls that compromise his own meta-ethical aim, as I see it, which is to formulate the structures that can account for all potential instances of transformational ethics.

With that said, I have no problem with the idea that there are certain general transformational values which do reappear in different contexts. And in this respect I do see the heuristic benefit of using Visagie's proposed index as a guide to the kind of values that the analyst of transformational ethics should be on the lookout for.

#### **(d) Domain**

The issue of the values that define an ideal transformed state is a separate from *what*, exactly, is supposed to get transformed in the process. The latter issue concerns the domain of transformational ethics: the designated aspect of the self on which transformational work is to be applied.

The domain frame is in actual fact not part of Visagie's formal framework. He does seem to recognize transformational domains – what Foucault (1984: 353; 1990: 26 – 27) identifies as the 'substance' of ethics – as a valid dimension for analyzing self-change (Visagie, 1999: i), but never ventures to show what this addition may look like within his own approach. Yet considering the deep relevance of this frame of analysis, the fact that Visagie does acknowledge it, and the ease with which his overall framework can accommodate it, I happily include the frame of transformational domains as an essential feature of the approach that I adopt for my own project.

Fortunately, in Foucault I have plentiful aid in filling out the picture that Visagie leaves incomplete. The domain of transformation, as Foucault would have it, is the part of self that is taken as the perceived object or 'material' of one's ethical work, the part that gets singled out for judgments and acts of self-change (Foucault, 1984: 352–353; Davidson, 1986: 228–229). This may include 'working on' domains such as one's thoughts, emotions, desires, will, or experience in totality.

The technique of fighting in *Fight Club*, for example, clearly concentrates on the domain of the *body*. But it applies equally to domains that extend beyond the immediate physical self, since their fighting is as much a self-fashioning of the characters' *behavior, life style and social relations*.

I believe it necessary that the analyst abides by any 'logic' of domains that a transformational ethic may impose, as the above example also suggests. This means that a posited domain of transformation, depending on the ethic at stake, need not be an empirical property of the self – it can be wholly phenomenological, conjectural, even superstitious. For it is often elusive, imperceptible phenomena such as 'intentions', 'passions', 'character' or 'the soul' that are deemed to be in need of transformational work.

It must furthermore be agreed that designated domains of transformation often lie outside the stricter boundaries of what one would normally demarcate as 'the self'. People like the Fight Club members may want to shape their actions, skills, habits, or way of life – things which are not necessarily 'internal' to the self, but which are nevertheless experienced as 'part' of the 'extended' person.<sup>121</sup> To recognize that self-transformation embraces interpersonal and culturally embedded extensions of the self, helps to ward off likely objections to the notion of personal transformation as being too individualistic or even solipsistic.

Many versions of transformational ethics will advance, not one, but a complex of domains, much like they also do with techniques, values and paradigms. And, again, the analyst can look into how an ethic conceives of its domains in terms of particular arrangements and interactions. Foucault gives us a taste of this kind of analysis when he identifies the triadic 'scheme' of acts, pleasure and desire in the ethics of sexual behavior, and elaborates on different historical constellations of these three domains. In what he calls the Greek 'formula', Foucault (1984: 359) explains that the domains of desire and pleasure are subsidiary to a strong emphasis on acts – but adds that Stoicism, already, shows indications of the elision of desire. In the Chinese 'formula', pleasure is the privileged domain at the expense of acts, which have to be restrained in order to achieve the fullest pleasure. Foucault sees the Christian 'formula' as one of neutralizing acts, which negatively emphasize desire by essentially wanting to eradicate it. In a similar vein, pleasure becomes excluded from both theoretical and practical considerations. And the modern 'formula', lastly, is fixated on desire and the liberation thereof.

Foucault however limits himself to how an ethic emphasizes or elides one domain with respect to one another. The analysis of domain-complexes, I find, requires that one additionally investigate how domains likewise operate on and impact upon one another. In order to do this, I have to accept that a transformational ethic does not only see 'work' on a domain as a matter of enhancing, moderating or reducing that domain. The perceived work of transformation can moreover involve that one domain be directed at and applied to another domain; or, otherwise, that the 'receiving' domain be made responsive to the transformative input of another. Domains of transformation can thus be analyzed as forming hierarchical configurations in which one domain (the 'source') is understood to operate on another (the 'target'), and possibly even does so through the mediation of yet another domain (the 'channel'). The familiar Platonic notion of self-mastery involves such an arrangement of domains, when it is said that one's reason (source) must exercise control over desire (target) through the power of the will (channel).

Pinpointing such relationships between transformational domains incidentally offers a useful basis also for critical appraisals of transformational ethics, since these hierarchical configurations tend to pose problematic essentialisms, reductionisms, and dualisms which call for critical deconstruction.

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121 It is worth recalling William James' (1890: 291–292) classic observation that the line between *me* (the empirical self) and *mine* (what we regard as belonging to the self) is a difficult one to draw.

### (e) Paradigm

Any ethic of transformation gives expression to, or ‘colors,’ the motive of personal transformation in a particular way – the transformation is sought after for precise reasons, some values are privileged over others, and specific techniques are singled out as suitable to the cause. So the question is: what guides the transformationalist in selecting particular elements of transformational ethics and putting them to work in a distinctive way?

The paradigm frame details the particular constellation of discourses, or ‘paradigms,’ that motivate a transformational ethic and casts it into a distinctive form. The overall paradigm of a transformational ethic, as Visagie conceives it, is typically composed of commitments to a philosophical school (e.g. Platonism, Stoicism, Rationalism, Romanticism), religious institution (e.g. Buddhist monasticism, Sufism, Puritanism), social movement (e.g. 1960’s counterculture, Human Potential Movement, environmentalism), or any similar ideological ‘home’ (1999: 121–122). Tyler Durden’s ethic of fighting, for example, does not appeal to an explicit guiding text, such as scripture or a self-help manual. Nevertheless his worldview cannot but bare its indebtedness to deep-rooted discourses like existentialism, nihilism, and anarchism. This confluence of discourses comprises a ‘paradigm’ in the general sense of an explanatory framework with a particular set of concepts, assumptions, generalizations, ideals and norms – all of which have bearing on how personal transformation is regarded and exercised.

For Visagie, to reconstruct the paradigm of a transformational ethic is to come to terms with its historical situatedness and, by that, its individuality. A given context constitutes the specific interpretive environment, the guiding worldview, within which personal transformation is understood and enacted: it introduces the idea of transformation, it gives the rationale for transforming the self and it dictates a particular application of modes, techniques and transformational values. The transformational paradigm is thus the individuating ‘filter’ through which the general structures of self-transformation – belonging to the other dimensions of mode, technique, value and domain – acquire their distinctive identity and meaning in a given ethic (Visagie, 1999: 121).<sup>122</sup>

The analysis of transformational paradigms incorporates what Foucault (1984: 353) identifies as the “mode of subjection”, which concerns “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations”, and so prompts practices of self-change. Foucault more or less limits this aspect of self-change to various historically defined agencies (divine law, natural law, cosmological order,

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<sup>122</sup> Visagie (1999: 126–128) gives as example the paradigmatic ‘filtering’ of transformational values. As he explains it, basic transformational values like serenity or freedom or beauty are quite indeterminate, and only obtain concrete meaning within a determining paradigm. So the Christian experience of peace, Greek *ataraxia*, and Buddhist quietude clearly relate to the same ‘primitive concept’, one might say, but the value of serenity still retains a distinct sense and inflection within each of these contexts. Apart from giving values concrete meaning, the paradigm of transformation configures potential values into a profile specific to each ethic: it dictates which values get singled out, prioritized, and grouped together, and which are rendered irrelevant or even get actively rejected.

reason, social convention, beauty or ‘aesthetics of existence’) which reveal moral obligations as well as inspire adherence to them – his aim being to show how people in disparate historical contexts can be subjected to similar moral codes (relating to self-transformation) in fundamentally different ways (Foucault, 1984: 353; Davidson, 1986: 228–229).

Visagie’s analysis of transformational paradigms, on the other hand, seeks to situate the sort of transformation-inspiring agencies that Foucault describes, within a broader ensemble of contextual conditions of which they form part. Among other things, this requires an indication of how the complex interconnection of multiple paradigms (and the historical agencies that they respectively pose) may give form to in a particular approach to transformation. One way of going about this is to locate ‘closer’, ‘inner’ paradigms within its concentrically expanding ‘outer’ contexts. Whereas Foucault may treat the self-regulating practice of sexual moderation, for instance, as following from the call of Reason (as the ethical ‘mode of subjection’), Visagie would rather approach this practice in terms of the more immediate context or paradigm of a particular philosophy that, on its part, is embedded in broader discursive contexts. He would thus interpret the paradigm of sexual moderation according to its ‘inner frame’, for instance early Rationalist philosophy, that is based within an ‘outer frame’, such as humanism or the modernist ethos (see Visagie, 1999: 91–99).

Similarly underdeveloped in Foucault’s ‘mode of subjection’, as I see it, is its restriction to what can be called the ‘normative’ motivations of the transformationalist. Visagie, on the contrary, recognizes that transformational paradigms also encompass negative, ‘anti-normative’ prescripts. Aspirations of personal transformation are frequently conceived of as a struggle against supposedly threatening paradigms. We can thus imagine the paradigm to have a ‘positive’ and ‘negative pole’: whereas the positive pole circumscribes that which should be attained, it may be complimented by negative suggestions of that which the transformationalist must ultimately turn away from (Visagie, 1999: 122). This polarized (dualistic) separation of ideals is arguably inherent to the worldview of the transformationalist, whose practice of transformation typically takes a stand against some (vilified) segment of reality – like the sinful ‘flesh’ in Christian discourse, or a ‘corrupting society’ in Romanticism.

For Visagie, therefore, it is characteristically common for transformational ethics to function as a form of ‘revolt’ (sometimes literally so) against a denounced *status quo*: the flight from the supposedly anti-normative to a claimed normative ideal of transformation, marks a resistance against, and transgression of, what is generally taken to be ‘normal’ or ‘natural’. The paradigm at work in *Fight Club* is exemplary of this kind of reactive impetus which drives transformational ethics. Fighting, in this case, serves to rid the fighters of a life of consumerism as well as the millennial ‘crisis in masculinity’, which form the asserted ‘enemy paradigms’ of the Fight Club. The group’s recourse to violence for the sake of *self*-transformation thus makes literal the implicit *cultural resistance* that this practice at the same time



enacts. And this cultural resistance *itself* becomes literal when the Fight Club eventually degenerates into a terrorist collective.

### 2.3 On Normativity & Critique

Finally, it is worth restating that analysis through the above frames ultimately also serves Visagie's critical interests with regard to transformational ethics. I have already noted that Visagie observes in transformational ethics an inherent bent towards the ideological, which he treats as a distortive 'transformationalism'. Whilst he does recognize the legitimacy of wanting to change oneself in certain respects, or needing to care for the self, he insists that these endeavors cannot evade their ideological contexts; and more often than not the imperative of self-transformation itself acquires the status of a distortive ideology. Visagie's chief objections to ideological transformationalism, as I see it, can be summarized as follows (cf. Visagie, 2006: 49–50):

- its characteristically selective privileging of (idealized) values (including the ideal of transformation itself) to extents which result in the disregard, distortion or even derision of other equally legitimate values;
- its fixations on the extraordinary and the novel, which downgrade the validity of ordinary life states in favor of achieving ecstatic or (quasi-) 'transcendent' experiences;
- fallible anthropological assumptions and appraisals which (reductively) place too much weight on isolated modes and techniques to achieve fundamental personal transformation;
- the idealistic individualism inherent to separating the ideal of self-transformation from (constitutive and restrictive) fundamental contexts such as a relatively constant human nature and unavoidable socialization processes;
- and the problematic ideological biases (born from religious schools, social movements, philosophical paradigms, etc.) which motivate and define particular transformational practices.

As I will elaborate in a moment, I favor an approach to transformational ethics that downplays Visagie's general and *a priori* critical stance on the topic. But this is not to say that relevant critique has no place in my analyses of film-philosophy. Some of Visagie's objections to transformational ethics will certainly surface in my appraisals of bold conceptions of film-philosophy – most notably when I get to the 'preparatory ethics' that these conceptions imply (see Chapter 3, Section 4).

### 3. Adapting the Framework: Meta-Analysis & Transformational Ethics of Film

Leaving *Fight Club* aside, for a moment, I want to reflect on my own use of the framework expounded above. I particularly value Visagie's broad historical scope and multipronged analytical focus for my own analysis of transformational ethics. Yet it is worth stressing that I appropriate his framework here for two purposes that he never takes into consideration: (a) the analysis of transformational ethics relating to art, in particular film, and, with that, (b) the meta-analysis of such transformational ethics as they manifest in the theoretical discourse of film-philosophy, dealing with the idea that films can do philosophy. These two purposes, both crucial to my project, require a broadened, comprehensive conception of transformational ethics, which calls for an initial departure from what I find to be needlessly restrictive definitions that Visagie adheres to.

#### Expanding the Reach of Transformational Ethics

Visagie, as I have explained, chooses to frame transformational ethics in terms of ideological ideals pursued by 'expert' transformationalists – individuals, that is, who devote themselves to rigorous and explicit ethical programs of self-change. This particular emphasis prompts Visagie to make transformational ethics exclusive: he identifies aspirations of personal transformation, not with the doings of the average person, but with the extreme kind of quest that one would associate with the mystic, eremite or sage; a quest, as he defines it, "to radically change and refine one's existence in accord with the desire to live on a higher level than that of the general populace" (2006: 48–49).

By branding transformational ethics as a radical, elitist endeavor, Visagie sells short the reach of a framework that can be far more flexible and inclusive. Certainly, history has shown that transformationalist projects typically harbor an elitist streak. But to claim that elitism is essential to all transformational ethics withholds us from likewise recognizing minor, everyday aspirations of self-change, which can be clarified in the same analytical terms that Visagie somehow wants to reserve for only grand transformationalist pursuits.

I have similar reservations about Visagie's inclination to tie transformational ethics down to their ideological qualities. I do acknowledge that there is always an ideological side to transformational ethics: aims of personal transformation are inevitably embroiled in all kinds of hegemonic idealizations and distortions. Moreover, oftentimes the transformationalist ideal itself manifests as the source of such hegemony. But to make ideology the defining starting point makes us lose sight of the substantial place of the self's relationship to itself – a given which, I insist, is a far more elemental condition for transformational ethics. Aspirations of self-transformation do not only have their source in (ideologically compromised) cultural conditions, as Visagie emphasizes, but more basically in the self-

awareness of human beings, who unavoidably think of and experience their selves as something that they can engage with, influence, and change.

Recall for example what George Lakoff & Mark Johnson (1999: 267–289) identifies as the ‘Subject-Self’ conceptual metaphor. This designates a basic cognitive schema according to which people understand and experience the self as ‘split’, as essentially being a ‘relationship’ between a ‘Subject’ and a ‘Self’. The ‘Subject’, they say, is seen as the seat of the person’s essence, and houses the consciousness, reason, judgment and will that gets exerted on a more or less objective ‘Self’, which may variously be perceived as one’s body, social roles or actions. While obviously at odds with the empirical reality of a single self, Lakoff & Johnson claims that the schema of a dual self nevertheless expresses a seemingly universal and highly commonplace experience of the self and its inner life (ibid.: 268, 288).

Visagie’s similar insistence on the universality of a motive of personal transformation therefore falls short if considered solely in cultural-ideological terms. The seeming inevitability of transformational ethics – a position which I certainly endorse – requires that we also consider the necessities of human cognition and structures of experience from which this ubiquitous motive stems.

My own point of departure, therefore, is to first and foremost frame transformational ethics from the basic perspective of the self’s relationship with itself – an unavoidable relationship, as I see it, within which judgments and intentions of personal transformation are equally unavoidable. This broadened perspective allows us to see transformational ethics – susceptible to ideology and elitism as it may be – as an indispensable part of our ordinary ethical lives.

### **Ethics, Morality & the Transformational Aspect**

In the interest of further clarification, let me now say a word on how I situate transformational ethics within the larger spheres of ethics and morality. In order to clear the forest, I follow a rough distinction between ethics as concerned with values, the question of the good, specifically what is ‘good for me’ or ‘my group’; and morality, on the other hand, as involving norms that should ensure the right or just, thereby responding to the question ‘what is right for everyone’ (see Habermas, 1993: 1–18; 1996: 162–68; Finlayson, 2005: 92–95).

Instead of allocating transformational ethics to its own separate sphere, then, such transformation is better construed as a distinct aspect inherent to both the ethical and moral spheres as defined above. The necessity of the transformational aspect, as I see it, derives from the self’s relationship with itself, and its attendant structures of self-change, which constitute an inescapable horizon that extends to any sphere of basic human interest.

This firstly means that the inner-workings of ethics – seeking ‘the good’ – will inevitably include transformational aspirations and efforts, even if only in principle. In many instances it is precisely some form of personal transformation that characterizes ‘the good’ that people live for – what I call a transformationalist

conception of the good. Even so, *all* pursuits of ethical ends – whether explicitly transformational or not – must assume a measure of self-change required to align one's beliefs, attitude, outlook, and actions, to name but a few domains, with whatever good one chooses to pursue. No ethical project, in my view, can steer clear from this tacit demand for self-transformation.

A similar logic applies to the sphere of morality. Self-willed adherence to a moral norm implies an act of self-transformation insofar as one has to bring oneself to that adherence. It is precisely this self-subjection to moral norms that Foucault wants to analyze under the heading of 'ethics' (Foucault, 1984: 352). Under the broader study of "morals", Foucault distinguishes (a) moral "acts", (b) the imposed "moral code" that prescribes those acts, and (c) "ethics" – the particular relationship with self that decides "how the individual is supposed to constitute him [or her]self as a moral subject of his [or her] own actions" (ibid.). The late Foucault thus recognizes ethical self-formation as an essential constituent of people's attachment to moral code.

A similar transformational angle on morality has recently been articulated by Peter Sloterdijk (2013: 25), who celebrates the Rilkean line, "you must change your life" as the "the absolute imperative" which exceeds both the Kantian hypothetical and categorical imperatives. Behind the flashy polemics, however, sits a simple acknowledgement of self-transformation and the relevance that it retains within the sphere of moral norms. As a reviewer of Sloterdijk's work makes clear: "To submit to any ethical imperative presupposes the practice of submitting to a transformation, an askesis of self-overcoming" (Mendieta, 2014).

To be clear, I do not wish to privilege ethical interests of self-transformation over moral ones; nor, for that matter, do I give precedence to an 'ethics of the self' (Foucault) over an 'ethics of the other' (Levinas, Ricoeur). My claim is only that transformational intentions towards self cannot be completely detached from morality, and therefore will feature as an unavoidable, albeit limited, aspect of any moral endeavor.

So to look at both ethics and morality through the 'lens' of the self's relationship with itself, and the structures of self-change that it conforms to, brings into focus an indispensable transformational aspect that forms part of these basic spheres of human interest. My insistence on this transformational aspect is not to say that something like ethics can be reduced purely to a matter of self-transformation, but rather that there is an inevitable side to ethics that can be disclosed in terms of self-transformation. And, in much the same way, this perspective or 'lens' will disclose an ethical-transformational aspect to spheres as diverse as social interaction, power, religion – or, my particular interest, art and film.

### 3.1 Transformational Ethics of Film

My first main adaptation of Visagie's framework is to develop it as a distinctive ethical perspective on film. To situate film within the sphere described by

Visagie's theory enables us to trace the main contours and structures of what I call 'transformational ethics of film' – an array of conceptions of how film, specifically, can serve as a means to personal transformation.

Of course, my aim is not to establish my own transformational ethics of film – lest I succumb to committing myself to normative, essentializing claims – but instead to use the skeletal outline at my disposal to ascertain and evaluate the particular ways in which film philosophers 'fill in' the general idea of self-transformation through film.

Although the issue of self-transformation has definite relevance to practices and intentions of filmmakers, as well as to what films themselves depict, the various transformational ethics that emerge in discourses of film-philosophy mostly revolve around film reception – the hypothetical viewer's potential transformation through particular cinematic experiences. Herewith many philosophers of film thus suggest that *watching film* can be a *technique* of self-transformation. Yet, as with any other technique, I propose, the notion of transformational film-viewing cannot but take shape around the basic dimensions that Visagie's theory isolates. With its aid, I can therefore analyze various versions of the notion comparatively with reference to the same basic dimensions: the transformational *modes* that are attributed to watching films, the *domains* that it is said to work on, the supposed *values* that it may realize, and so forth.

## Transformational Ethics & Art

Naturally, the possibility of a transformational ethics of film relates to the far more comprehensive issue of how a transformational ethics relates to art. My project in fact opens up the multifaceted question of what art, in general, has been held to mean to our transformational pursuits.

The function of art in practices of self-transformation is a topic that Visagie never takes up. Interestingly, neither did Foucault get around to this question – perhaps even purposively so. While he gave considerable attention to literature and painting in the earlier stages of his career, Foucault's ethical project gives no consideration to engagement with art within the care of the self. This seems a strange omission for an ethics that is synonymous with notions like an 'aesthetics of existence' or self-creation as a 'work of art'. The reason for this discrepancy might be that Foucault explicitly decries the fact that today "art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life" (1984: 350). And, apparently, he wants to redress this imbalance by turning away from works of art and rather to underscore the aesthetic as having its proper home in the 'art' that is ethics.<sup>123</sup> Be that as it may, Foucault's insistence on the 'art of ethics' leaves open the nevertheless important question of the 'ethics of art': how

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123 "We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society, that the principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's life, one's existence" (1984a: 362).

do concrete art objects, and the aesthetic experiences that they afford, support and even encourage people's attempts at self-transformation?

As with ethics, I approach the ethics of art, as a general sphere, in terms of the values that people ascribe to art. And since the necessity of self-transformation will enter into any ethical search for 'the good', as I have argued above, much the same goes for seeking the 'the good' in art. The canonical kind of ethical values associated with art never drift far from the theme of personal transformation. Apart from the multitude of ways in which the creation of art can serve as a practice of self-transformation, the classic uses that art is said to have for the beholder – catharsis, emotional enrichment, leisure and play, learning, cultivation of empathy, self-reflection, self-improvement, *Bildung*, moral guidance, therapy, consolation, and withdrawal from everyday life<sup>124</sup> – are either essentially about personal transformation, or at least approximates it by involving some form of self-regulation.

Again, my claim is not that the value of art can be reduced solely to matters of personal transformation. But I do maintain that we relate to art within the human horizon of self-transformation, which inevitably forms an aspect of any significant value that people attach to art. And instead of simply recognizing such a general transformational perspective on the ethics of art, the framework that I adopt provides a set of tools that can help clarify a variety of transformationalist conceptions of the good of art – precisely as I will do with reference to film in the field of film-philosophy.

### **Aid, Agency & Transformational Work**

To accommodate film in Visagie's framework however requires that a vital axis be added to our analytical point of departure: the transformational ethics of viewing film entails that the self's operations on itself may occur *via* the parallel relation of that self being affected and operated upon by a film.

A transformational ethic of film thus introduces film as an art into the basic relation of a self that aspires to change itself, where as an additional role player it is suggested to be an essential aid to personal transformation. As Foucault (1988a: 18) defines it, the work of self-transformation may be effected by one's "own means" or "with the help of others". But 'others', as I see it, need not be restricted to other *people*, and can certainly extend also to concrete *objects* – films, or artworks in general, being but one class of objects that can presumably be instrumental to an individual's personal transformation. But, as I shall show in chapters to come, philosophers also entertain the transformational role of film in stronger terms: the view that film can actually initiate the suitably attuned viewer's transformation. Film, thus conceived, is more than a mere aid. As an agent of personal transformation, rather, film makes a transformational appeal to

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<sup>124</sup> For reviews of the standard values and functions that are attributed to art, see Belfiore and Bennet (2008), Eldridge (2014a: 225–283), Van Maanen (2009: 149–201), and Landy (2012: 4–11).

its viewers, the encounter of which draws them into a particular course of work on the self, unfolding in harmony with the particular experience that the film provides.

Granting this kind of agency to film however requires that we be clear about the distinctness of the film's work from the self-work that the viewer does. On the one hand, the film's 'transformational work' involves those posited forms, modes and methods by which a film is said to encourage and support transformational activity in the viewer – the result of which I will also call the film's assumed 'transformational effect' on the viewer. The work of the film is not 'transformative' – it does not transform directly – but precisely 'transformational', conveying that it only has to do with the viewer's transformation. For, on the other hand, we have the viewer's relatively independent acts of self-transformation, the modes and techniques that the viewer performs, which remain distinct from the film's work, even if prompted by it.

To my mind, any ethic of transformation must sufficiently account for these two sides: to claim that the film postures the viewer in a mode of transformation is to simultaneously affirm the viewer's own active involvement in the transformational process. I will pick up on this correlation in my discussion of transformational modes again in the section that follows.

### **3.2 Meta-Theoretical Analysis of Film-Philosophy**

The core business of this study is to examine transformational ethics as a theme in theories of film-philosophy, transformational ethics as envisioned by film philosophers. This objective calls for my second major reorientation of Visagie's theory: to deploy it as a framework explicitly geared towards meta-theoretical analysis. Whereas Visagie intends his theory to address the practical discourse of self-transformation, I find in the selfsame theory a valuable heuristic for reflecting on the ethics that transpire in a theoretical discourse – the film as philosophy debate. The frames through which Visagie describes different dimensions of transformational praxis are therefore transposed into meta-perspectives that disclose the same ethical dimensions and issues within the theoretical domain of film-philosophy.

I emphasize, once more, that I take as my point of departure views that are already circulating in the film as philosophy debate. My primary undertaking with the proposed framework is not to theorize my own ethical understanding of film, but to establish a synoptic, meta-level of analysis from which existing theoretical conceptions of transformational ethics of film can be examined and critically charted. This purposeful meta-stance requires that I continually heed the needed distance between the first-order concepts of transformational ethics that film philosophers commit themselves to, and my own second-order theorization, which aims to locate these concepts as particular options and directions within a bigger ethical picture of the field.

In what follows, I will elaborate on the various uses and heuristic potentials of my framework as a meta-analytical tool.

### **Explication & Reconstruction**

My framework firstly serves various functions of clarification: it aims to make explicit ethical impulses and conceptions in the film as philosophy debate that are mostly only implied or suggested; to explicate the general motive of personal transformation in theories of film-philosophy; as well as to elaborate the differentiation of this motive into the diverse transformational ethics, and their imagined practices, that these theories consequently pose.

My approach thus clarifies an overall ethical-transformational orientation of the field. Since philosopher's ethical positions are frequently implied or understated, this is indeed a matter of the field's ethical orientation, rather than of explicit commitment.<sup>125</sup> The majority of philosophers who address the question of film-philosophy are not principally, nor consciously even, dealing with ethics and the issue of personal transformation. Yet, in the process of tackling the question of film-philosophy, these philosophers inevitably ascribe to film values that repeatedly affirm a broad motive of personal transformation as central to their assumptions of what 'the good' of film is. Having already introduced the types of 'committed-' versus 'distanced theorists', then, I think of these philosophers, rather, as 'incidental theorists' of transformational ethics: they commit to ethically significant positions regarding the transformational value of film, but do so only as an inadvertent consequence of theorizing a particular understanding of film-philosophy. This is in contrast to those I deem 'essential theorists' – the likes of Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, or, more recently, Robert Sinnerbrink – whose views of film-philosophy consciously include what are clearly ethical-transformational considerations.

Yet there is more to explicate than a mere motive in discourses on film-philosophy. Whenever a theory expresses a motive of personal transformation, it will be accompanied by intimations of the assumed means and nature of transformation through film. These indications provide the raw material for reconstructing an implicit ethic that the theory in fact posits. In order to extract and elaborate on such an ethic, I will resort to my frames of analysis that pose to a theory different questions of the 'how', 'why', 'what' and 'to what end' of self-change through film, and so help spell out essential properties of the transformational ethic that a theory proposes.

Let me give an initial idea of how my frames of analysis serve to tease out transformational ethics in theories of film-philosophy:

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<sup>125</sup> With this I draw on Colin Koopman's (2013) distinction between theoretical "commitment" versus "orientation".



(a) *Technique*

The most obvious dimension of transformational ethics in film-philosophy concerns the posited 'how' of transformation, its concrete means. The very notion of transformational ethics of film entails that various dealings with film – making films, viewing films, thinking about them, writing about them – have the capacity to be transformational techniques. Film philosophers, for the most part, emphasize the transformational value of film for viewers, and by so doing cast distinct visions of how *film-viewing* can serve as a technique of self-transformation.

Barring the odd exception – like Daniel Frampton's (2006a: 148–168) guidelines for enhancing the experience of the 'filosophical' filmgoer – these philosophers, quite understandably, do not go into detailed methods and instructions for watching films as a practice of transformation. Yet more specific prescriptions for the practice can still be derived from philosophers' outlook on film-philosophy, and the nature of the ethic that they adopt; for instance, viewing particular (kinds of) films, or viewing films with the deemed appropriate attitude, expectation, or frame of mind. Filling in the specifics of the technique of film-viewing extends to the theme of 'preparatory' transformational ethics – the prior steps of self-work needed to ensure a transformative encounter with film – which I will develop in the following chapter.

The question of 'how' includes – by default – also the presumed modes of transformation that techniques carry out. The mode frame, as explained, helps disclose the heterogeneity of basic means that a technique may mobilize: depending on the context, the transformational mode of film-viewing may shift between modes as diverse as pleasure, contemplation or asceticism. As distinct potential aspects of transformation, these modes may even be simultaneously present in transformational film-viewing. So although theories of film-philosophy all presuppose a notion of film-viewing as concrete means of transformation, the task of my meta-analysis is to differentiate the array of possible modes underlying this technique, and to identify which modes philosophers thematize and ascribe to this process.

(b) *Mode*

To pose the question of transformational modes to film-philosophy, then, is to probe the essential means to personal transformation provided for by cinematic 'thinking', or philosophy 'done' by film, as philosophers conceive it. Visagie's notion of transformational modes predicts a fundamental set of alternatives that any intention of self-change is most likely bound to. This set of alternatives, I propose, also holds for self-change through film. Indeed, the modes – contemplation, asceticism, mysticism, and

endurance, in particular – persistently feature as topoi and guiding models for the ethical-transformational significance attributed to films-as-philosophy. And, again, the modes are often suggested to function in an interactive harmony, where each thus represents a distinct perspective on, or aspect of, the transformational effect that a particular film is said to achieve.

When analyzing transformational modes that pertain to film-philosophy, one must take care not to confuse supposed modes of the viewer with the modes of the film. As already noted, I reserve the notion of ‘transformational modes’ for the viewer’s basic means to self-change, which I distinguish from the means and methods – the ‘transformational work’ – whereby the film encourages a process of self-transformation in the viewer. What complicates matters, however, is that the work and special appeal of films are often approached in the very terms provided by transformational modes: philosophers are typically drawn to qualities like a film’s sparse, ‘ascetic’ design, a ‘contemplative’ cinematic tone, or a style that gestures to the ‘transcendental’ or ‘ecstatic’. In such cases transformational modes emerge as basic models for conceiving different cinematic aesthetics. But by virtue of the prominent ethical topoi that these modes are, the distinct aesthetics that they designate for philosophers also carry decided connotations of the transformational work that ‘contemplative’, ‘ascetic’, or ‘transcendental cinemas’ are expected to do.

All the more reason, then, for my insistence on clarifying the difference between the supposed work of the film, on the one hand, and the elicited mode of the viewer, on the other. Take, for instance, the implied ethics in Robert Sinnerbrink’s characterization of ‘cinematic thinking’ (e.g. 2011a: 137–142), a thinking that he says promises to renew our own thinking by provoking yet also resisting philosophical reflection in equal measure (see Chapter 1, Section 4.5). Clearly, this conception of film-philosophy attributes to film the transformational work of provocation and resistance. But this work can also be related to various possible modes of the viewer, each of which recasts the work of film in a slightly different light. No doubt, Sinnerbrink’s notion of cinematic thinking firstly suggests the viewer to adopt a *contemplative* mode of transformation, which defines film’s essential work as guiding the viewer towards a particular awareness or course of reflection. Yet, in terms of the resistance that it enacts, cinematic thinking can also be seen eliciting an *ascetic* posture, which entails that a film does the corresponding work of withholding from viewers, for instance, the applicability of neat and clear conceptual categories that they would normally rely upon. Closely related, also, is the presumed mode of *endurance* that cinematic thinking elicits. This mode explicitly renders the resistance enacted by cinematic thinking as a matter of confronting viewers with obstructions, difficulties or discomforts that may prompt

a transformation of thought. Cinematic thinking moreover hints at a certain *mystical* mode of viewing, insofar as it reflects an aspiration for viewers to overcome and renew ordinary forms of thought. According to the mode of mysticism, cinematic thinking's resistance comes down to a work of transcendence – resorting to the affective, imagistic and aesthetic qualities of cinema to reach beyond the accepted limitations of conventional philosophical concepts and language.

Each transformational mode that people may attribute to the film viewer, therefore, suggests a basic category of transformational work to be done by the film, as I tentatively summarize in the following table.

Table 2.1

Transformational Mode of the Viewer	←	Transformational Work of Film
<i>Most basic means available to self-transformation</i>	<i>Ethical posturing of viewer / Fostering of transformational modes</i>	<i>Corresponding kinds of work of film on the viewer</i>
Contemplation: Transformation through a form of reflection or consciousness or concentrated experience		To elicit reflection; to induce a particular state of consciousness; to construct a concentrated experience
Asceticism: Transformation through the giving up of things		To withhold the viewer from things taken for granted; to take away; to lessen; to reduce
Mysticism: Transformation through experiences of ecstasy or transcendence		To transcend; to push the boundaries of the viewer's faculties or ordinary experience
Endurance: Transformation through using experiences of hardship for purposes of self-change		To make difficult; to challenge; to obstruct, to discomfort
Ministering: Transformation through attending to others; or through being attended to by others		To let the viewer address (the situation, the perspective, the person of) another; or to let viewers be addressed by another.
Pleasure: Transformation through the use of pleasure		To arouse pleasure, enjoyment or delight.

Some ethical conceptions pose a simple one-to-one correspondence between the above modes and the kind of film-work that each of them forecasts, whereas others mix and match. The former occurs, for instance,

in philosophical appraisals of Terrence Malick's 'contemplative style', which for the most part connect the viewer's assumed *contemplative* mode with the 'contemplative work' of the style that is perceived to promote this mode (see Chapter 4). This stands in contrast to perceptions of the equally much-remarked contemplative character of so-called 'slow' films, which commentators instead match with the '*ascetic*' work that these films are taken to do. We see this in the typical sentiment, captured by Kuhn & Westwell (2012), that it is slow cinema's patient efforts of "minimalism", "austerity" and "downplaying of drama, action, and event" that helps endow "the activity of viewing with a meditative or contemplative quality".<sup>126</sup>

The analysis of transformational modes in film-philosophy runs into another general problem: philosophers' notions of transformational film-viewing are by and large confined only to the mode of contemplation, the idea that films foster self-transformation by means of particular forms of reflection or awareness in the viewer. Their preference for this mode is understandable, given the contemplative nature of philosophy itself – but where does that leave the other modes in my analysis? Because in most cases it is not exactly accurate of me to infer that cinematic thinking postures the viewer in a mode of endurance, to take one example. If this mode is literal, it has to be something like Alex DeLarge's forced endurance of the fictional 'Ludovico technique' in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971); or, to give another illustration, the viewer who willingly endures the graphic sexual violence of contemporary 'extreme cinema' (see Horeck & Kendall, 2011; Frey, 2013), as with the notorious depiction of rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002).<sup>127</sup> Similarly, to attribute a mode of mysticism to film-viewing implies that a film supports a literal experience of ecstasy – say, in conjunction with the use of drugs.<sup>128</sup> But

126 A similar correspondence happens to clear up Paul Schrader's (1972) potentially confusing designation of a 'transcendental style' in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer. It is 'transcendental' in the sense that he proposes this style to foster for viewers an indirect disclosure of the Transcendent. But paving the way for this presumed mode of mysticism is the essentially *ascetic* work – cinematic operations of elimination, sparseness and purification – that Schrader centrally associates with a transcendental style.

127 One also sees this literal mode of endurance in the example of adolescent males, who view frightening or excessively violent films as a test for affirming their masculine identity to their peers. The social occasions of viewing such films thus serve as 'rites of passage' for showing that you are 'man enough' 'to take it' (Goldstein, 1999: 275–276).

128 Presumably there are people who do combine their use of consciousness-altering drugs with watching films deemed appropriate to this modern practice of mysticism – a simple internet search for 'ultimate stoner movies' or 'films to watch when you're high' easily confirms the existence of such interests. One well-known example of this combo is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which, after an initial slow start, was heralded by a second-wave audience as a "psychedelic roller coaster" and "the ultimate trip" (Joyce, 2001). Considering the film's narrative minimalism, its dazzling visuality and how "much of the film functions outside linguistic parameters", it is not surprising that experiences of Kubrick's sci-fi masterpiece were straightforwardly likened to "cinematic LSD" (Powell, 2007: 161). This kind of drug-inflected ritualization

this is not what transformational modes like endurance and mysticism mean in the contemplation-focused context of film-philosophy, such as Sinnerbrink's notion of cinematic thinking described above.

Hence, I propose that the mode of contemplation be systematically unfolded by identifying each of the other transformational modes *within* it. This relies on the assumption that the interaction between transformational modes can extend also to 'internalizing' relations: that one mode can figure in the inner-constitution of another, with the latter providing a qualifying context for the former.<sup>129</sup> And nowhere is this possibility more clear than in the set of sub-modes that can be distinguished in the mode of contemplation. These internal distinctions allow for more exactness in describing the implied modal dimension of film-philosophy. To again return to Sinnerbrink, the specifically cerebral challenge that he attributes to cinematic thinking then elicits not a literal mode of endurance, I conclude, but an *endurance* of a *contemplative* kind – captured by the sub-mode that I call a 'contemplative endurance'. The same qualification holds for further relevant configurations, like a 'contemplative asceticism' and a 'contemplative mysticism', which I include in the table below.

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around psychedelic films is synonymous with 'midnight movie' culture, which has also embraced other mind-bending classics like Alejandro Jodorowsky's acid western, *El Topo* (1970), and Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980).

129 In his concluding remarks Visagie does raise the possibility of an "internal relationship", where a given mode seems to harbor another "as intrinsically part of itself" (1999: 138). Yet he gives only two limited illustrations: "Think for example of the possible *pleasures* of *mystical* experience, or of the *ascetic* sparseness of thoughts allowed to inhabit a *contemplative's* mind in a given time of concentration" (ibid. [emphasis added]).

Table 2.2

Contemplative Mode of the Viewer	←	Contemplative Work of Film
<i>Potential basic channels for transformation through contemplation</i>	<i>Ethical posturing of viewer / Fostering of transformational modes</i>	<i>Corresponding work of film on the viewer</i>
Contemplative Asceticism: Transformation through the giving up (renunciation) of things in thought or awareness		E.g. To lessen, or entirely withhold from the viewer, necessary information, clarity, convenience of perception, etc.
Contemplative Mysticism: Transformation through transcendence or ecstasy of thought		E.g. To exceed conventional forms and categories of conceptualization
Contemplative Endurance: Transformation through the use of difficulties in thought or state of mind		E.g. To make thinking (also perception, concentration, or attention) difficult by defying established norms and assumptions
Contemplative Ministering: Transformation through acts of reflection that attend to others; or transformation through being led to reflection by others		E.g. To elicit sympathy or empathy for a character or group of people; or to explicitly address (or 'hail') the viewer as a recipient of insight through the film
Contemplative Pleasure: Transformation through the use of pleasurable states of awareness or thought		E.g. To invite a state of cognitive play

This layout develops a finer grained heuristic for probing the overriding transformational mode that film philosophers entertain. Whereas most of my reconstructions would have been restricted to only a general mode of contemplation, I now have analytical recourse to the other modes as marking distinct channels *within* contemplation as a means to transformation.

(c) *Value*

The value frame explores the transformational ends that philosophers envision for viewers' engagement with film. It serves to clarify these envisioned 'end-states' or outcomes of transformation around the particular values that they affirm. Within the broader assumption that film-philosophy enables personal transformation, then, these suggested transformational values are the implicit measures that define the nature of transformation from one case to the next.

As may be expected, the theoretical project of film-philosophy frames the quest for personal transformation with an overall paradigm that extolls cognitive ideals associated with ‘the love of wisdom’ as a highest priority. As a result, most transformational ethics in the field are oriented towards the general value of transformed *knowledge*: philosophers see in films-as-philosophy the potential to change perspectives, to establish new ways of thinking, to foster emancipated forms of knowledge. This epistemological orientation can be further specified by showing how philosophers incorporate into the general value of knowledge other transformational values such as freedom, individuality, and openness – as when they speak of transformation through film as a liberation, individuation, or ongoing unfolding of thought.

Yet the most patent transformational value in the film as philosophy debate, and closely related to that of knowledge, is the perennial ideal of *awareness*. With reference to film, the value typically takes the form of an increased awareness of one’s beliefs and assumptions, one’s thinking and experience, one’s embodiment, and even an awareness of what is unknowable and transcendent. Again and again, I will return to the value of awareness – and its incarnations as attention, presence, openness, receptivity or sensitivity – as a central theme that emerges in transformational ethics of film-philosophy.

Still, it will become clear, transformational values of film can get much more unusual – even if only compared to traditional practices of personal transformation. Especially when it comes to bolder, more adventurous notions of film-philosophy, it is worth recalling that any value can be appropriated by an overarching motive of transformation; and that, technically, any conceivable state can figure as such a value. The analysis of film-philosophy thus requires the dexterity to also recognize that abstract and sometimes open-ended goals like ‘becoming’ and ‘difference’ and ‘the New’ turn up in the role of transformational values to the viewer of film.

(d) *Domain*

The domain in transformational ethics of film-viewing concerns the ‘what’ – that supposed aspect of the viewer-self – that gets targeted for transformation, and where film is said to do its transformational work.

One already sees the pertinence of transformational domains in a notion as common as film theory’s longstanding interest in how film transforms human *perception*. This is particularly so for what Malcolm Turvey (2008) calls the “revelationist tradition” – rooted in the work of Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer – which relies on the

presumption that cinema can reveal a ‘truer’ reality by revealing features of the world that are invisible to the human eye. The ethical implication of this claim is that the cinema’s extension of visual perception can transform how filmgoers see, which, for these theorists, goes hand in hand with an epistemological transformation of how people ‘see’ the world in general.<sup>130</sup> Eyal Peretz (2008), with his philosophical exposition of the cinema of Brian De Palma’ as a “cinematic education of the senses”, provides a more recent iteration of this kind of interest in sensual perception as domain of transformation.

Many theories of film-philosophy, of course, look at the transformational work that films do within the cognitive domains of higher-level thinking, on the assumption that these films stimulate viewers through their own cinematic forms of thought. However, cases where cinematic thinking is taken to be inherently affective in nature (e.g. Frampton, 2006a: 98, 196, 200; Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 152), require that I reconstruct what is a proposed interaction between a complex of transformational domains. The commonly posed interaction, in this instance, is that the viewers’ transformational work on a ‘higher’ cognitive domain, like philosophical thinking, relies on it being impacted upon by the ‘lower’ domain of affect, as activated by the corresponding ‘affective thinkings’ of film. In this constellation, therefore, the self-aspect that undergoes the work of transformation is spread between two domains: affect, construed as a constructively disruptive ‘source’, which, for its part, operates on philosophical reflection as the ‘target’ of transformation.

To accurately profile the domain-dimension in a transformational ethic of film therefore requires attention to its implicit model of selfhood – assumptions of the self’s organization in different aspects – yet in conjunction with its implied ‘theory’ of how the cinematic medium relates to the viewing self. Because any such ethic will have assumptions about which continuities, affinities or correspondences may exist between film and selected domains of the self, which in turn provide the basis upon which film is said to enlist these domains for transformation. Film’s capacity to reach and activate transformational domains in the viewer can be based on qualities as varied as the material properties of the medium, formal-technical aspects of a film, its socio-cultural and ideological entanglements, or the narrative-affective appeal that a film makes. This interrelation of film and the viewing self is even couched in broader

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130 The fundamental place of optical metaphors in our conceptions of knowledge makes it complicated to untangle ‘seeing’ as *sight* from ‘seeing’ as *comprehension*. So it is perfectly natural to find that the revelationist theorists treat this distinction as a porous one. Turvey, however, insists on reading the revelationists as speaking exclusively of literal sight, which, I find, turns the general revelationist claim into something of a strawman.



ontological assumptions – like the Deleuzian intertwinement of film and viewer in what is understood to be a single field of de-subjectivized forces (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2009: 158); or Vivian Sobchack's (1992: 5) assumption that film, too, has a body, inasmuch as viewer and film share the same structures of embodied existence. In fact, the more radical the presumed continuity between film and viewer, the more an ethic will perceive film as an extension of the self, inevitably woven into the substance of the self's transformation.<sup>131</sup>

(e) *Paradigm*

The paradigm frame serves to clarify the contexts and surrounding discourses that both motivate the notion of transformational ethics of film in film-philosophy, and define distinct visions thereof.

No question, there is a cascade of possible contexts to take into consideration. At the outermost bounds are the broad socio-cultural motivators for personal transformation, which Visagie tends to focus on – contexts such as social movements, or a culture of “selfism”, which sets ideals of self-actualization, personal authenticity, and “finding one's true self” as its highest priorities (Visagie, 1999: 3–4). But to try and explain ethics in the film as philosophy debate as symptomatic of a therapeutic “culture of narcissism” (Lasch, 1979), for instance, or the political apathy of “the great flight inwards” (Lijster, 2016), would, if not overstepping my purview of analysis, anyhow take me too far down the path of speculation. In line with my meta-theoretical agenda, rather, I take the analysis of paradigms as opportunity to spell out the more immediate theoretical contexts determining the transformational ethics that I take under examination here. The first of these is the general context of ‘film as philosophy’, the theoretical project which clearly nurtures a distinctive series of expectations and ideals of personal transformation through film.<sup>132</sup> A second significant theoretical context needing clarification is the respective paradigmatic bases, and the particular conceptual frameworks, from which philosophers tackle the project of film-philosophy. This is a matter of tracing how various approaches to film-philosophy – i.e. Cognitivist, ‘Analytic’, ‘Continental’, Phenomenological, post-Structuralist, New Materialist, or even Deleuzian, Cavellian or Heideggerian – each have their own ethical inclinations, and so motivate different variations on the

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131 The notion of film as a ‘continuation’ of the viewer, I can add, is much in line with the strong anthropological angle of late developments in the field of Image Studies. Leading figures like Hans Belting, Horst Bredekamp, and W.J.T Mitchell all share a general concern with how the image coincides, and even overlaps, with human embodiment. See, for example, Belting's *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (2011).

132 The profile of transformational ethics emerging from this context exhibits emphases and interests distinct from what one will for instance find in its sister project, ‘film as theology’, or ‘film as religion’ (see Lyden, 2003; Kickasola et al., 2013).

general theme of self-transformation through film. A third and crucial context that I will expound concerns the conditions for film-philosophy that philosophers appeal to. As concluded in the previous chapter, diverse theories of film-philosophy organize themselves around the basic conditions of Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power and Nature. And each of these conditions enters into the paradigm frame as decisive for the kind of transformational ethic – the essential direction of transformation – that a theory ultimately delineates.

Like any other paradigm, the paradigms in film-philosophy can also be formulated from a negative, oppositional perspective. This perspective yields the perceived threats and adversaries – often rhetoricized and constructed – that fuel a negative motivation for the idea of self-transformation through film. The ‘negative pole’ of a paradigm need not be limited to the thematization of troubling cultural conditions – such as when advocates of slow cinema see in the cinematic experience of slowness a self-treatment against a capitalist culture of speed (see Flanagan, 2012). An ‘enemy paradigm’ to a transformational ethic can be an explicitly theoretical one. In this way Daniel Frampton, we shall see, formulates his experience-centered program of Filmosophy as an antidote to what he deems the prevailing ‘technicism’ of film-writing and scholarship, as epitomized in David Bordwell’s brand of cognitivism (e.g. Frampton, 2006a: 100, 103–112).

Through the frames outlined above, then, I can articulate a special set of ethically relevant selections and assumptions that film philosophers commit themselves to. My aim is to show how each such set of commitments combines into a particular ethic, a theoretical vision, giving us a definite picture of what the actual practice of personal transformation through film might possibly look like.

Important to add at this point is that the ethical assumptions at work in film-philosophy will also lead my analysis to a related yet distinct set of transformational ethics: the required forms of self-work by which viewers must adequately *prepare* themselves for the transformational effects of films on them. Such requirements make up the critical transformational dimension of ‘preparatory ethics’, addressed towards the end of Chapter 3, using the same frames of analysis presented above.

### Identification of Types

By making explicit the transformational ethics posed by theories of film-philosophy, my meta-theoretical heuristic furthermore serves to define and identify distinct ethical types. Types of transformational ethics can be configured according to different frames of analysis, each of which details a particular category of topoi that an ethic may employ. So within the framework of transformational modes, to take an obvious example, various types of ethics can be distinguished according to topoi of contemplation, asceticism, pleasure, and so forth.

It is however the cooperation of these distinct, interlocking frames that helps me steer clear from the oversimplified pigeon-holing that meta-theorizing is often criticized for (see Ritzer, 2001: 20–22). The framework allows for a dynamic identification of types that shift according to the analytical frame that one chooses as organizing perspective. This means that two theories may be similar in type from the perspective of their mode of transformation, say the contemplative, for example, but diverge in type when one considers the disparate values or domains of transformation that they posit. Or *vice versa*. The framework thus gives insight into the complexity of connections *and* disconnections that can be drawn between the various ethics of transformation under analysis.

### Identification of Guiding Assumptions

The work of teasing out a variety of ethical types and positions will, in turn, stand in aid of a broader meta-theoretical task: to lay bare the deciding influence that assumptions about philosophy, in particular, but also film, have on the types of transformational ethics that the theories suggest. The ethical-transformational potential that theorists envision for film consistently follows from their understanding of what philosophy is, or should be, plus how they perceive film to address the shortcomings of philosophy.

A central reference point, again, will be Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power and Nature as the more general assumed conditions for film-philosophy. These abstracted motives mark out four basic approaches to the question of how films can be a form of philosophy, and each of these approaches, I will show, sets a very definite agenda for the kind of transformational ethics that various film philosophers envision. It is thus a matter of tracing how such assumptions ‘trickle down’, from the way in which philosophy and film is defined, through a resultant theory of how films can do philosophy, right into the eventual distinct ethic of transformation that a theory puts forward.

### Unification

As much as it may serve to chart differences and divides, my framework equally grants meta-perspectives that can unify and harmonize disparate positions in the film as philosophy debate. On the whole, the (meta-)theme of transformational ethics establishes a conceptual space that displays the debate’s convergence around a shared interest in personal transformation. By isolating this general ethical continuity between diverse conceptions of film-philosophy, the framework opens a new level of exchange – a middle ground – between what otherwise would remain discordant positions. This function of unification extends to highlighting also more specific connections and commonalities among theories – their affiliations through shared modes, values or domains of transformation – which might otherwise go unnoticed.

## **Giving Direction**

In addition to its clarification of the variety of functions, the proposed heuristic moreover supports my interest in wanting to steer the film as philosophy debate towards more explicit considerations of its own ethical inclinations and implications. I take it to lay the groundwork for further premeditated discussion and research on transformational ethics as surely the most prominent ethical refrain that emerges from the film as philosophy debate. The framework thus offers particular a vocabulary, a set of basic reference points, in terms of which the recurring theme of personal transformation in film-philosophy can be examined and developed further. It can be of assistance to future descriptive and interpretative analyses; and to positive, explanatory theories of how films can achieve personal transformation; and even to empirical enterprises along these same lines.

## **Same Motive, New Context, Persisting Themes**

Lastly, a framework that details the structures of transformational ethics, in general, gives the necessary ground on which to correlate ethics relating to film, specifically, with other recognized instances of transformational practice. This, as I will show, brings me to conclude that the transformational ethics transpiring in the film as philosophy debate is not as novel as one may initially hope.

One would, of course, expect the notion of ‘transformational ethics of film’ – whatever this may prove to be – to be something quite dissimilar to the transformational practices of the ancient meditator, the religious mystic, or the modern ascetic. Yet the conceptions that film philosophers come up with remain in essential conformity with what is are longstanding ethical ideals and discourses that go far beyond their immediate theoretical concerns with film. Bringing into play transformational ethics in the context of film may indeed be new, but the core features and resultant forms of ethics remain surprisingly consistent with traditional forms and patterns of transformationalist discourse. Why? No doubt, our dealings with film promise a fresh potential outlet for an age-old, ever recurring, ethical pursuit. But the pursuit of personal transformation implicates certain structures – involving fundamental modes of transformation, typical goals, or domains of selfhood – which can certainly be adapted and reimagined, yet cannot be circumvented by the supposed novelty of seeking self-change through film. Hence philosophers of film continually resort to familiar and recurring – perhaps, deeply entrenched – paths and topoi when they relate the idea of film as a means to personal transformation.

My framework of analysis makes the above clear by giving a thorough account of basic topoi that are at the philosophers’ disposal. On this basis, I have the leverage to ascertain the extent of reinvention and ‘transformation’ that these topoi may undergo when they are used in the new and unique context of film-philosophy.

### 3.3 Final Additions & Fine-Tunings

As final word on my use of Visagie's framework, let me briefly go into a few fine-tunings that will allow more nuanced analyses of my often abstract and complex subject matter. These adjustments all come down to theory-internal movements and interrelations that can further the descriptive potential of my meta-analytical tools.

#### Internalization Between Elements

When it comes to analyzing interrelations of elements within his frames of analysis, Visagie restricts his procedure to drawing functional categories and detailing interactions between them in terms of 'means-end' relations of support. However, such 'external' relations between the theory's elements have to be supplemented by a notion of their possible 'internal' connections, by which I mean that one element can appropriate and 'internalize' another as an extension of its own nature.

I have already suggested the fruitfulness of this measure for the analysis of transformational modes – as when I elaborate on the contemplative mode with internalizing relations like a 'contemplative asceticism', a 'contemplative endurance', and the like. Similar tie-ins can give an equally enriched texture to the analysis of transformational domains. Consider the blends that occur between the viewer's *knowledge* and her *body* when thematized as transformational domains by film phenomenologists like Vivian Sobchack. One can expect from film phenomenology, which emphasizes embodied situatedness, to conceive of the viewer's body as a domain of transformation. But I will show that someone like Sobchack in addition addresses the body's presence *within* the domain of knowledge – thereby designating a composite domain, which is the *knowledge (understanding, awareness) of one's bodily states*. In fact, Sobchack posits also an inversion of this particular relation between knowledge and the body when she suggests film to be just as capable of transformational work on the composite domain of *embodied knowledge*, on what the body 'knows' (see Chapter 3, Section 2.4).

With regard to transformational values, likewise, such internalization suggests a useful way of filling in the content of the ubiquitous value of *awareness*. The value, for example, repeatedly comes up in philosophical readings of Terrence Malick's filmmaking. Certainly, awareness can be specified in terms of any subject, like the idea of transformation as a growing awareness *of nature*, which is a prominent refrain among Malick's philosophical interpreters. But this means that the value can also incorporate, as its subject, a qualifying 'sub-value', as when philosophers relate the value of awareness to that of unity or oneness. The transformational value at stake thus becomes an *awareness of unity*, which in the case of Malick is further specified as an awareness of our essential unity with nature (see Chapter 4).

#### Movement Between Frames

Another way of adding to the heuristic flexibility of my framework is to recognize the considerable degree to which elements 'native' to one frame can show up in

another. By ‘travelling’ from one frame to another, the same concept can adopt an alternative role to that defined by the ‘foreign’ frame that it comes to inhabit.<sup>133</sup>

Notable, for example, is how transformational modes can duplicate into the value frame and function as transformational values in their own right. It is not hard to see, for example, how *ascetic restraint* or *temperance* may in themselves be teloi of self-transformation – especially if they serve a larger complex of accompanying transformational values. Likewise, *pleasure*, which Foucault is inclined to treat as a domain or substance of transformation, reappears in both the mode frame, where Visagie identifies it as a means to transformation, and the value frame, in cases where pleasure is nominated as the goal of self-change. And philosophers of film, we will see, like to think of transformational film-viewing as geared towards the end of enhanced reflection, which essentially transfers the mode of *contemplation* into the value-dimension of transformational ethics.<sup>134</sup>

*Awareness*, as a transformational value, exhibits similar adaptability within the framework. It has obvious affinities with the mode of contemplation, insofar as the latter mode typically finds expression in various techniques of exercising awareness. And one’s awareness can equally manifest in a given ethic as the domain of the self on which transformational work should be exerted – often as a composite domain like bodily awareness, perceptual awareness, or epistemic awareness, as I have just illustrated in the section above.

The same logic of movement goes for concepts with no immediately obvious ‘base’ in the framework. For example, *knowledge*, in my analyses of film-philosophy, features just as much as a value as it does as a domain of transformation.

### 3.4 Conclusion: Making Sense & Giving Direction

In order to open up the implicit ethics of film-philosophy, I first needed to do the work of opening up Visagie’s theory of transformational ethics for that purpose. What I sought to demonstrate is the highly adaptable framework that Visagie in fact grants my own project. Having spelled out the essential dimensions of practices of self-transformation, as Visagie distills them, I proposed how to set them up as meta-theoretical frames of analysis; moreover, frames of analysis that pertain to the potential transformational capacities of film. With the resultant framework, I can clarify and critically analyze various theoretical conceptions of film-philosophy in terms of their ethical-transformational implications, as I will do in detail in the following chapters. The framework thus enables me to show that theories of film-philosophy do *more* than simply address the philosophical capacities of film (while many film philosophers seem unaware of the significant ethical implications

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133 I borrow the useful label of “travelling concepts” from Mieke Bal’s (2002) guidebook on interdisciplinarity in the humanities.

134 In a similar fashion, yet unknowingly it seems, Visagie (1999: 110) renders the mode of *ministering* into a value, when he notes that a life dedicated to helping others can figure as the outcome and visible proof of someone’s personal transformation.

that their views harbor). Guided by Visagie's basic distinctions, my meta-analysis will range from bringing into focus a general ethical-transformational orientation in theories of film-philosophy, to reconstructing the various types of ethics that transpire – in terms of transformational modes, domains, values and paradigms – when philosophers argue for film's philosophical significance. I have previously referred to this meta-theoretical contribution as one of *making ethical sense* of film-philosophy.

However, as noted before, the contribution of my meta-theoretical framework does not stop at making better sense of film-philosophy: it simultaneously intends to *gives an ethical direction* to its future development. The value of the framework developed here is thus not restricted only to its critical, 'diagnostic' capacities, so to say. Its core concepts and distinctions supply a distinct ethical agenda, with a variety of strategies and guidelines for future theorizing, and even empirical work, on the idea of transformational ethics of film. In developing this framework I hope to advance a broader program for film philosophers to work in; for although the framework poses the overall question of personal transformation through film (embedded within a set of core concepts), this question and its related concepts can still be probed from a variety of other individual theoretical perspectives.

### **Post-Script: Violent Strokes for Different Folks**

For the sake of giving readers a further taste of the heuristic potential of my framework, I cannot resist the temptation of ending this chapter with one final outing to *Fight Club*. And speaking of giving in to temptations: with this quick run-out, I briefly consider a few instances of *Fight Club*'s reception that *exceed* the exact meta-theoretical agenda which I have constructed for this study. Why this momentary expansion of scope? I wish to indicate how the theme of transformational ethics, far from being limited to the meta-theoretical turf of my reflections on film-philosophy, proliferates across a number of different spheres of *Fight Club*'s reception and interpretation (over and above the theme's proliferation also within the film, as this chapter has already shown). This will further underline the versatility of my ethical framework, which speaks directly to each of these spheres – be it the film's reception by everyday Tyler Durden-wannabees, critics, or philosophers – and thereby elucidate the variegated dialogue on self-transformation that in fact occurs between them.

To help reign in this self-indulgent little excursion, I zoom in on how *violence* – a central thematic and visual fixation of *Fight Club* – persists as a key reference point in the ethically relevant responses to the film that I discuss below. Hence, I emphasize how *Fight Club*'s portrayals of force and fighting get transposed into various notions of 'transformational violence', across different spheres of the film's reception.

In this regard, I should parenthetically add that I do not consider it incidental that notions of violence recur the way they do within the context of transformational ethics. I take it safe to suggest that any imperative to transform oneself goes with inherent demands and challenges, seeing that the transformed state is not a given, but precisely something to be *attained*. For this reason, it seems, any intention of self-transformation is naturally relatable to the metaphor of ‘fighting’, ‘struggle’, or ‘war’, as theorists of conceptual metaphor would by and large conceive of it (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Turner, 1987). And, on the basis of this conception of ‘fighting’, it is not difficult to see how the elaborating notion of ‘violence’, especially transformation as ‘violence to self’, follows suit. Not that ‘fighting’ and its related concepts is the only natural way of understanding self-transformation.<sup>135</sup> But the metaphor does spotlight where the particular ethical appeal of *Fight Club* lies for its diverse audiences. As the examples below attest, the film (no less than the book by Palahniuk) plays on the ease with which we think of self-transformation as a ‘fight’ against the self.

### Everyday Reception

In the sphere of *Fight Club*’s everyday reception, firstly, a researcher of transformational ethics cannot but get a kick out of the of numerous real-life ‘Fight Clubs’ reportedly inspired by the film (e.g. McCarthy, 2006; Complex Mag, 2009). It is not clear whether this apparent aping of *Fight Club* is committed in the name of fan-hood. What is clear, though, is that participants of these practices act on *Fight Club*, reproducing – very literally – the film’s ethic of consensual violence as their own technique of transformation. Take the widely reported example of “Gentlemen’s Fight Club”, started in 2000, where a group of Silicon Valley techies gather every two weeks for an invitation-only garage brawl (Robertson, 2006; Kasperkevic, 2012). As its participants see it, the meticulously planned rite of battering each other – with anything from bare fists and chairs, to dust-busters and keyboards – gives them a special respite from the dullness of their cubicle-defined existence.

Compelling about a case like this, as an ethic of transformation, is the extent to which a *film* features within its overall paradigm. With both their methods and the stated ends of the Gentleman’s Fight Club – transformational values like feeling “more alive” and “more in touch with our physical selves” (FoxNews.com, 2006) – the group takes a barefaced leaf out of the book of Tyler Durden. And, of course, the thick veneer of Hollywood-cool (think: Brad Pitt, all brawny and

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<sup>135</sup> Regarding this point, I am again indebted to Johann Visagie who, in the different context of his theory of figurative semiotics, identifies the metaphor of ‘fighting’ or ‘struggle’ as belonging to a class of related ‘root-metaphors’. Along with that of ‘fighting’, root-metaphors such as ‘journeying’, ‘working’, ‘loving’, and ‘playing’ are very basic, existentially loaded images which are recurrently singled out as symbolic of the human condition as such (Visagie, 1990: 9–13). This means that, apart from conceiving of self-transformation as a ‘fight’, we would be just as inclined to think of it as a ‘journey’, as ‘work’ or ‘service’, and perhaps even as a personal ‘game’ of sorts.



badass) makes for an all the more attractive model through which to negotiate their own aspirations of self-change by the fist.

### Critical Reception

It is no surprise then, as we move to the sphere of film criticism, that many journalistic and scholarly responses to *Fight Club* have hovered around the film's violence. Often cited in this context is Henry Giroux's (2001) fierce critique of *Fight Club* and the "public pedagogy" that it disseminates. One of Giroux's many concerns is the apparent mode of pleasure that informs characters' use of violence, which he takes to reinforce cultural formations of misogyny, fascism and cynicism (e.g. *ibid.*: 69).

Giroux's views in this regard can be construed as a certain 'violence' of criticism, intended as a resistance to the ideological work performed by contentious Hollywood exports like *Fight Club*. He himself designates it as "pedagogies of disruption", which aim to "unsettle the commonsensical assumptions and ways of thinking that inform films" and thus make viewers "more attentive" to cultural texts as sites of political struggle (*ibid.*: 77, 79).<sup>136</sup>

This is a good opportunity to point out the fruitfulness with which normative interpretative stances, such as Giroux's, can be modelled as 'self-transformations'. Most conceptions of ideal interpretative attitudes can be spelt out in terms of various transformational intentions towards the self. Giroux's stance entails the self-intention of maintaining one's own critical principles in the face of a film that threatens them. This is in stark contrast to the often-cherished ascetic ideal, discussed in the next chapter, of letting go of your assumptions and beliefs in order to be sufficiently 'open' to what a film can say and do. And even more obvious in Giroux's case is that he intends his work qua pedagogy to instill in others the same posture of resistance, for the sake of maintenance of principles. In this way Giroux's film criticism comprises a mode of *ministering*, aimed at fostering for viewers a transformed attention and critical awareness, in order to effectively 'withstand' what a film like *Fight Club* does.

### Philosophical Reception: Commentary & Interpretation

But what is the place of transformational fighting in the philosophical reception of *Fight Club*? In this sphere the notion of 'violence' persists as a figurative guideline for the various ethical interests that philosophers pursue. This means that *Fight Club*'s depictions of violence provide an attractive symbolic resource for its philosophical interpreters to draw on.

Slavoj Žižek's declarations on self-beating in *Fight Club* makes for a rather rich illustration (see 2001: 149–150, 2003, 2008: 107). With quintessential Žižekian zeal, he latches onto the film's depictions of striking at oneself – an exaggeratedly

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<sup>136</sup> In another context Giroux elaborates on how Hollywood films serve to both clarify his role as critical pedagogue, and to broaden his "understanding of the transformative possibilities of pedagogy" (2008: 9).

ascetic act, most notable when Jack visibly slogs himself right in front of his boss. For Žižek, these self-beatings pose an incisive lesson in how self-degradation brings forth real change of the subject and its situation. Yes, Tyler Durden might just as well be channeling Žižek when the character says that “self-improvement is masturbation”, and recommends the alternative of “self-destruction” instead.

Obviously – or, hopefully, I should say – Žižek is not calling for literal self-violence on our part, but what he calls a “shattering” or “emptying” of identity, by undermining the fantasies and symbolic support that underpin it (2003: 116–118). Žižek’s assumption of a negative subject – i.e. subjectivity as essentially void – encourages a logic of asceticism whereby the pure subject “in the Real” can materialize only through its own self-undermining. The figurative asceticism of “self-beating”, as he treats it, thus yields a model for self-transformation unto two parallel ends: towards a value of *connection*, a reaching out to “the real Other”, which is a way out of capitalist abstraction and isolation; and, at the same time, towards a value of *distance*, or *freedom*, when self-beating serves to cut us loose from the symbolic backing that keeps social oppression in place (ibid.).

It is worth mentioning that existentialist appraisals of *Fight Club* echo much the same ascetic motive (e.g. Bennett, 2005; Skees, 2012; Baker, 2014). Not unlike Žižek, the typical existentialist angle on *Fight Club* links the film’s violence to struggles of self-liberation – in this case, the purging of false beliefs, misplaced values, or bad faith (figuring as domains of transformation), and doing so in the hope of fostering personal freedom and authenticity of experience (values of transformation). In one such reading, Murray Skees (2012: 24) describes this kind of ethical project, tellingly, as “a war against one’s self”.

### **Philosophical Reception: Film as Philosophy**

Still, the above kind of interpretations only go as far as approaching *Fight Club* as a potential script, or allegory, for transformational action. Philosophers who claim that films can do philosophy tend to take things further: they suggest that films can actually *do* transformational work for its viewers.

The metaphor of violence retains its relevance in the context of film as philosophy, notably through its association with broader notions of ‘force’ and ‘strength’: many players in the field like to formulate the philosophical capacities of certain films as a ‘challenge’, ‘resistance’ or ‘provocation’ to thought – recall, for example, how Robert Sinnerbrink defines cinematic thinking along the lines. Roughly paraphrased in *Fight Club*-terms, one could say that these philosophers see in film-philosophy the potential of a constructive force – a ‘violence’ – that can counteract or ‘fight’, and thereby transform, our habits of thinking. This conception of film as philosophy, especially when distilled in such ‘forceful’ terms, makes for a rather ironic comparison with the position of Giroux: whereas he calls for a pedagogy of disruption (another notion of ‘force’), to make viewers aware of problematic assumptions at work *in a film*, we have the exact inverse in the claim that a film itself can function as such a pedagogy of disruption, able to rattle problematic

assumptions at work *in the viewer*. In short, Giroux hopes for the viewer to resist the film; film philosophers, for the film to resist the viewer.

Does *Fight Club* indeed then serve its viewers with such a transformational ‘violence’ to thought? From the Deleuzian camp of film-philosophy comes a characteristically bold and resounding ‘yes’: William Brown and David Fleming, with their detailed ‘schizoanalytic’ treatment of the film, come to the conclusion that “*Fight Club* affects its spectator in much the same way that the characters seem to be affected in the film” (2011: 292).<sup>137</sup>

Yet, for starters, there are other softer suggestions of *Fight Club*’s contemplative-transformational value. Most of these can be related to the film’s status as a mainstream ‘complex film’, falling within the categories of ‘twist film’ or ‘mind game movie’ (see Wilson, 2006; Elsaesser, 2009; Klecker, 2013). A prevailing assumption among philosophers is that such films, by virtue of their disruptive complexities, do the work of *making thinking difficult* – a work suggested to be as much transformational as it is pertinent to films doing philosophy. As I reconstruct it, interpreters take this difficult-making to posture viewers in a state of *contemplative endurance* (mode), on the understanding that the film’s resistance to thinking leads viewers in a *self-reflection* (technique) unto greater *awareness* (value) of their own *beliefs* and *assumptions* (domain). In such manner emerges a vision of viewing *Fight Club* an ethically relevant exercise in self-awareness. One example is that *Fight Club*’s eventual unmasking of its unreliable narration challenges and brings to awareness something as simple as the filmgoer’s background assumption of narrative transparency in film, as George Wilson (2006) has argued in detail. The prominent twist furthermore forces viewers to faceoff with their initial assumptions about Tyler and his ideals, and so to take part in the film’s own self-reflexive critique, as Robert Bennett (2005), for example, examines it. In this way *Fight Club* even amounts to something of a test: viewers have to recognize the narrative’s self-undermining as a cue to critically suppress Tyler and his views in their own thinking – a measure of contemplative asceticism, if you like – much like Jack himself has to do in the end (Kavadlo, 2005: 10–14; cf. Bennett, 2005: 67). On this account, people like Henry Giroux, or real-life *Fight Club* participants – people who succumb to conflating Tyler’s message with the film’s message – are the ones who *fail the test*, thus missing out on a growth in critical awareness. And so I can go on about the various types of ‘aware-makings’ that *Fight Club* is suggested to provoke in viewers: for Philipp Schmerheim (2013b: 93) the film can focus our attention on the general pliability and distortions of human perception; or *Fight Club* may even give viewers the self-awareness of their modern skeptical condition and subjective isolation, as Nancy Bauer’s (2005, 2012) Cavell-inspired explorations of the film indicate.

Approaches inspired by Gilles Deleuze, however, present us with a singular philosophical take on *Fight Club* and, accordingly, the self-change that it may

<sup>137</sup> See Mitchell (2013) for another Deleuzian treatment of *Fight Club* that reaches conclusions similar to those of Brown and Fleming.

instigate. We come full circle, in a sense, for in the Deleuzian scheme of things film is an assemblage of forces that exert *literal force* on its viewers. This is how Brown and Fleming can claim that *Fight Club* “enacts a *physical form of violence* that is deterritorializing and puts viewers’ bodies through new experiences that call for new modes of thinking and movement, and allow us to become, as opposed to simply being” (2011: 293 [emphasis added]). For them this has little to do with the depicted violence in the film. The violence enacted on the viewer is rather a function of the film’s supposed creative power, its disruption of temporal order, its distortions of image, color and sound – all of which boldly suggests a more literal mode of endurance on the part of the viewer, and not only a contemplative one. In this way, say Brown and Fleming, *Fight Club* allows for physical and mental ‘deterritorializations’ of the self – Deleuze-speak, that is, for personal transformations – which are defined by intrinsically open-ended transformational values like becoming-other, difference, and the New.

### **Conclusion: *Fight Club*, Violence & Transformation**

With this outing, I have given only the slightest of appetizers for the kind of meta-analyses of film-philosophy that I take up in depth in the next two chapters. As I have admitted from the outset, my focus in this post-script was of course slightly more comprehensive: to try out, across different spheres of *Fight Club*’s reception and interpretation, the scope of applicability of my proposed ethical framework. It seems to me that the framework can indeed open up a productive analytical perspective – broad enough to address the transformational ethics that transpire both in *Fight Club* and across diverse spheres of its reception (due to a shared investment in some ideal of personal transformation in each case), while having enough nuance to distinguish essential differences between those ethics. In the end, this sweeping analytical perspective is even broad enough to link film philosophers with the wild, fist-swinging members of *Fight Club*. Indeed, a more-or-less philosophical reading of *Fight Club* such as Žižek’s shows that some philosophers, at least, long for much the same thing that the fictional fighters do: blessed *violence* – and lots of it. Although, here we still need to retain the nuance of seeing in Žižek’s ‘violence’ something extolled for obviously different reasons, and to different transformational ends, than those of the fighters.

More importantly, I also took a closer look at members of the more specific group of philosophers with whom this thesis goes into dialogue – those who explicitly subscribe to the notion that films can, in one way or another, do philosophy. And, thanks to the analytical space opened up by my ethical framework, even this group can be linked with the members of *Fight Club*. Most fundamentally, these philosophers and these fighters share a common motive of personal transformation. Certainly, it is a commonality that is obscured by the starkly different ways in which they endeavor to unfold this motive: violent fighting versus silent film viewing (as philosophy). But, in essence, the proposal to transform yourself through viewing a film, as the philosophers imply, is just as much a transformational ethic as Tyler Durden’s proposal to transform the self through fighting. Both camps, in the end,

seek out an unusual means for achieving self-transformation. It is in this sense that I like to think of these philosophers as 'joining' the Fight Club.

Yet some of the philosophers, as we have seen, 'join' the Club in the further sense that they suggest *Fight Club* itself to be such a filmic means to self-transformation. That they single out *Fight Club* in this regard opens up – in anticipation of the next chapter – one preliminary angle for understanding the transformational work that philosophers attribute to film-philosophy. The particular case of *Fight Club* 'as philosophy' draws attention to the productive *forcefulness* with which film-philosophy, in general, is often characterized. From this angle, film-philosophy ushers the film viewer to a place of self-transformation by making them endure – cognitively, or affectively – the various forms of *resistance*, *disruption*, and even *force* that such films are claimed to enact. Encouraged by *Fight Club*, consequently, this transformational work of films may even then be construed as an edifying 'violence' performed on the self. In this way, *Fight Club*'s graphic portrayals of violence anticipates and reinforces the more sophisticated transformational 'violence' that philosophers foresee in encounters with film-philosophy.

Admittedly, this richly figurative construal of self-transformation through film as 'violent' is one strongly inflected by the particular case of *Fight Club* and its philosophical exegeses. It hardly needs stating that there are many more ways, also less baroque ways, in which philosophers suggest film-philosophy to have transformational effects. So let us now turn, with my framework of analysis set in place, to an analysis of the basic shapes that various transformational ethics take within the project of film-philosophy.

# Chapter 3

## How Films are Thought to Do More Than ‘Think’: Film-Philosophy’s Slogans for Self-Transformation

### 1. From Movies to Ethical Makeovers

It lurks alongside any assertion that film can be a form of philosophy: the nagging question of the actual *need* for film-philosophy. ‘*So what* if films can do philosophy?’ Or, to truly aim for the artery: ‘Of what use is “film as philosophy” if we already have philosophy itself?’<sup>138</sup>

In Chapter 1, I sketched the project of film-philosophy. And, in Chapter 2, I presented my framework for an ethical meta-analysis of film-philosophy. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to survey the many ways in which the project of film-philosophy commits itself to the idea of transformational ethics. Yet, in order to appreciate how ‘philosophy through movies’ can entail ‘ethical makeovers,’ I must first emphasize the question of the need for film-philosophy as the off-ramp that takes film philosophers onto this ethical route. For the question targets the supposed *value* – indeed, the *added* value – of film-philosophy. And any manner of response necessarily broaches the deeper subject of ‘the good’ of film as such.

Siegfried Kracauer, as D.N. Rodowick (2010b: 97) and others note, was the first theorist to directly pose to film theory what is the question of *film ethics*: ‘What is the good of the film experience?’<sup>139</sup> It is a question of that elemental kind that will nudge its way into any film theorizing. The theorist of film cannot proceed without at least some implicit stance on what good film holds. This inadvertence of film ethics is perfectly illustrated by the film as philosophy debate. When philosophers argue that films can do philosophy, they are bound to make judgments about the good of film, thereby setting themselves on the turf of film ethics. Whether these judgments remain wholly implicit or not, and whether philosophers make them consciously or not – no matter how – the unyielding question of the good of film is one that philosophers cannot but address somehow.

So which answers to the ‘good’ of film are disclosed by the discourse of film-philosophy? In the broadest view, I make out an obvious answer, and a not-so-

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138 I credit Berys Gaut for posing this incisive question to me – in a much more cordial fashion, I must add – at a Film Philosophy workshop at the University of Groningen in 2015.

139 Kracauer opens the epilogue of his famous *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* with this question, referring to it as the issue “which is most central of all” (1960: 285). See also Brian Bergen-Aurand (2013), who uses Kracauer as point of departure for his discussion of film ethics.

obvious one. The obvious answer follows from the ‘philosophy’-part: the good of film, quite simply, is that it can do philosophy. And, naturally, philosophers reckon that philosophy in the form of film amounts to something *more* than good old philosophy by itself. The ‘moderate’ accounts of film-philosophy, as I identified them in Chapter 1, all stress that the added value lies in how “films can sometimes do some things better” than written philosophical texts (Cox & Levine, 2011: 11); things like “giving us a clearer grasp of the experiential dimensions of a philosophical issue” (Davies, 2015: 150). Film thus bolsters the cognitive value that philosophy already has, by breathing aesthetic individuality, concrete experience and affect into what would otherwise remain abstract ideas.<sup>140</sup> True to its name, the ‘bold’ position on film-philosophy ups the ante considerably: the value of cinematic thinking, far from only doing some things better, is that it does things that traditional philosophy indeed *cannot* do (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2011c). This view suggests a negative estimation of conventional philosophy and identifies ‘the good’ of film – its unique contribution to philosophy – with making up for that which philosophy lacks.

This chapter, however, scrutinizes the not-so-obvious answer that gets wrapped up into the obvious one: that is, that the ‘the good’ of film consist of it being a special means to the viewer’s *self-transformation*. This general ideal of personal transformation motivates much of the added value that philosophers hang on to cinematic incarnations of philosophy. Thinkers of many different stripes routinely intimate how film-philosophy can transform our thinking, reconstitute our experience or, at the very least, enhance our self-knowledge. In fact, the notion that film-philosophy has some kind of transformational value proves to be a rare stretch of common ground between what are otherwise mismatching positions in the field.

Of course, the ideal of personal transformation that gets attached to film-philosophy is by no means unrelated to the claim that films do *philosophy* – for philosophy itself has a long-established tradition of being practiced for purposes of self-transformation. As noted in Chapter 2, Western philosophy has really always been in cahoots with transformational ethics, right from the earliest inceptions of Ancient Greek *philosophia*. At this time, and even more so in the Hellenistic and Roman periods thereafter, philosophy was by definition an existential pursuit. Philosophy and the practical issue how to live your life formed a package deal. And ‘doing’ this philosophy meant that you practice what you preach, and become proficient at personal practices – ‘spiritual exercises’ – that transform the self for the sake of a philosophical mode of existence (Visagie, 1996a: 142; 1999: 21; cf. Hadot, 2002: 1–6). Much as this understanding of philosophy was frequently forced into dormancy by medieval and modern philosophy, its many offshoots persist to this very day. Pierre Hadot, ever the patron of ‘philosophy as a way of life’, calls attention to the examples of Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Kant, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Marx,

<sup>140</sup> The idea that film adds experiential value to philosophy finds another guise in the cherished slogan that films ‘show’ (philosophy, that is) rather than ‘tell’ (e.g. Goodenough, 2005: 21; Baggini, 2011: 209–210).

Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty – all figures who, “in one way or another, were influenced by the model of ancient philosophy, and conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of ways of inhabiting and perceiving the world” (2002: 270).

I take it to be quite natural, then, that these ethical-transformationalist associations with philosophy also seep into notions of how *films* can function as philosophy. It is not a big jump, nor a difficult one, to get from ‘films do the work of philosophy’ to ‘films do the transformational work of philosophy’. Some philosophers even directly pick out self-transformation as the defining feature of the philosophical work that films do – such as the claim that films undertake the ‘therapeutic’ tasks of philosophy, as scholars inspired by the later Wittgenstein like to argue (e.g. Hutchinson & Read, 2005; Read, 2015; Abbott, 2013). So in busying themselves with how films do philosophy, philosophers consistently express the motive that such films also do *more* than philosophy: they can serve the ethical function of assisting aspirations for self-change. And the philosophers in question, it turns out, do *more* than only theorize the philosophical capacities of film: to put it bluntly, they also do film ethics – *transformational* ethics, to be exact. And most of them seem to be unaware of it.

### Aims, Methods & Bumper Stickers

In what follows, then, I take stock of the major strands of transformational ethics that flow from the film as philosophy debate. Since most of the philosophers in question do not address transformational ethics head-on, I make it my task to connect some dots that they leave untended. The philosophers inevitably cast visions of how self-transformation can be achieved through films that do philosophy – I take their visions and draw out of them the different ethics that they imply. (In my reconstructions, I indicate any heuristic use of the concepts and distinctions derived from my framework expounded in the previous chapter by use of italics.) Part of my thinking through each transformational ethic is also to try and picture what the ethics may look like in actual practice – a *critical imagining* that uses the raw material provided by film-philosophy to figure out what options the everyday viewer has for self-transformation through film.

The chapter proceeds through a series of representative vignettes. The vignettes vary in length – some cases provide more ethical material to work with, and thus require more detailed analysis. Whether long or short, however, I consider it crucial that a whole range of cases be covered in this chapter. For my argument concerns an entire field – that is, the bigger ethical picture that emerges from film-philosophy as a project.

To help streamline this enterprise, I approach film-philosophy’s distinctive forms of transformational ethics through a set of slogans that you may well find on bumper stickers. I assign such a bumper sticker slogan to every subsection below. The stickers include golden hits like ‘Know Yourself’, ‘Lose Your Self’ and ‘Sense Your Senses’; representing different themes and options under the archetype of all self-



transformational bumper stickers – ‘CHANGE YOURSELF’. That the very same slogans also go down in hipster hashtags on Twitter must however not be taken as a sign of shallow scholarship. In the under-celebrated tradition of ‘bumper sticker ethics’ (Wilken, 2011), these pithy clichés are thoughtful points of departure, inviting us in, right through the front door of whatever ethical conceptions they stand for.<sup>141</sup> This virtue makes bumper sticker slogans vital to my sifting through the many guises of transformational ethics in film-philosophy.

The aptness of stereotypical slogans moreover serves to drive home a particular point: the transformational ethics cooked up by film philosophers are not quite as novel and fresh as one might perhaps hope them to be. We are speaking, after all, of self-transformation through the novel means of the seventh art. Yet I find that film philosophers struggle to do more with this thought than only reproduce ethical notions and categories as old as philosophy itself – which, to be fair, is in many ways inevitable and as such foreseen by Visagie’s theory of transformational ethics, central to my framework of analysis (see Chapter 2). A good deal of my analysis therefore goes to show how film philosophers take to what are really familiar ethical paths – ancient paths, even – since most of them inevitably lead back to ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. As a precursory step to this end, I arrange my inquiry below around a distinction drawn by Pierre Hadot, which turns out to be just as useful to our understanding of film-philosophy as it is to the ancient transformational practices Hadot devotes attention to. He shows that the many philosophical exercises of the Greco-Roman world boil down to two essential movements: a ‘concentration of the self’, and an ‘expansion of the self’ (2002: 189–220). These two directions characterize two sides of the same coin, as Hadot indeed argues. But the respective ethics hatched by film-philosophy, I find, are far more polarized, and give priority to either one movement, or the other. What I will group together as ethics of ‘self-concentration’ tend to emphasize transformation through film as an inward turning, a turning towards the self, resulting in different forms of self-knowledge (Section 2). Ethics of ‘self-expansion’, in contrast, envision the viewer ‘turned outwards’, using film as a means to alternative perspectives, new experiences, and breaking the mold of the self (Section 3). These two ethical orientations draw unto themselves distinct sets of topoi and tropes – like transformation being framed as somehow ‘finding the self’, as opposed to ‘losing’ it; or an act of ‘recovery’, versus one of ‘discovery’. Each kind of ethics also appeals to distinct approaches to film-philosophy: supporters of moderate versions of film-philosophy prefer to dwell on uncontroversial notions of self-concentration, whereas bold conceptions of film-philosophy flaunt comparably bold hopes of self-expansion.

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141 Steve Wilken’s *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics* (2011) explores a range of ethical systems on the basis of popular statements that include “Look out for number one” (ethical egoism), “Doing what comes naturally” (natural law ethics), and “All you need is love” (situation ethics). For a comparable approach, see Sarah Bakewell’s (2011) celebrated biography of Montaigne, which works through twenty one bumper-perfect answers to the question “How to live?”.

Dissimilarities aside, however, all versions of transformational ethics of film-philosophy indicate the need for self-transformation of an altogether different order – bringing me to wrap up my analysis with the question of ‘preparatory ethics’ (Section 4). Film philosophers paint a compelling picture of film-philosophy’s power to transform, yet at the same time they assume prior measures of self-work that the ideal viewer must have in place in order for film to have these claimed ethical effects. These preconditions prompt questions of the extent to which film *per se* actually shoulders the work of personal transformation. Especially to those who fancy film as a prime mover of our self-transformations, the dilemma of preparatory ethics shows that there is much more to the bumper than only the stickers.

## 2. Ethics of Self-Concentration

### 2.1 ‘Know Yourself’: Film as Thought Experiment

The first major strand of transformational ethics in the film as philosophy debate goes under the classic ‘Know Yourself’ – a sticker that goes all the way back to the so-called ‘father’ of Western philosophy, no less.<sup>142</sup>

The knowledge that we hold is not always entirely present to us. According to the ‘Know Yourself’ ethic, films that do philosophy lead viewers into an introspective uncovering of the self’s knowledge: they make you aware of *what you do not know you know*. To practice this ethic would mean to watch films with the expectation that they may expose a surprising insight into how you think; to let them cast a spotlight on the unexamined corners of your judgement, and bring to light beliefs that have previously only sat in the dark.

This ethical vision typically comes from philosophers who see film-philosophy as a matter of whether films can embody recognized forms of philosophical knowledge: for film to be philosophy, it has to function as an argument, a thought experiment, or the like. Certainly, philosophers may value such films for the simple reason that they can transmit to us all sorts of philosophical insight. But the philosophers who prefer this approach to film-philosophy are specifically interested in the *value* of *self-knowledge*.<sup>143</sup> And, being philosophers, they are after

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142 In general philosophical circles the Delphic precept ‘know yourself’ is synonymous with the figure of Socrates. But when drawing this connection with Socrates, I do take seriously Foucault’s advice that *gnōthi seauton* (know yourself), for the Ancient Greeks, functioned within the broader justificatory framework of the imperative, *epimeleia heautou* (the care of the self) (Foucault, 2005: 8). Much as the ‘Know Yourself’ ethic of film-philosophy may resemble Socratic self-examination, therefore, I cannot pretend that the film philosophers concerned rely upon *epimeleia heautou* as the ethic’s motivating paradigm.

143 With regard to self-knowledge versus other kinds of insight, literature scholar Joshua Landy (2012: 4–8) offers a valuable take on various conceptions of what fiction, in general, can do for us. In addition to two main branches, which respectively ascribe “exemplary” and “affective” value to fiction, he identifies a prominent “cognitive branch” of theorizing according to which the point of our engagement with fiction is the expansion of knowledge. Within this cognitive branch, Landy distinguishes four positions: that fiction can give us (a) knowledge of the world at large (whether by propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge,

a very specific variety of self-knowledge: to become *aware* of the beliefs that you hold, the tacit beliefs that structure your knowledge, but which you have never explicitly thought about yourself. When films act as philosophy, they suggest, you are most likely to get *knowledge about knowledge* that is still *unacknowledged* in your thinking.

Why this particular emphasis on self-knowledge? The philosophers concerned are the most circumspect ones. They accept only ‘weak’- to ‘moderate’ notions of film-philosophy, according to which film – even if embodying certain techniques of philosophy – can at best make only modest contributions to philosophical knowledge.<sup>144</sup> So instead of saying that films produce new knowledge, they find it safer to rather emphasize how films play upon the tacit knowledge of the viewer, and thus serve the well-known Socratic cause of examining knowledge that is already in place.

### **Be-(a)-ware: *The Matrix* of Hidden Assumptions**

The ‘Know Yourself’ ethic emerges most clearly when philosophers think of films as thought experiments. The familiar argument goes that films as philosophical thought experiments, by being more immersive and engaging than their traditional written counterparts, are particularly apt to expose unquestioned assumptions upon which we base our judgment.

Consider Thomas Wartenberg and Chris Falzon, who take this line on that great philosopher’s favorite, *The Matrix* (Lana & Lilly Wachoski, 1999).<sup>145</sup> The two philosophers’ accounts are similar, in that both of them proceed from the Socratic view of philosophy as critical self-examination, of philosophical discourse as devised for the purpose of questioning the beliefs we live by – and see *The Matrix* as fulfilling just this task. Insofar as philosophy, says Wartenberg (2003: 145), “aims at unsettling our established habits of belief and action in order to reestablish them on a firmer, more critically aware foundation”, a thought experiment can help oppose “the tenacity of the habitual” (ibid.: 145). Wartenberg goes on to explain how *The Matrix*, with its famous narrative twist – in which the established diegetic world is revealed to be ‘the matrix’, an oppressive digital illusion – put viewers in an ‘epistemic position’ in which they, too, are led to interrogate their own assumptions about the realness of reality as they experience it (ibid.: 152). Falzon (2002: 29–31), likewise, concludes that the disorienting narrative twist of *The Matrix* brings to awareness the viewer’s reliance upon

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knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation), (b) knowledge of the cultural moment or Zeitgeist, (c) knowledge of the author or producer of the fiction or, lastly, (d) knowledge of oneself – the last option of which clearly corresponds to the ‘Know Yourself’ ethic in film-philosophy.

<sup>144</sup> As I explained in Chapter 1, the claim that films engage in/with philosophy can be plotted along two intersecting axes – one pertaining to the degree of engagement, the other to the conditions for film’s engagement of philosophy. I find that most ‘weak’ to ‘moderate’ stances on the degree to which film can be philosophy, coincide with the condition that, in order to be said to do philosophy, film must instantiate the techniques of philosophy (illustrations, arguments, thought experiments).

<sup>145</sup> See Wartenberg (2003, 2007: 55–75) and Falzon (2002: 25–31, 2006).

previously unrecognized assumptions. Much as philosophy is about bringing taken-for-granted epistemological frameworks to our critical attention, a film like *The Matrix* serves the purpose of challenging our complacency by creating an acute epistemological instability that we, viewers, need to deal with.<sup>146</sup> However, as both Falzon and Wartenburg suggest, this philosophical work performed by *The Matrix* rests on its manipulation of a typically cinematic ‘reality effect’ (*effet de réel*), which, on the level of experience, makes the effect of the thought experiment *in film* ever so much more effective.

Wartenburg and Falzon’s take on *The Matrix* gives us the necessary ingredients to piece together a transformational ethic of film. In terms of the analytical frames that I introduced in the previous chapter, I extract from the claims of these two philosophers a technique, mode, domain and value of transformation respectively. First, *The Matrix* is thought to facilitate a particular work of the self upon itself: Wartenburg and Falzon imagine the viewer’s encounter with *The Matrix* as an act of self-reflection, suggesting the specific transformational *technique* of *self-examination* through film. Naturally, this self-examination marks a *contemplative mode* of transformation, elicited in the viewer, they argue, through the pronounced narrative trickery central to *The Matrix*. Next, this contemplative mode is focused on a particular *domain* of transformation. Within the overall domain of the viewer’s knowledge, self-examination may be directed at explicitly held views and arguments; beliefs and biases; or, more broadly, an entire episteme, cognitive frameworks and world views basic to one’s thinking. Here Wartenburg and Falzon single out the transformational domain of *latent assumptions*. And, lastly, there are implicit *values* of transformation they adhere to. We can only speak of a transformational ethic if this self-examination through *The Matrix* is presumed to target some transformed end-state, defined by a particular value. Wartenburg and Falzon notably posit the value of gaining *awareness* with respect to the unconscious, habituated forms of knowledge that are basic to how we know the world. Yet values like clarity, openness of mind, and freedom (from false beliefs and dogmatism) apply just as much.

But what is the need for practicing this particular self-examination? On this point, Wartenburg and Falzon sketch roughly the same motivating *paradigm* for ‘Know Yourself’, which they get from *The Matrix*’s central theme. The film’s self-reflexive unmasking of an artificial reality, they say, brings to attention our susceptibility to all of the technologically mediated and highly captivating cinematic (or televisual or digital) ‘realities’ that we so easily take for granted in our daily lives (Wartenburg, 2007: 75; Falzon, 2006: 101). Viewing *The Matrix*, as an exercise in self-examination, is thus negatively motivated by the context of an all-pervasive

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<sup>146</sup> Falzon also considers other films, like *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999), *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) and *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), as variations of the skeptical thought experiments found in the philosophies of both Plato and Descartes (see 2002: 26–29). This suggests that these and comparable “skeptical films” (Schmerheim, 2013b) may have ethical relevance similar to that attributed to *The Matrix*.

*screen culture*, and our habituation to it, in order to make us aware of what screens might screen us from.<sup>147</sup>

Note, by the way, that both philosophers also approach *The Matrix* as a digital-era update of the ‘evil demon’ thought experiment – the famous skeptical scenario posed by René Descartes, which, they argue, the film enacts in its own narrative-cinematic (and again: captivating, as I would like to add) terms. This Cartesian connection thickens the ethical plot. For its ‘evil demon’ ancestor stems from a context absolutely steeped in the kind of transformational self-reflection that Wartenberg and Falzon imply of *The Matrix*. Descartes’ thought experiment, after all, belongs to a series of ‘meditations’, designed to awaken the reader to the errancy of beliefs, and to discern the self as a thinking reality. As Hadot (2002: 264) notes, Descartes certainly knew that the title of his *Méditations* – presented as successive intellectual exercises, extending over six days – designated spiritual exercises belonging to the tradition of ancient philosophy (cf. Kobusch, 2013). And, indeed, numerous classical exercises actually feature in the *Méditations*: commentators identify spiritual exercises like that of ‘attention’ and ‘circumspection’ (Kobusch, 2013: 169–170); the Platonic discipline of *aversio*, turning the mind away from the senses (Cottingham, 2013: 158); and the Stoic discipline of ‘assent’ (Hadot, 2002: 265). So when the likes of Wartenberg and Falzon use *The Matrix* to extend the long tradition of philosophical skepticism, it turns out they invoke also the tradition of transformational ethics that informs the *exercise* of skepticism.

### Other Twists & Trammels: *Do the Right Thing* & *Happy-Go-Lucky*

Whereas Wartenberg and Falzon’s version of ‘Know Yourself’ targets broad assumptions about the nature of reality, Dan Flory gives the ethic a more specific socio-moral emphasis, by considering how films specifically target viewers’ ideological assumptions about race. He focuses on *film noir*-influenced Black films (i.e. African-American cinema), for the reason that they mobilize the classic genre’s “distinctive potential for encouraging viewers to question presuppositions that might otherwise go unnoticed” (Flory, 2009: 5).

Among the variety of cinematic-narrative devices that Flory explores, he too finds ‘epistemological twists’ ideal for triggering the self-examination of unnoticed assumptions.<sup>148</sup> Flory’s (2010) analysis of *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) as

147 The capacity of screens to screen, hide, or obscure finds perhaps its most famous expression in Freud’s notion of ‘screen memories’ (1962 [1899]). These, according to Freud, are vivid but unimportant childhood memories that stand in for – and conceal – deeper, traumatic memories from which they derive.

148 The notion of the ‘epistemological twist film’, as Flory indicates, was formulated by George O. Wilson (2006) with reference to drastic revelatory narrative turns in films such as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001). As Wilson himself explains, these films are characterized by “the fact that global aspects of the epistemic structure of their narration are clarified, in a surprising way, only toward the end of the movie” (ibid.: 89). Since these twists depend on some epistemological delusion of the characters, viewers are also taken up in an analogous process of being ‘deceived’ by what is ultimately unmasked as unreliable cinematic narration. Consequently, they have to revise major assumptions about what they have experienced up to the point of the twist. Flory (2010: 381, 384) however extends Wilson’s

a 'socio-political twist film' shows how the film exposes problematic *background beliefs* and *default values* relating to race.<sup>149</sup> Ideally, this process can lead to a challenge of assumptions, and encourage viewers to reconsider how they perceive characters in terms of race. This is one instance of what Flory broadly sees as Black *noir*'s potential to minister to viewers an "opportunity for thinking, believing and knowing differently about race" (2009: 309). Much of Flory's argument would of course also apply to the 'feminist twist films' that expose problematic default assumptions pertaining to gender – as in a recent example, the gender role reversal narrative of the French Netflix comedy, *I Am Not An Easy Man* (2018, Éléonore Pourriat).

Even more than the cases above, lastly, Basileios Kroustallis (2012) stresses the epistemological disruption that philosophical thought experiments perform with regard to the viewer's latent assumptions. The possibility of a cinematic thought experiment, he explains, requires that "a proposition initially straightforward to agree with will be challenged, and will reveal different consequences by means of narrative, acting and the visual setting of the film" (ibid.: 80). The suggestion that a film as a thought experiment somehow obstructs the viewer's natural patterns of reflection and makes thinking difficult – the kind of disruption to thought that is actually also performed by the narrative and epistemological twists discussed above – requires a slight elaboration of the transformational *mode* to 'Know Yourself'. For Kroustallis and company, cinematic thought experiments posture viewers in what I specify as a mode of *contemplative endurance* brought about by the supposed nature of the film's transformational work, which is to obstruct and challenge the viewer's default ways of thinking.

Yet, when it comes to *how* film does this work of making thinking difficult, Kroustallis apparently wants to show that film has methods other than complex storytelling twists. He finds that Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008) undermines our automatic assumptions about the nature of happiness not through a narrative twist device, but by means of the actively estranging disposition played out by the main character, Poppy (Sally Hawkins). He describes Poppy as 'eccentric', 'idiosyncratic', 'ambiguous', and 'confusing' – terms which, in yet another twist, also go for the challenging figure of Socrates, he claims.<sup>150</sup> The resultant incongruity between our familiar assumptions about happiness, and the unfamiliarity of Poppy's, who embodies them, says Kroustallis, establishes an uncomfortable

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theory to also cover what Flory formulates as the "socio-political twist film". Such a film does not centrally rely on unreliable narration, but rather localizes its 'twist' in a drastic shift in how the viewer perceives a character from a socio-moral perspective. This device, he argues, can foreground and challenge a viewer's background assumptions about race (ibid.: 384).

149 I should point out that Flory rightly also stresses the role of formal cinematic aspects like focus, framing, angle and music in the film's treatment of racial perspectives (e.g. 2010: 382).

150 Kroustallis' notion of the supremely unique Individual, the ineffability of whom poses a challenge to thought, has a clear philosophical precedent in Socrates. Depictions of Socrates hold that it is not merely his questions and discourse that breeds perplexity, but "a personality which, by its mere presence, obliges those who approach it to question themselves" (Hadot, 2002: 29–30). At the end of Plato's *Symposium*, for example, Alcibiades describes Socrates as *atopos* – implying that Socrates is strange, absurd, unclassifiable, and even disturbing (ibid.: 30).

spectatorial experience, compelling viewers to examine the commonsense assumptions that it puts under strain. (ibid.: 79–81).

While Christopher Grau (2013)<sup>151</sup> exposes several shortcomings in Kroustallis' argument – especially regarding his failings of interpretation – my own interest is less in the accuracy of Kroustallis' reading, than in the motive and argumentative strategy that guide his reading. He counts on a cinematic thought experiment to do the transformational work of actively frustrating our assumptions, and thereby have them ushered into the viewer's critical awareness. What ultimately drives the self-examination of assumptions, therefore, is an experience of dissonance, a cognitive unease<sup>152</sup>, which – overstated as it may be – Kroustallis ascribes to a very specific narrative device: a character that resists commonsensical beliefs.

## 2.2 'Remind Yourself': Noël Carroll

We come to a rather similar picture with the ethic of transformation that emerges in Noël Carroll's account of film-philosophy. Carroll, I suspect, would not even mind to bear the 'Know Yourself' sticker on his bumper. Yet the particular spin that he puts on that ethic warrants a slogan of its own. Let me call it: 'Remind Yourself'.

As with the examples of 'Know Yourself' above, Carroll's implied ethic is one of self-concentration; he too affirms film as a means to *mind* your own knowledge. But whereas 'Know Yourself' is about getting knowledge of what you do not know you know – things like hidden assumptions or cognitive frames – 'Remind Yourself' is specifically about getting to know, again, afresh, *what you have long known*. This ethic construes film-going as an occasion to restore in us those truths that we know, no doubt, but do not keep in mind as we would like to – or should.

### Self-Knowledge as Recollection & *Sunset Boulevard*

Carroll offers his most explicit treatment of film as philosophy in an essay on the Billy Wilder *film noir* classic, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) (2013: 161–182). In asking how *Sunset Boulevard* contributes to philosophical insight, he proceeds from an understanding of philosophy that strongly affirms its practical relevance – a position that also automatically brings to the fore the transformational ends of philosophy.

Carroll explains that, much as philosophy has the function of forging new ideas and advancing unimagined possibilities, it also has the basic task to remind us of matters that for whatever reason we overlook or even actively ignore or suppress.

151 I should add that that Grau's (counter-)reading of *Happy-Go-Lucky* is even more obvious about *its own* transformational interests. I get to this later.

152 See Miklós Kiss & Steven Willemsen (2017), who bases their incisive account of contemporary complex cinema and complex cinema scholarship on the viewer's experience of cognitive dissonance. (The category of 'twist films' under discussion here – for example, *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* – represents a key early development in the still-ongoing trend of narrative complexification that they study.) The creation of some form of cognitive dissonance indeed seems to be a crucial ingredient for the viewer's self-examination of assumptions that 'Know Yourself' prescribes.

At issue, for Carroll, is the aware-making function that philosophy has with respect to the self's knowledge, its role as "a discloser of hidden truths, known but repressed" (ibid.: 179). And he appeals to the examples of Kierkegaard and Heidegger, who remain relevant and significant "precisely because they remind us of facts of the human condition which, although admittedly known, are readily forgotten" (ibid.: 174).

In recognition of philosophy's practical task to remind us of dormant truths, Carroll claims that narrative fiction films, by fulfilling this task, have an obvious capacity to do philosophy. The claim typifies Carroll's general approach to film-philosophy: a film does philosophy when it midwives reflections and insights on behalf of the viewer; film-philosophy is essentially an occurrence in the viewer's mind (see Chapter 1, Section 4.2). Accordingly, the philosophical contribution made by *Sunset Boulevard*, as he argues, is that it calls to mind for us the inevitability of our mortality with respect to the process of aging<sup>153</sup> – an insight brought home not only by the story of the aged and fading silent cinema Hollywood star, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), but also by factors like Wilder's recourse to horror film stylistics, and their enlistment of disgust, which give cinematic substance to the theme of mortal aging (ibid.: 165–169).

Carroll must however agree that this philosophical exercise through film, as he describes it, is inherently also one of self-transformation. A lesser way of stating Carroll's transformational ethic is to simply say that viewing *Sunset Boulevard* encourages an enhanced state of contemplation, addressing the existential theme of mortality. The heart of his account, however, is that our encounter with the film constitutes an exercise in self-reflection, aimed at restoring knowledge that has become submerged from awareness: "to recall to mind features of human experience that, even if known once, have been forgotten or are only dimly grasped, ignored, neglected, and/or even repressed" (2013: 174).<sup>154</sup> According to this picture, then, Carroll gives ethical weight to film as a means to be reminded of forgotten truths. This is not so much a 'remembering' something that we have literally 'forgotten', as it is a (sudden) becoming aware (again), expressed through the deep-rooted and existentially loaded metaphor of recollection. Watching film thus becomes a *contemplative technique of recollection*; it is aimed at transformational *values of awareness and self-knowledge*; and it is directed, within the self, at the *domain* of the well-known, but *neglected/suppressed truths*, fenced off from our daily existence.

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153 In light of the film, Carroll describes the theme of mortality as "one of those features of human existence of which we easily lose sight, conveniently forgetting and even repressing our awareness of this phenomenon as, in the heat of life, we press forward with our projects" (2013: 169).

154 It certainly is commonplace to conceive of art as activating various kinds of repressed mental categories (impulses, desires, memories, etc.). But, considering his career-long disputes with psychoanalytic inspired theories of film (among other things), the avid reader of Carroll will no doubt detect a tinge of irony in this uncharacteristic appeal to the idea of repression.



## Ancient Backing

Carroll bolsters the above argument – and rightly so – by contextualizing the task of reminding oneself of forgotten truths as something which has always been part of philosophy. As he puts it, the charge to “remind us of facts of the human condition which, although admittedly known, are readily forgotten [...] has been one of the tasks of philosophy since the get-go” (ibid.: 174–175). Carroll associates tasks of this kind with the ongoing tradition of philosophy – exemplified by the Ancients – that primarily concerns itself with how one should live, alongside which he cites the work of Pierre Hadot (ibid.: 174–175). He concludes that, since *Sunset Boulevard* compels us to remember our human condition, it also participates in this tradition that puts philosophy to ‘the task of living’ (ibid.: 176).<sup>155</sup>

Carroll’s reliance on the Ancients’ paradigm of practical philosophy is actually signaled from the outset of his essay. We see this in his carefully chosen notions for the ‘philosophy’ that he says films do. Carroll pinpoints the philosophical contribution of films on how they can promote personal *insight* (one may go as far as labeling it *wisdom*) – not on how they deal with philosophical theories or arguments (ibid.: 162). It is certainly so, he admits, that philosophical arguments – understood in the restricted, technical sense – can deliver insights about how to live life. But the same kind of insights can be achieved through the devices of popular narrative fictions. The popular (mass) medium of film can therefore engage in what Carroll labels ‘popular philosophy’, aimed more generally at the reflective layman, and not only the scholar (ibid.: 176). And by doing popular philosophy, relevant to living daily life, film can fulfill therapeutic functions resembling those of Ancient philosophy – such as the recollection of important but forgotten truths.

## Self-Knowledge as Clarification

The claim that film, or art, serves to ‘Remind Yourself’ is certainly not a view that Carroll as a cognitivist is particularly well-known for. Still, the claim does agree with Carroll’s broader philosophy of art, where he shows the same transformational interest in self-knowledge, and how art essentially lets us “know what we know” (Landy, 2012: 6).<sup>156</sup> The *Sunset Boulevard* essay frames such self-knowledge as an act of *recollection*. But far better known in Carroll’s work is the notion that

<sup>155</sup> It appears that Carroll considers tragedy, in general, to also form part of this tradition. This is due to how tragedy, he says, serves to remind us of uncomfortable truths about our condition (2013: 176). In fact, Carroll sometimes extends the same function of reminding to art *in toto*. In a brief passage elsewhere Carroll remarks that “artworks may serve to remind audiences of what they already know by posing it vividly and concretely” (2010: 184). And to give another example, Carroll also affirms the recollective function of art when he discusses the socio-cultural value of specifically memorial art (2010: 163–174).

<sup>156</sup> Below I refer to a relevant and representative sample of Carroll’s philosophy of art, an essay in which he develops an account of the relation between art and morality (Carroll, 1998). In this instance Carroll restricts himself to categories of art that are most pertinent to moral assessment. Although this does not preclude other categories – like portraiture, for instance – Carroll opts to focus on narrative as “clear-cut case” (ibid.: 138).

self-knowledge through art is an act of *clarification*. Art can clarify our existing knowledge – this marks the more pivotal and indeed overarching metaphor on which Carroll's ethic of self-knowledge hinges. For the recollection of knowledge entails also a clarification: to 'Remind Yourself' through art implies ultimately to gain a certain clarity into what you know, and therefore goes under what appears to be Carroll's umbrella ethic, 'Clarify (to) Yourself'.

Crucial to what Carroll calls the 'clarificationist view'<sup>157</sup> is his commitment to the position that art – and here he concentrates on the narrative arts – does not give us brand new knowledge. Instead it activates both the cognitive and the emotional stock material that we already possess and thereby offers an "occasion for exercising knowledge, concepts and emotions that we have already, in one sense, learned" (1998: 141). This is therefore a different sense of learning: "in mobilizing what we already know and what we can already feel, the narrative artwork can become an occasion for us to deepen our understanding of what we know and what we feel" (ibid.: 142). In such a manner, narrative art – by its very nature, Carroll seems to suggest<sup>158</sup> – encourages in its beholders a process of clarification. Carroll describes clarification as the (re)connection, reorganization, reclassification and reinterpretation of established knowledge forms (e.g. beliefs, premises, and categories of thought) (ibid.: 142–143). The ethic suggested here is that the filmgoer can use film-viewing in active pursuit of clarification, which as a particular contemplative *technique* is aimed, as we have seen before, at the *domain* of one's established beliefs, premises, and categories of thought. But note that in Carroll's account the technique of clarification also branches into the transformational domain of the *emotions*: to the extent that emotions have a conceptual component, he argues, they form part of our established knowledge forms, and therefore are likewise amenable to clarification through art (ibid.: 144). What adds to the ethical-transformational thrust of this position is that Carroll is specifically interested in the role of clarification *vis-à-vis* our moral capacities.<sup>159</sup>

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157 Carroll's clarificationist position is first and foremost a defense of the idea that there are significant relations between art and morality – contrary to the position of 'automatism' (arguing that art and morality are essentially separate realms), which he takes issue with. Carroll deems the clarifying effect of art on moral cognition to be the most prominent stratum of the relation between particularly narrative art and morality (1998: 154–155). What I am after, of course, is the transformational agenda implied by his position. Yet I admit that this agenda need not be limited to only Carroll's clarificationist view, as I do here. He ascribes to art many other functions that are equally relevant to transformational ethics. Elsewhere, for example, Carroll goes into how artworks can develop and enhance significant moral skills relating to moral judgment, perception, emotional responsiveness, openness to other points of view, empathy, and the ability to configure life-situations into a meaningful narrative whole (2010: 179–185). My reason for not addressing these functions of art here is that – though they are certainly ethically relevant – they are not directly relevant to Carroll's understanding of film as philosophy.

158 He explains that narratives are essentially incomplete: they rely on presuppositions that are filled out by the knowledge that the audience brings to the text (1998: 138). Narratives therefore necessarily mobilize and exercise the *knowledge* of their audiences. And these conditions of narrative intelligibility also extend to the requisite *emotions* (drawn from a shared 'stock' with the author) which the audience has to supply (ibid.: 138–139).

159 Carroll holds clarification to be "the most prized transaction that can transpire between the narrative artwork and moral understanding" (1998: 142). Yet he does not limit the clarificationist potential of narrative

Since moral recognition and judgment are based on moral beliefs, concepts and emotions, his main interest is in how the exercise and clarification of the latter, through narrative, can specifically deepen moral understanding. Clarification thus results in deeper *understanding*, which Carroll distinguishes from knowledge: understanding is the *clarified, refined and deepened* insight gained into anterior knowledge and emotions (ibid.: 142–144).<sup>160</sup>

In this way, Carroll's position epitomizes the ethical interest that is most likely to accompany weak to moderate notions of film-philosophy: that film can foster self-transformation within the *domain* of the *viewer's knowledge*. As to the nature of that transformation, the likes of Carroll, Wartenberg, and Falzon are not likely to claim that films introduce something fundamentally new, or different, to the viewer's knowledge. Instead, they emphasize how films call the existing knowledge of the viewer to attention and subsequent reflection. The transformation, as such, is measured by *values* like *awareness, insight and self-knowledge* being inserted into the knowledge that the self already has. It is precisely this transformation of knowledge-already-possessed, a typical ideal for philosophers of film, that finds

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art to only moral competencies. One interesting alternative is that narrative art can bring clarification to the domain of *narrative cognition* itself. Consider Carroll's film-philosophical essay (2013: 203–220) on *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and how the film can be seen as making a contribution to philosophy of art. *Memento's* philosophical contribution, he claims, consists in giving the thoughtful viewer insight into how we follow a film narrative. More specifically, the challenging structures of the film is said to promote in the viewer a clarification (although Carroll does not use the term here) of the process by which she comprehends the narrative. While presenting viewers with the familiar genre of the film noir, *Memento* does so in de-familiarizing way – making the narrative strange *à la* Russian Formalism – which makes viewing it difficult (ibid.: 208–209). Carroll attributes this difficult-making, the particular contemplative work that the film does, with three factors: the film's backwards narration, temporal play, and unreliable narration (due to the protagonist's condition of memory loss) (ibid.: 213). And as a result of this “provocation”, he explains, the film prompts in viewers what I would call a contemplative mode: “to negotiate the film with a heightened consciousness of what they are doing” (ibid.: 208). Carroll concludes that the viewing-process thus serves the “meta-narrative” function of making the viewer more aware of “standardly neglected, essential features of movie narration and comprehension”; and also makes one more (self-)aware of one's own processing of the narrative (ibid.: 215). According to this account, therefore, narrative art serves the transformational purpose of bringing to awareness narrative itself; and, with that, foregrounds and clarifies the mostly hidden processes whereby the viewer assimilates it. Carroll also suggests that a clarification of narrative cognition, such as we find in this case, can feed a more general transformation of how we view films. For the special viewing experience of *Memento*, in turn, gives the viewer “phenomenological access” to what goes into our “less reflective encounters” with “more straightforwardly composed narratives” (ibid.: 208–209, 212–213).

<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, as Carroll sees it, understanding involves an increased capacity for the *application* of established knowledge:

“[U]nderstanding is meant to mark our capacity to manipulate what we know and to apply it with a sense of intelligibility [...] Understanding is a capacity to acknowledge and to be responsive to connections between our beliefs. A person with understanding has the ability to find her way around in the mental geography of her own cognitive stock [...] With understanding, we acquire increasing familiarity with concepts and principles that are at first bewildering. Understanding is the activity of refining what we already know, of recognizing connections between parts of our knowledge stock, of bringing what we already know to clarity through a process of practice and judgment” (1998:143–144).

such clear expression in Carroll's complementary metaphors of recollection and clarification.<sup>161</sup>

## 2.3 'Know Yourself' Some More: A Word on Film-Philosophy Doubters

It is worth briefly considering also some film-philosophy doubters, for the reason that they, too, affirm the kind of transformational ethics of film surveyed up to this point. Take two clear-cut skeptics: Bruce Russell, already introduced in Chapter 1, as well as Berys Gaut. Both are only willing to endorse a weak engagement between film and philosophy, as I have defined it earlier.<sup>162</sup> Yet they still acknowledge the broader cognitive value of film, and in doing so tread on the same themes of self-reflection, and transformation within the domain of knowledge, that we have encountered in the ethics of 'Know Yourself' and 'Remind Yourself'.

Russell (2005; 2008) is known for insisting on definite limits to the philosophy that films can be said to do (see Chapter 1, Section 4.2). But with the philosophical functions that he does grant film, he affirms the by-now familiar theme of transformation aimed at one's existing knowledge: in addition to the functions of raising philosophical questions and offering counterexamples, he notes that films can "remind us of things we already know", "motivate us to find out things we do not already know" and to "double-check what we think we know" (2005: 390).

In a similar vein Gaut (2015: 41) holds that, although certain cognitive functions of films may overlap with philosophy, this does not mean that films *do* philosophy. Not all forms of cognition are philosophical; and film embraces emotional and aesthetic aims seldom shared by philosophy. Yet when Gaut evaluates *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), and the effect of the 'cognitive vision' that the film casts, he endorses the exact same 'Remind Yourself' sticker that Carroll sports in his reading of *Sunset Boulevard*. In the context of an already death-obsessed film, as Gaut describes it, *Blade Runner* presents viewers with the plight of the replicants – androids who have the radically curtailed life-span of only four years. Gaut claims that this plight presents viewers with an intensified rendition of what is also our own finitude, thus prompting us to reflect on our mortality. Much of the film's power, he concludes, lies in it initiating this posture of self-reflection (ibid.: 42).

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161 In my view, recollection and clarification, as models for transformation unto awareness of the self's knowledge, can be taken as complementary in at least two ways. Since being reminded of aspects of our existence is a manner of clarifying established (but forgotten, or neglected) knowledge, the recollection of forgotten truths can be seen as one instance of the more encompassing notion of clarification. But if one works with a more restricted understanding of clarification, recollection (becoming aware) can alternatively be seen as more basic and, hence, as paving the way for processes of clarification.

162 To be even more precise, both Russell and Gaut fall within what Wartenberg (2011a: 15) distinguishes as the "moderate anti-cinematic philosophy" position. This means that they do not flatly reject the possibility for films to do philosophy. But, at the same time, they maintain that there are clear and significant limitations to the philosophical contributions that films can make.

So even though Russell and Gaut deny film to do philosophy in any strong sense of the term, they do attach to film transformational functions of self-knowledge. This sets them on what may perhaps be the unintended ethical common ground they share with their opponents.

## 2.4 ‘Sense Your Senses’: Vivian Sobchack

The transformational ethics that we have covered up to this point are all about films engaging viewers at a level of higher cognition or reflective knowledge. Yet to leave it *only* at that, Vivian Sobchack would say, is to very literally take leave of our senses.

Her favorite bumper sticker, ‘Sense Your Senses’, says it all. With what is also an ethic of self-concentration, Sobchack wants to use film not so much to know what you know, but rather to *sense how you sense*, to *perceive how you perceive* and, ultimately, to *experience how you experience*. In short, she radically orients the idea of self-transformation through film towards the body. Much like Richard Shusterman’s well-known ‘somaesthetics’ seeks to redress self-transformation understood purely as a one-sided project of the mind<sup>163</sup>, Sobchack too, as far the film experience is concerned, helps put the ‘soma’ back into ‘tran(s)f(orm)ation’.

As we have seen earlier, in Sobchack’s thinking the idea of film-philosophy takes the form of ‘film as phenomenology’, the idea that films themselves partake in and perform phenomenology. Films can do phenomenology because they share in the same structures of embodied existence as their viewers. And the philosophical payoff of film doing so, she suggests, is that film in effect performs for us a ‘meta-phenomenology’: it gives expression to an experience *of* experience, and so enables us to experience *our* experience. More specifically, our engagement with film’s own ‘body’ and ‘experience’ mobilizes and concentrates the ‘body’s attention’, lets the body ‘sense itself’, and so enhances our ‘sensual being’ (2004: 62, 72, 77).<sup>164</sup> She thus sees in film the capacity to create for its viewers an experience of ‘extreme self-

163 See Shusterman (2008: 15–17). For more on his overall research program of somaesthetics – now recognized as a field in its own right, with its own devoted *The Journal of Somaesthetics* – see also Shusterman (2012; 2013). However, despite the many productive connections that could be drawn between somaesthetics and Sobchack’s film phenomenology, Sobchack never mentions Shusterman’s work. And in the field of somaesthetics, much to my surprise, no one has yet ventured to develop a somaesthetics specifically of film-viewing. If one were to do so, Sobchack’s writings would certainly make for a good starting point.

164 This may be obvious with regard to vision and hearing, but Sobchack holds this to be just as much the case for the senses of smell, taste and touch. Even though we cannot smell, taste or touch figures on the film screen, they nevertheless solicit a sensual desire in the body which finds its fulfillment in a ‘rebound-like’, reflexive turn towards itself. In her own words:

“That more literally accessible sensual object is my own subjectively felt lived body. Thus, ‘on the rebound’ from the screen – and without a reflective thought – I will reflexively turn toward my own carnal, sensual, and sensible being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality” (Sobchack, 2004: 76–77).

reflection’ on those very perceptions – or, structures of embodied existence – that condition the cinematic experience (Sobchack, 2011: 204; 1992: 5).<sup>165</sup>

This account leaves little doubt as to the possibilities of personal transformation that Sobchack sees in our meta-phenomenological encounter with film: it affords a transformation of *how we experience our embodied selves*, based on a restoration of a self-reflective *awareness* of our own experience. That is, by heightening and intensifying the experience of the viewer’s sensorium, the film experience gives her a greater *sense of sensing*. Or as Sobchack also puts it, “the cinema quite concretely returns us, as viewers and theorists, to our senses” (1992:13).

With this Sobchack puts her own cinematic stamp on a phenomenological tradition that, starting with Edmund Husserl, has always set itself the ethical-transformational agenda of renewing our reflective engagement with the world.<sup>166</sup> Following Husserl, she characterizes the ‘radical reflection’ of phenomenology as retrieving and clarifying phenomena of existence, phenomena which have been lost to our reflective knowledge through either habituation or the institutionalized abstractions of scientific thought (1992: 28).<sup>167</sup> Habituation and abstraction, then, represent the main negative motivations that Sobchack adopts within her *paradigm* of self-transformation. For her, the procedure of phenomenology seeks to reanimate what is taken for granted or obscured by abstractive practices. There is a gap between our ‘actual experience’ and the ‘theory’ we use to explain that experience: phenomenology calls us back to the former (see Sobchack, 2004: 53). In so doing phenomenology “opens up not only fresh possibilities for reflective knowledge, but also fresh possibilities for living knowledge and experiencing phenomena, for seeing the world and ourselves in a critically aware way” (1992: 28).

### Sobchack’s *Blue* Exercise

In the spirit of these claims, Sobchack strongly affirms not only the practical value of phenomenology, but also the need to engage in the actual *practice* of phenomenology: you really have to *do* phenomenology to fully understand what it is all about. And, unlike the cases considered up to now, Sobchack gives us quite a tangible picture of her theoretical ideals put into practice. In an essay where she lets us in on her pedagogy of phenomenology, Sobchack describes her use of Derek Jarman’s demanding biopic, *Blue* (1993), as a way of introducing her students to the phenomenological method (2011: 191–206). With this exercise, as I see it, Sobchack leads her students in what is essentially a transformational *technique* of *self-reflection*, based on their experience of a film. Incidentally, an obviously

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165 See Chapter 1, Section 4.4, for the discussion referred to.

166 This agenda is, for instance, clear to see in Simon Glendinning’s assessment that phenomenology “aims to cultivate and develop your capacity faithfully to retrieve (for) yourself (as from the inside) a radically revis(ion)ed understanding of yourself and your place in the world” (2008: 48). Also see Joaquim Siles i Borràs (2011) on the pronounced ethical interests at play in Husserl’s phenomenology.

167 Sobchack elaborates on the nature of this loss: “the phenomena of existence are usually either lived as simply given and taken for granted, or they have been abstracted and reified objectively as the predicated constructs of what has come to be thought of as scientific inquiry” (1992: 28).

*contemplative* technique in this case also incorporates the transformational *mode* of *ministering*, seeing that the self-reflection and its outcomes rely on Sobchack's guidance as a film phenomenological teacher too.

The goal of the *Blue* exercise, Sobchack explains, is to forestall students' habitual recourse to quick-fire judgments and theoretical interpretations ('abstractive practices'), and instead get them to first attend to their own embodied experiences (ibid.: 192–194). Yet contemplative techniques of transformation invariably call upon the directions of an explicit guiding text. And the *Blue* exercise does just that. Sobchack calls in Don Ihde's *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (1979), which provides her with a sequential set of hermeneutic rules<sup>168</sup> that guide the students in adopting the required reflective attitude. Evidently the concrete business of attending to 'actual experience' cannot, after all, proceed without a tinge of abstract theory in place. This touches on issues of the assumed model viewer, and her preparatory self-transformations, which I will get to later on.

Sobchack notes that sitting through Jarman's final feature film is typically experienced as difficult and demanding, and that students' reactions to it are polarized. This is no doubt on account of its radical minimalism. (One might find similar responses, for example, to the minimalism of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975).) Visually, *Blue* is reduced to a single shot of the screen saturated with the color blue. Yet Sobchack insists that the 'extreme conditions of somatic attention' provoked by Jarman's privations – belonging to the transformational mode that I identify as a *contemplative asceticism*, following from the great deal of visual stimuli from which the film withholds the viewer<sup>169</sup> – help challenge one's assumptive 'natural attitude', and so allow students to expand the limits of their own perception (ibid.: 191, 194, 196, 199–200). And this is indeed, then, the kind of transformational result that she reports on: following the exercise, students' phenomenological descriptions become more reflexive; they become sensitized to subtle alterations in their visual attention; they become more receptive to the expansion and sensuality of the aural field; and they can even discover synaesthetic dimensions in their experience (such as listening to color) (ibid.: 197–199).

## Disclosures, Disruptions & Deepenings

It is fair to say that 'Sense Your Senses' overlaps with the other types of ethics discussed so far on the basic transformational *value* of *self-knowledge*, or even more generally, *self-awareness*. But self-knowledge, as it emerges in Sobchack's ethic, gets linked to a very different profile of transformational *domains*. Whereas 'Know Yourself' & Cie want to use film for knowledge of the self's *knowledge*

<sup>168</sup> The five rules read as follows: one, "attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear"; two, "describe, don't explain"; three, "horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena"; four, "seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena as they appear"; and, lastly, five, "every experiencing has its reference or direction towards what is experienced, and, contrarily, every experienced phenomenon refers to or reflects a mode of experiencing to which it is present" (cited in Sobchack, 2011: 195–203).

<sup>169</sup> I distinguish this mode in Table 2.2, under Section 3.2 in Chapter 2.

(its constituent themes, assumptions, biases), 'Sense Your Senses' probes for more elemental knowledge of the *senses* and *embodiment* of the self.

Yet to say that Sobchack is after self-knowledge of our embodied being is to merely scratch the surface of her vision of self-transformation through film. Within the broader *domain* of embodiment, she zooms in on a range of further details of how film can disclose to us our sensory experience.

First, Sobchack elaborates the idea of self-knowledge of the body by adding that film also grants us awareness of how the body itself knows. Here we can speak of self-knowledge aimed at *embodied knowledge* – a composite domain in which the domain of the body incorporates also its own form of knowledge. Noteworthy in this regard are Sobchack's meditations on *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) (2004: 61–64).<sup>170</sup> Here she recounts how the unidentifiable opening images of the film – which turn out to be the main character's hands – evoked an anticipatory sense of what, she says, *her fingers already knew*. These images, as Sobchack explains, mobilized and concentrated her body's attention: "my tactile sense of being in the world through my fingers grasped the image's sense in a way that my forestalled or baffled vision could not" (ibid.: 64). That her fingers can 'grasp' or 'comprehend' in a manner that can only afterwards be refigured into conscious thought, demonstrates what she takes to be "the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility" (ibid.: 59).<sup>171</sup> The film experience, by giving a greater sense of sensing, can thus also sensitize us to what she variously calls our 'bodily knowing', 'embodied intelligence', or 'carnal thoughts' (e.g. ibid.: 60, 75, 84). In this manner, says Sobchack, we become more attuned to how the body reflexively knows *before* we reflectively know.

Besides getting to know our bodily knowing, Sobchack suggests that film's engagement of the senses can furthermore stimulate and deepen our capacity for synaesthesia. Synaesthesia is described as a basic exchange and translation between the senses – to experience one sense in terms of another. Such an exchange between the senses she asserts as a given condition of the human sensorium. But even though synesthetic perception is the rule, she goes on, we become unaware of it through both over-familiarity and cultural conditioning (ibid.: 67, 69–71). Sobchack therefore wants the particular sensory solicitations of a given film, or filmic moment, to step in and disclose for us this supposedly obscured synaesthetic

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170 Sobchack speaks in dramatic terms of her profoundly sensual experience of the film: "The film not only 'filled me up' and often 'suffocated' me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but it also 'sensitized' the very surfaces of my skin – as well as its own – to touch. Throughout the film my whole being was intensely concentrated and, rapt as I was in the world onscreen, I was wrapped also in a body that was achingly aware of itself as a sensuous, sensitized, sensible material capacity" (2004: 61–62).

171 I must point out the undoubtedly polemical dimension to Sobchack's claim that cinematic intelligibility relies on a pre-reflective embodied form of understanding. She makes no secret of the (then) prevailing paradigms that she challenges:

"[M]ost theorists still don't quite know what to do with their unruly responsive flesh and sensorium. Our sensations and responses pose an intolerable question to prevalent linguistic and psychoanalytic understandings of the cinema as grounded in conventional codes and cognitive patterning and grounded on absence, lack, and illusion" (2004: 59).



dimension of our experience. This, too, is a central theme in her meditations on *The Piano*: film can harness the viewer's synaesthetic capacities, on the basis of our total embodied involvement with it, and thereby let the dominant senses of vision and hearing 'speak to' our other senses, and *vice versa* (ibid.: 67). The cited fingers-example in *The Piano* is thus taken by Sobchack to illustrate how film quite literally touches us through what we see; and, thereby, shows us the deep extent to which sight is informed by the sense of touch.<sup>172</sup>

But Sobchack still has more in mind. The disclosure of synaesthetic exchange among the senses, as she sees it, ushers in yet another transformational prospect for film viewers: to have our naturalized sensory hierarchy altered and rearranged (ibid.: 80).<sup>173</sup> Here she is specifically driving at how film can destabilize the dominance of the audio-visual, and in particular the 'cultural hegemony' of vision with its "hierarchical sway over our other senses" (2004: 63–64; cf. 2011: 199).<sup>174</sup> Presumably film can help us approximate what Sobchack at one point calls a 'pre-logical and nonhierarchical unity of the sensorium', which precedes the hierarchical arrangement of the senses that later develops through cultural immersion (2004: 69). With this thought, as I see it, Sobchack adds to 'Sense Your Senses' the time-honored transformational *value of unity* – a value that in discourses of mysticism often gets related to entities external to the self, like unity with Nature or God<sup>175</sup>, but which otherwise can also apply to a unity (integratedness, wholeness) *within* the self, whether that may be a unity of parts of the soul, mental faculties or, in this case, the senses.

Finally, for Sobchack, all the above disclosures effected by film – relating to embodied knowledge, synaesthesia, and integrating the senses – give viewers

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172 "[O]nce we understand that vision is informed by and informs our other senses in a dynamic structure that is not necessarily or always sensually hierarchical, it is no longer metaphorical to say that we 'touch' a film or that we are 'touched' by it" (Sobchack, 2004: 80).

173 Sobchack (2004: 69) explains that "we do not have to be clinically diagnosed synaesthetes or very young children to challenge those boundaries and transform those hierarchies". She considers the film experience one of a variety of possible situations that can undo the "regulatory borders and orders among the senses" (ibid.).

174 The subversion of the normative dominance of vision must, on the one hand, challenge traditional film-theoretical conceptions of a disembodied vision: "we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (2004: 63). This consequently questions the privileged status that vision usually enjoys with respect to the other senses: "vision is only one modality of my lived body's access to the world and only one means of making the world of objects and others sensible – that is, meaningful – to me" (ibid.: 65).

175 Sobchack does in fact also hint at this first kind of transformational unity. Owing to the relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity between the viewer's body and the film's body – among many other matters raised in her dense prose – she notes that "objectivity and subjectivity lose their presumed clarity" (2004: 66). Quoting from Iris Marion Young, she further speaks of embodied subjectivity as leaving "no basis for preserving the mutual exclusivity of the categories subject and object, inner and outer, I and world". This view has echoes of the aim of unitive experience in various forms of mysticism, one typical feature of which is the blurring of subject-object boundaries. And, as I will still show, it puts Sobchack in the company of both Daniel Frampton and those who subscribe to the 'Lose Your Self' ethic.

access to greater *depth* and *richness* in their sensual experience (e.g. *ibid.*: 67, 71). At this point ‘Sense Your Senses’, which starts off as an ethic of self-concentration, quietly transmutes into one of self-expansion. As much as film *heightens* and *intensifies* (i.e. concentrates) our experience of the self’s sensorium, Sobchack sees it as an experience that we simultaneously recognize as *general* and *diffuse* (i.e. expanded) (*ibid.*: 77). She speaks of this self-expansive flipside to her ethic in terms of an *opening* of the self and an *extensive* mode of being (*ibid.*: 78–79). The embodied intelligence that is roused by the film experience, she says, “opens our eyes far beyond their discrete capacity for vision, opens the film far beyond its visible containment by the screen, and opens language to a reflective knowledge of its carnal origins and limits” (2004: 84). As this suggests, Sobchack even thinks of this opening of the self as being an embodied sense of *transcendence*.<sup>176</sup> According to this dramatic denouement of ‘Senses Your Senses’, then, particular film-going practices can evoke a deepening of the self’s experience to the extent that the very limits of that experience gets transcended and transformed.

So with Sobchack having already opened the door to the topic of self-expansion, let us now turn to transformational ethics of film where such ideals are the main focus of interest.

### 3. Ethics of Self-Expansion

#### 3.1 ‘Expand Your Mind’: Stephen Mulhall & Others

Film-philosophy’s ethics of self-concentration, I have shown, construes film-viewing as a way to know yourself – that is, to better know what you already know, and to dig deeper into the knowledge and experience that makes you *you*. With the ethics of self-expansion, film philosophers emphasize transformation in the opposite direction: film-viewing is a way to know what is new, different, and other – not to affirm the self and its existing knowledge. This line of ethics banks on film to break you loose from forms of experience that restrict you to being *you*. Ultimately, ethics of self-expansion wishes for the film viewer not just to know what is other, but to *become* what is other.

So what better place to start, then, than with the evergreen transformational slogan, ‘Expand Your Mind’ – the promotion-savvy guru’s bumper sticker of choice. In using this slogan for film philosophers like Stephen Mulhall, however, I do not intend it to mean an expansion of one’s Mind in some grand metaphysical sense (although we will still get to cases that resemble this). No, for Mulhall, and many others, film-philosophy affords a more sensible, down-to-earth instance of self-expansion: films, quite simply, direct our thinking toward different perspectives and unconsidered ideas. ‘Expand Your Mind’ thus prescribes an attitude of

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176 See Sobchack (2008; 2011: 202–204) for a sampling of how she approaches the experience of transcendence on the basis of our material, bodily immanence.

openness to film, and what it ‘thinks,’ so that it can open up pathways along which we are yet to think.

Bear in mind that already with Vivian Sobchack, above, we have crossed some significant borders within the film-philosophy landscape. Both Mulhall and Sobchack assume a clearly different condition for films to engage in philosophy: films do so, not because they enact forms of philosophical *knowledge* (think Wartenberg and Falzon, earlier on), but because they draw viewers into relevant *subjective processes* and enact such processes. Sobchack, we have just seen, identifies the philosophical contribution of films with the broader forms of embodied experience that they enlist and express. Mulhall, on the other hand, narrows film-philosophy down to films that engage in philosophical thinking.

On top of that, we are now squarely on the terrain where films are taken to do philosophy in the most direct and literal sense – the so-called ‘bold’ conception, according to which films can actually *be* philosophy. And the designated person on the ‘bold’ film-philosophy poster is, of course, Stephen Mulhall (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2013: 207–209). As I have previously discussed, Mulhall patently claims that some films think systematically, address philosophical questions and, quite simply, philosophize.<sup>177</sup> Yet, as I have also argued, there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding this ‘thinking’ that films supposedly do: it remains unclear whether this ‘thinking’ refers to film’s own thinking, the thinking that it generates in the viewer, or the thought that the filmmaker (supposedly) wishes to convey to the audience. What is clear in Mulhall’s account, however, is that a film’s thinking – whatever, exactly, it may be – does not leave *the viewer’s* thinking unaffected.

### **The Thinking Film’s Transformations of Thought**

Mulhall gives a number of indications that philosophizing films have a subjective agency that grants their viewers transformations of thought. It is no coincidence, by the way, that most of these indications come up precisely when Mulhall (2008: 129–155) sets out to respond to critics of his bold stance on film-philosophy: in having to elaborate on what counts as ‘philosophy’, and how films can do it, he is bound to consider also ethical-transformational effects that are intrinsic to (films) doing philosophy.

The resultant transformational ethic that Mulhall gestures towards, it has to be said, is not exactly as ‘bold’ as the position on film-philosophy that he is reputed to have. Mulhall, to begin with, values film for motivating in the viewer a movement of thought. He takes some films to be particularly adept at encouraging viewers to ask questions and make meaning – like, again, *Blade Runner* which, Mulhall says, ‘educates’ our reflections on what it means to be human (ibid.: 29–45). From this angle, film-viewing constitutes a contemplative *technique* in the simple sense that it enhances contemplation, which means that contemplation in Mulhall’s ethic

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<sup>177</sup> See my discussions of Mulhall in Chapter 1, Sections 3.3, 4.3, and 5.

figures as both *mode* and *value* of transformation. But compared to the likes of Carroll, Mulhall sees contemplation through film as more open-ended, not as set on some cognitive outcome. Films do not lead viewers to particular philosophical insights, but rather give them broader ways for thinking, ways leading to whatever insights they may.

Mulhall also differs from the cases dealt with before in that film-viewing, as he treats it, becomes not a transformational *technique* of self-reflection or introspection, but rather what I would call *contemplating the world*. This is to reflect, through film, on the nature of existence, and our place within it. But how does such contemplation involve self-transformation? When Pierre Hadot goes into 'contemplation of the world' – deeming it one of the most general spiritual exercises of ancient philosophy – he specifically relates the technique to a transformation of *vision*, the way in which the philosopher *sees the world* (see Hadot, 1995: 251–263; 2002: 229–231). Although not exactly the same<sup>178</sup>, Hadot's assessment is useful for pinning down the transformation of thought that Mulhall is after: films in the act of philosophy disclose for their viewers alternative 'visions of the world' and 'visions of what matters in human life' (Mulhall, 2008: 136, 140–141). This is a conversion of thinking in the same sense as "encouraging one's interlocutor not so much to change her mind about a particular course of action but to *look at everything differently*" (ibid.: 140 [emphasis added]).

So besides regarding film as inducing us to think *more*, Mulhall sees in film's thinking the ability to accomplish fundamental reorientations of how we think and reason. By providing 'pathways to thinking', films can initiate *new directions* and indeed *new ways* of thinking (ibid.: 136).<sup>179</sup> Again, this is not about films engaging in arguments, in the narrow sense of the term. The point for Mulhall is that any argumentation relies on a shared space of thought, which presupposes the shape and significance – the givenness – of the topic under discussion. What films do is to let us "reconceive *that space*, by finding a new way of thinking about the topic" (ibid.: 137 [emphasis added]). To re-envision the space of thought is to alter our sense of the stances available to our reasoning about a given topic. In this manner film's thinking can provide "an open space in which thinking takes place, enabling new modes of organizing and making sense of experience and knowledge" (Andersen cited in Mulhall, 2008: 136–137).

Mulhall goes on to suggest that film has an especially important part to play in such re-envisioning and reorientation with regard to 'ethical perception' (2008: 141). Because ethical perceptions spring from deeply committed visions of the world, their transformation often requires more than rational engagement alone.

178 For ancients like Seneca or Lucretius, as Hadot evaluates them, contemplating the world is at core about rediscovering a naïve vision: to see the world with new eyes, as if one were seeing it for the first time. In contrast, Mulhall claims that film inspires, not some *renewed primitive vision* of the world, but *new visions* – different perspectives – in terms of which to consider the world.

179 For these notions Mulhall gives credit to Stanley Cavell, who characterizes an ideal philosophy as giving us 'ways to think' and 'directions to answers'; as well as Nathan Andersen, who in a review of Mulhall's work speaks of films as providing 'pathways of thinking' (2008: 136–137, 143–144).

Their reorientation relies just as much on appeals to the ‘heart’ (emotional responses and sensibilities) and to the *imagination* – things, presumably, that film is especially suited to appeal to. Here I take Mulhall as proposing that ‘Expand Your Mind’ occurs within a complex of transformational *domains*. He seems to say that with the experience of film we have an ideal way of harnessing affect/emotion and imagination as domains *by means of which* to impact and transform the *target-domain*, the viewer’s ways of thinking. Put differently: it is by “engaging with and altering our affections and sensibility that film gets to dislodge deep-seated perceptions and reorient them” (ibid.).<sup>180</sup> That said, to be affected in such manner does require of the viewer to be sufficiently open to the film experience. But the viewer’s preparedness for self-transformation is an issue that I save for later in the chapter.

### Perspectives, Frames & Aspect-Seeing

It turns out, then, that Mulhall does in fact nominate for ‘Expand Your Mind’ a more specific transformational *value* than only contemplation for contemplation’s sake. Now I must admit that certain general values, like achieving *awareness* or *insight*, will apply to practically every transformational ethic that I identify in this chapter – and Mulhall is no exception. Yet within each ethic these values still acquire individual flavors: an ethic typically seeks not just awareness but a particular *object* of awareness; or better put in Mulhall’s case, not just insight but a specific *kind* of insight. Mulhall hardly uses the term, but it is clear that the kind of insight that he aims for is one of *perspective*; the reorientations of our thinking that he attributes to films comes down to the *shifting-* and *gaining* of perspectives.

There are a number of other philosophers who, like Mulhall, treat film-philosophy as initiating viewers into transformations of perspective – whether this be called perspective-shifting, frame-switching, or aspect-seeing – and in this respect the likes of Mulhall provide us with further possible formulations of the ‘Expand Your Mind’ ethic.<sup>181</sup> Perspective as a transformational issue is especially evident in philosophers who draw on familiar ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein, like his distinction between ‘saying’ and ‘showing’, and his concept of ‘seeing aspects’. Phil Hutchinson, for example, argues of the films *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) and *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier, 2011) that they both explore the ‘life is a journey’ metaphor – one of the most pervasive cognitive frames through which we reflect on life – and indeed explore it “in inventive ways [that] might well give us *new perspectives*, bring to light *new aspects* on, our live (Hutchinson, 2015: 86). Rupert Read, another philosopher known for his work on Wittgenstein, hits a more spiritual note in his assessment of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009): he argues

<sup>180</sup> With this quote, I should point out, Mulhall makes this statement with reference to how novelist Charles Dickens relies on sentiment and the moral imagination to foster more sympathetic ways of looking at children. He gives this as substantiation for his claim that appeals to the heart and imagination form part of the “claim of reason” (2008: 141).

<sup>181</sup> Questions of perspective, in relation to self-transformation, also emerge as a major theme in philosophical readings of Terrence Malick’s film style, which I take up in the following chapter. See specifically Section 4.3.

that the film takes us through a process of transformation that “opens our eyes”, and “midwifes a change in conscience and consciousness”, with regard to how we relate to nature and the future of our planet (Read, 2015: 90, 93). And even Julian Baggini, despite his doubts about some of Mulhall’s ideas, agrees that films are well suited to “shifting the way we look at things” (Baggini, 2011: 209). It is because they *show* rather than *tell*, Baggini makes clear, that films have the power to make us attend to aspects of the world – ways of seeing it – that may otherwise go unnoticed.

But let me elaborate more on the further example of Christopher Grau, seeing that he brings us back to the character, Poppy, from the film *Happy-Go-Lucky*. Earlier on I explained how Basileios Kroustallis identifies Poppy’s supposedly estranging demeanor as crucial to how *Happy-Go-Lucky* leads viewers in a self-examination on the nature of happiness. One of the many things that Grau takes issue with in this reading is that Kroustallis fails to recognize that viewers’ perception of Poppy may change, and in fact *should* change. Grau does not deny that Poppy at first comes across as annoying. But he argues that the film is precisely an exercise in challenging the viewer to come to see Poppy from a different perspective from the one that she is initially tempted to adopt. Grau explicitly likens this shift to Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘aspect seeing’, which he then explains in terms of his own viewing experience:

“I am struck by how my own perspective of Poppy has undergone *a transformation*: she no longer strikes me as irritating. The film has succeeded in altering *my vision* such that a person who I couldn’t help but see as obnoxious I now see as something much closer to the ‘laughing Buddha’ described by Eddie Marsan [an actor, whose statement is quoted earlier in Grau’s essay]. *Happy-Go-Lucky* has helped me undergo a certain kind of *aspect shift* in my own perception of that character” (2013: 19, emphasis added).

This account matches with the core ‘Expand Your Mind’ picture that we get from Mulhall and the others: for Grau, also, the accomplishment of *Happy-Go-Lucky* is that it grants viewers new insight related to the shifting – the transformation – of *perspective*. He makes clear that the film incites us not only to shift our perspective on Poppy, the challenging character that she is, but likewise to shift closer to the challenging life-perspective that she herself holds. What the film does is far from a conversion experience, Grau admits, but still worth calling an “edifying cinematic accomplishment” (ibid.: 18).

### 3.2 ‘Blow Your Mind’: Deleuzian Inspirations in Sinnerbrink & Frampton

Our next bumper sticker is perhaps best introduced by a dictionary-style definition: to ‘blow someone’s mind’, as they say, is to affect, to excite, to elevate,

to overwhelm. Accordingly, film philosophers who advocate the following ethical slogan make emphatic the intense affects, emotions, and experiences that films can rouse in the viewer. But, as the ‘blow’-bit certainly implies, the notion also speaks of potential discomfort: that the mind at stake may be ruffled, disturbed, shocked, or simply blown *away*. Yet, for the philosophers concerned, it is precisely this moment of disruption that gives films a foothold to redefine the parameters of philosophical thought.

In terms of aspirations of self-expansion, things get considerably more adventurous from here on. Self-expansion here begins to take on the form of *ekstasis*, the ideal of stepping outside of oneself. In this ethic, more exactly, the ideal manifests itself as a desire to step outside the restraints of our thought. Philosophers who endorse this ethic find in the distinct thinking of film – ‘cinematic thinking’ – a means of pressing beyond the limits and limitations of philosophical thinking. For them, in essence, cinematic thinking transcends our own conventional forms of thinking. And, by doing so, it pushes us to also transcend, and transform, those forms of thinking for ourselves. According to this vision, then, you go to the cinema in search of experiences that cognitively overwhelm you, that disrupt your usual philosophical certainties, so as to be in a position to be forced to invent thinking beyond the confines of your existing thought. This envisioned outcome may go by many names: ‘ecstatic thinking’ (Bernauer, 1988); ‘thinking the outside’ (Foucault, 1987); thinking ‘the unthought within thought’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 59–60); reaching for the ‘unthinkable in thought’ (Deleuze, 1989: 168); even ‘thinking the impossible’ (Gutting, 2013). However, to mark off the supposition that *films* are instrumental in achieving the outcome of such thinking, I label it ‘Blow Your Mind’.

I put forward Robert Sinnerbrink and Daniel Frampton as two paradigmatic representatives of ‘Blow Your Mind’. Of course, the reason for them suggesting a common transformational ethic is that they have in common the same ‘cinematic thinking’ approach to film-philosophy. As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the cinematic thinking approach, which emphasizes the confrontational difference of this form of thought, finds a key inspiration in the thinking of Gilles Deleuze.

“Something in the world forces us to think”, Deleuze observes in *Difference and Repetition* (1994: 139). And, to be sure, that ‘something’ may be anything, owing to the infinite, incessant play of forces that animate the Deleuzian ontology. But as his *Cinema* books no doubt witness, Deleuze reserves a special role for cinema as something that forces us to think. This is made especially evident in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Deleuze, 1989: 156 ff.), where Deleuze portrays the intensities, affects and precepts flowing from cinema as ‘shocks to thought’. These shocks encountered through cinema, among other things, “forces us to think and re-think our own thinking, bringing about a new image of thought” (Huygens, 2007). Or, put in an alternative way: the creative forces of cinema inevitably force the creation of new concepts (see Deleuze, 1998a: 14–16).

Therefore, rather than tapping the film-philosophical potential of specific Deleuzian notions such as the ‘movement-image’ and time-image, ‘crystals of

time’, or ‘powers of the false’<sup>182</sup>, the cinematic thinking approach exemplified by Sinnerbrink and Frampton takes its lead from this more basic viewpoint. Firstly, that cinematic thinking forces or shocks us into thought. But, secondly, also, that cinematic thinking enacts this force or shock by virtue of its inherent distinctness from our own forms of thinking. Cinematic thinking is conceived of as an imagistic and affective Other, standing in contrast to the usual conceptual-abstractive thinking that characterize philosophy. It is an Other, consequently, that confronts philosophy with its own limitations. And, for this reason, cinematic thinking forces philosophical thought beyond itself, to become Other. Cinematic thinking thus overwhelms philosophy, challenges and resists philosophy, and jolts philosophy into revision and invention – and, in this sense, can be said to ‘do philosophy’. The philosophical value perceived in cinematic thinking therefore revolves around the supposed *power* deriving from its otherness – an influence that is at once affective, disruptive, and creative.

The ethical implication of this approach to film-philosophy, of course, is that any encounter with this supposedly forceful cinematic thinking is one of potential formation and transformation. This (trans)formative power of cinematic thinking is especially noticeable in claims of its capacity to generate ‘the New’: new concepts, new knowledge, new perceptions and new possibilities in thought and experience. When ‘Expand Your Mind’ says that film orientates our thinking to new perspectives, we have something ‘new’ in the sense that an alternative, previously unconsidered perspective is revealed. The suggestion at hand here is far more audacious: we have the formation of new perspectives that would not have existed at all without the creative intervention of cinema. As a transformational ethic of film, then, ‘Blow Your Mind’ asks – much like Deleuze would – ‘What might thinking become?’ And, importantly: ‘How does the thinking of cinema incite the becoming of our own thought?’

### **Robert Sinnerbrink: Ethical Motives & Motifs**

I should first point out that placing Robert Sinnerbrink under the ‘Blow Your Mind’ banner is by no means done because I take him to be a boots-and-all Deleuzian in his thinking on film. His ‘romantic film-philosophy’, as he refers to it, echoes many other voices. He explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Stanley Cavell as well as Stephen Mulhall (see 2011a: 137–139). A good deal of his thinking on film-philosophy also responds to Heidegger – especially with the notion of aesthetic world disclosure (see 2006; 2014c). Additionally, in more recent work, he (as do Pisters (2012) and other Deleuze-inspired film scholars, for that matter) increasingly takes on board insights from cognitive film theory (see 2016a).

Yet when it comes to his notion of cinematic thinking, I hear Deleuze’s voice ring the loudest. Recall from Chapter 1 that, like Deleuze, Sinnerbrink treats cinematic thinking as essentially distinct from – and Other to – conventional philosophical

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<sup>182</sup> Of course, many do find considerable philosophical value in these and related concepts – see the work of Patricia Pisters (2003; 2012) and D.N. Rodowick (1997; 2010a) as two influential examples in this regard.



thinking. Cinematic thinking stands apart as a ‘thinking in images’, a thinking that he identifies as intuitive, affective, aesthetic, and non-conceptual in nature (2011a: 89, 139, 152). Also recall that, on account of this otherness, cinematic thinking for Sinnerbrink does not engage *in* philosophy so much as it engages *with* philosophy. Cinema’s contribution to philosophy thus resides in what is a generative confrontation between two distinct forms of thought (see Chapter 1, Sections 3.4 and 4.5). It is thus no wonder that the standout Deleuzian motif in Sinnerbrink’s thinking is that cinema produces a ‘shock to thought’ (Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 137 ff.; cf. Deleuze, 1989: 156–164). Sinnerbrink elaborates on the motif of cinema’s power by claiming that cinema: “performs a cinematic thinking in images that both challenges and resists philosophy, provoking us to think in response to what film enables us to experience, without, however, reducing cinema to a mere reflection of a philosophical thesis or framework” (2011a: 137). So in a double movement, as he portrays it, cinematic thinking stages for us an experience that provokes philosophical thinking, yet at the same time actively disrupts and challenges that thinking. And by exposing the inabilities of conventional modes of philosophy to come to terms with it – that is, through its aesthetic, affective, non-conceptual nature – cinematic thinking forces philosophy into new possibilities of thought (2013b: 213; 2011c: 33).

Compared to earlier cases in this chapter, Sinnerbrink is quite explicit on the ethical commitments that he makes with his particular stance on film-philosophy. For one thing, Sinnerbrink is explicitly concerned with the theme of transformation, and makes quite clear the particular ideal that he is after: cinematic thinking, as both a provocation and resistance to thought, should transform philosophy. Between film and philosophy transpires what he calls a transformative “thinking dialogue”, which spurs “philosophy to respond creatively to the kind of thinking that cinema allows us to experience” (2011c: 36).

Less explicit is the added personal transformations, for the philosopher-viewer, that the transformation of philosophy clearly also holds. For the renewal of philosophical thinking, as Sinnerbrink envisions it, surely entails more than ‘thinking’ only in an abstract, cultural sense. It entails also the renewal of the thinking viewer-subjects who must transform in their capacity to think and embody (re-)new(-ed) philosophical thoughts. To his credit, Sinnerbrink often brings up such ‘extra-philosophical’ transformations. He points out, for example, that our grappling with cinematic thinking can result in new ways of thinking and feeling; open new possibilities of thought; question our normative practices and frameworks; challenge habituated ways of seeing; and even do as much as transform our experience of the world (2011a: 7; 2011c: 40; 2013: 207). These remarks are in keeping with the ‘Blow Your Mind’ motto: they signal the transformational ambition that films, by pushing us to move beyond conventional philosophy, moreover, help us move beyond our regular forms of thinking, feeling, and experience in general.

To further back up this broader ambition for cinematic thinking, Sinnerbrink specifically petitions the idea of aesthetic world-disclosure which, he says, can

help recuperate the 'ethico-political dimensions' of film (2011c: 42–43). But before getting to its ethical uses, I must acknowledge that the idea of world-disclosure adds a distinctly Heideggerian dimension to Sinnerbrink's Deleuzian inspired notion of cinematic thinking and its effects. One obvious token of this dimension is that Sinnerbrink never speaks of the transformation of thinking in terms of the 'creation of concepts', as Deleuze would do. In allegiance to philosophical romanticism (more on that in a moment), while by no means in opposition to Deleuze, he rather speaks of such transformation in terms of *disclosure* and *opening up* of new possibilities of *thought*. Cinema's aesthetic forms of disclosure amounts to its distinctive ways of thinking (ibid.: 38). And by our encountering these alternative forms of world-disclosure, Sinnerbrink argues, we are compelled to new ways of thinking, or to 'think the New' (2011c: 37).

I should point out that Sinnerbrink does not deploy the notion of aesthetic world-disclosure in a consistent manner. In his book, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (2011a), the term is nowhere to be found. In a later essay like *Technē and Poïēsis: On Heidegger and Film Theory* (2014c), in contrast, Sinnerbrink resorts to 'world-disclosure' much like Heidegger himself would do. On most other occasions, however, Sinnerbrink is content with a much looser application of the term. In a revealing essay on romantic film-philosophy, he aligns his use of world-disclosure with the tradition of 'philosophical romanticism', as in particular formulated by Nikolas Kompridis.<sup>183</sup> Sinnerbrink takes from this tradition its emphasis on the arts as providing alternative forms of world-disclosure that can open up new possibilities of thought and action (2011c: 36 ff.). Not that his allegiance to this line of thinking is entirely reciprocated. Kompridis himself, albeit in a different context, denounces Sinnerbrink's notion of aesthetic world-disclosure as something of a decorative concept. Kompridis claims that what Sinnerbrink means by 'world-disclosing critique' lacks ontological grounding, gets no special meaning from Heidegger, and merely amounts to any sort of aesthetic 'eye-opening'.

The exact merit of Sinnerbrink's concept of world-disclosure is not decisive for my argument here. Much more important is that Sinnerbrink finds in aesthetic world-disclosure (casual as his take on it may be) a further resource for affirming the ethical-transformational value of cinematic thinking. Through aesthetic world-disclosure film essentially does the work of possibility-disclosure – for Sinnerbrink, the possibility of new forms of meaning-making, new horizons of experience, and by implication new viewer selves (ibid.: 42). Incidentally, the idea of world-disclosure also allows Sinnerbrink's 'Blow Your Mind' ethic to incorporate elements of 'Remind Yourself' – discussed earlier with reference to Noël Carroll, who, likewise, makes an appeal to Heidegger, even if only briefly so. In effect, world-disclosure needs not only open up the novel in our experience. It can likewise disclose, and thus help retrieve, aspects of our experience that Sinnerbrink describes as forgotten or lost (ibid.: 41–42).

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183 See Kompridis (2005; 2006a) in addition to Kompridis (2006b), which Sinnerbrink cites.

Now I take it that any form of art or fiction may lay claim to the function of world-disclosure. But Sinnerbrink seems to reserve for cinema a special capacity for it: since our experience in cinema is essentially that of cinematic worlds, films disclose the world via the actual construction of alternative worlds (ibid.: 35, 41–43). This apparent recommendation of a *cinematic* world-disclosure rides on a strong conception of viewer immersion, but one of which he gives little account. He basically accepts cinema's capacity for viewers to temporarily 'inhabit' its richly sensory virtual worlds, with no mention of how this process may work, nor how it may extend to worlds established by other art forms. If anything, he suggests that immersion relies on the attitude of the viewer – a matter to which we shall return. But it is nevertheless on account of the film's immersive powers, for Sinnerbrink, that cinematic world-disclosure gains its particular *affective* engagement. In this way, disclosure and immersion team up in a powerful experience of cinematic worlds that "both reflect and transform our subjective orientation in the world" (ibid.: 42).

Finally, I must say a word on Sinnerbrink's recent turn to cinematic ethics, seeing that it very much affirms and deepens the above ethical interests that come to the fore in his writings on film as philosophy. In his *Cinematic Ethics* (2016a) he extends the idea of film as philosophy by going deeper into the idea of 'film as ethics', that films can 'do ethics', by considering cinema as a "medium of ethical experience with the power to provoke emotional understanding and philosophical thinking" (Sinnerbrink, 2016a: x). His favorite notion of a powerful cinema experience as 'provocation' thus already shows up on page two, even though here he refrains from calling it 'cinematic thinking'. And films that pose enough of a challenge to viewers, he goes on to say, have the capacity to "be exercises in ethical (and political) provocation with a *transformative* potential" (ibid. [emphasis added]). The undeniably *ethical* motive of transformation, which has long been at work in Sinnerbrink's thinking, is now made explicit and moves center stage. Of course he expands his ethical interests on a number of fronts, addressing for example cinema's relevance with regard to sympathy and empathy, emotional engagement, perspective-taking, and cultivation of the imagination. But his anchor-notions of an affective medium evoking powerful experience, which challenges and pushes the viewer, while disclosing alternative possibilities for thought and action, remains firmly intact. No wonder then that the value and ideal effects that he sees in cinematic ethics sound so familiar: "to effect an ethical conversion, altering our horizon of understanding and transforming how we think, feel, and conduct ourselves in the world" (2016a: 185).

### **Sinnerbrink's Ethic: Domains & Modes**

Let me round up the main features of the transformational ethic emerging from Sinnerbrink's account of film-philosophy, starting with the *domain* of transformation. Sinnerbrink himself nominates philosophy as the main 'what', or domain, to be transformed by film. And even though philosophy or philosophical thinking constitutes a broader cultural domain, we have seen that it cannot be uncoupled from personal domains of viewers: Sinnerbrink's transformation of

philosophy thus entails the transformation of our ways of *thinking*, in particular, yet reaches also into our *feelings*, habits of *perception*, and *experience* of the world (e.g. 2011a: 7, 141–142; 2011c: 40; 2013: 207). In addition, this already comprehensive set of transformational domains grows even larger in Sinnerbrink's work on cinematic ethics. Here, for example, he credits films for leading us in the self-work of challenging our *beliefs* (reminiscent of 'Know Yourself'), and exercising our *moral perception* or *moral imagination* (2016a: 16–17).

Next we have the implicit *modes* of transformation that Sinnerbrink poses, especially within the domain of the viewer's thinking. As to be expected by now in this chapter, we also find in Sinnerbrink's account the idea that film elicits self-transformation in the mode of *contemplation*. 'Contemplation' in this technical sense encompasses not only the thinking prompted in the viewer, but also the triggered affects, emotions, and experiences of the viewer in which the thinking is prompted. Indeed, for Sinnerbrink, films evoke a contemplative mode of transformation by "provoking us to think in response to what film enables us to experience" (2011a: 137).

In fact, Sinnerbrink's notion of cinematic thinking poses more than one contemplative mode, or as I prefer to see it, poses distinguishable contemplative aspects within that mode. We can derive these contemplative *modes* (indeed, any mode of transformation, as I emphasized in Chapter 2) from the particular transformational *work* attributed to films. Sinnerbrink's claim is that, in addition to provoking thought, cinematic thinking also resists thought, withholds closure, and forces us to think the New. Each of these latter actions point to 'sub-modes' that we can distinguish within the contemplative mode implied for the viewer: i.e. that contemplative transformation through cinematic thinking have the inner-dimensions of *asceticism*, of *endurance*, and of *mysticism*.<sup>184</sup> To get a better sense of what I mean by each of these sub-modes, consider the following passage with which Sinnerbrink prefaces an analysis of David Lynch:

"Instead of arguing [...] that bringing philosophical reflection to popular film genres shows how such films can be philosophical, I would like to explore the reverse scenario: responding to films – such as Lynch's *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006) – that both provoke and resist philosophical reflection. Such films, of varying provenance genre, style and commercial popularity, have aesthetic and cinematic qualities that prompt an experience conducive to thought; films that provoke, incite, or force us to think, even if we remain uncertain as to what kind of thinking (or writing) might be adequate to such an experience. These are films that 'resist theory', evoking an experience that is aesthetic and reflective, yet where the former cannot be reduced to, or even overwhelms, the latter. Such films communicate an experience of thinking that

184 See Chapter 2, Section 3.2. (b) 'Mode', where I explain how a transformational mode may internalize others as its constitutive sub-modes.

resists philosophical translation or paraphrase; thus they are films where we encounter what I am calling cinematic thinking in its most intensive and dramatic forms” (2011a: 141–142).

Alongside provoking philosophical thought, then, cinematic thinking does the work of resisting philosophical thought. One way to construe the resultant mode of transformation for the viewer is to say that cinema’s resistance to thought prompts a contemplative *endurance*. In this composite mode, the traditional mode of transformation through endurance gets qualified by that of contemplation; it speaks not of literal physical endurance but an endurance of a specifically contemplative nature. In Sinnerbrink’s ethic, it is indeed not a shock but a shock *to thought* that the viewer has to endure. The viewer must endure cinema’s active resistance of her conventional philosophical responses and the frameworks that those responses rely on. In other words, the viewer must endure the difficult-making of philosophical thinking at the hand of cinematic experience that “resists cognitive closure or theoretical subsumption” (ibid.: 139). And by putting us through this particular endurance, Sinnerbrink hopes, films can ‘provoke’, ‘incite’ or even ‘force’ viewers to new possibilities of thought.

When proponents of the ‘Know Yourself’ ethic envision the viewer’s contemplative endurance, they typically attribute it to a particular strategy on the part of a film – as when a well devised twist-film upsets a routine assumption or schema in the viewer’s thought. But for Sinnerbrink contemplative endurance is intrinsic to his very definition of cinematic thinking: it is a form of thinking that is essentially Other to philosophy (remember: non-conceptual, affective, and aesthetic) and thus, by default, resists our run-of-the-mill philosophical procedures. This also explains, I should add, Sinnerbrink’s preference for films like David Lynch’s *Inland Empire*. If cinematic thinking by definition must resist our philosophical mastery of films, then it is only natural for Sinnerbrink to associate cinematic thinking with complex and ambiguous art cinema – including, along with Lynch, the oeuvres of Terrence Malick (more on that in Chapter 4, Section 4.3) and Lars von Trier. The particular aesthetic, intellectual, even moral challenges that these filmmakers pose are tailor-made to the contemplative endurance that Sinnerbrink seeks from cinematic thinking. Also in his later work, where he addresses not so much cinematic thinking as he does cinematic ethics, Sinnerbrink remains attracted to the same breed of filmmakers. His analyses of films like *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011) *Talk to Her* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2002), and *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010) all underscore that ‘ethical experience’ thrives most when cinema viewers come up against ambiguity, moral ambivalence, estrangement and complex perspective-taking and switching (see 2016a: 80–164).

Another way to construe this resistance of cinema to our thought is to say that it leads the viewer into a mode of *contemplative asceticism*. From this viewpoint, cinema’s resistance, its work of difficult-making, as I see it, involves also *withholding* from viewers certain basic aids to their thinking. Again, this is not a literal mode of asceticism, but the specifically *contemplative* asceticism in which the film suspends for the viewer cognitive conveniences that we mostly

take for granted – things like essential narrative information, logical consistency, or ease of perception. What interests Sinnerbrink about *Inland Empire*, to use the example above, is its incessant deployment of disorientation, dissociation, dispartateness – with the net result that the film withholds the viewer from attaining any interpretative coherence (e.g. 2011a: 148).<sup>185</sup> Rather than merely experience philosophical thinking made difficult, viewers experience in such instances their thinking rendered incapable. It is in this sense, therefore, that Sinnerbrink envisions viewers in a mode of contemplative asceticism: when cinematic experiences overwhelm our thinking by denying us the usual cognitive resources by which we want to make philosophical sense of them.

This brings us to a third dimension in the contemplative mode that Sinnerbrink posits for cinematic thinking, namely that it initiates for the viewer a *contemplative mysticism*. In his own words, cinematic thinking “prompts philosophy to reflect upon its own limits or even to experiment with new forms of philosophical expression” (ibid.:7). So whereas mysticism proper would entail transcending our ordinary forms of experience, by contemplative mysticism I take Sinnerbrink’s vision to mean that we may analogously transcend and renew our conventional forms of thinking – a vision not unlike the ideal of ‘ecstatic thinking’ or ‘thinking the outside’ that I noted earlier. To summarize, for cinema to ‘resist’ philosophical thought can mean that it enacts on our thinking the work of difficult-making (contemplative endurance), and that of withholding (contemplative asceticism). But for cinematic thinking to elicit a mode of contemplative mysticism, means that it moreover does the work of *exceeding* and *reaching beyond* our standard philosophical conceptions – thanks to those concept-transcending powers that by Sinnerbrink’s definition sets it apart from our thinking. Cinematic thinking, free from the constraints of our thinking, thus exposes for us the limits of philosophy, yet by the same token exerts pressure on them. In the resultant mode of contemplative mysticism we are forced – aided, really, Sinnerbrink would assure – to overcome those limits, as cinema leads us to think beyond the accepted confines of our own thought.

### **Sinnerbrink’s Ethic Continued: Romanticism, the New & Practicing Receptivity**

The stand-out transformational *value* that emerges in Sinnerbrink’s ethic, it should be quite clear by now, is that of the *new*. It persistently defines the nature of transformation that he seeks from cinematic experience. Regarding the way we think – Sinnerbrink’s primary concern – he envisions *renewal*, the opening up of *new possibilities* of thought, and more directly for us *to think the New* (e.g. 2011c: 37). And the potential transformations of feeling, action, and experience that may follow, he foresees as being the disclosure of what is novel in each of these domains.

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<sup>185</sup> As much as one could say that Lynch’s film withholds certain things – meaning, coherence, significance – it is of course so that on account of the withholding it also brings something to the viewer; such as, for example, a deepened and prolonged and complicated perceptual process.

This priority of the new in Sinnerbrink's ethic follows from its most prominent guiding *paradigm*: the earlier mentioned *philosophical romanticism* as championed by Nikolas Kompridis (2006b). For philosophical romanticism, the main mission of philosophy is to expand intelligibility and possibility within our cultural conditions – “to make room for the new”, as Kompridis (*ibid.*: 4) puts it – which includes also making room for new possibilities within philosophy itself. Kompridis goes as far as to claim that the new is normative to philosophical romanticism, not as a law of any kind, but as a normative challenge: we are compelled to be answerable to the new, as well as to revise or abandon those sense-making frameworks that the new disrupts (2006c: 33). And how does Sinnerbrink heed this normativity of the new? Precisely by responding to challenging cinematic art as harboring for us yet unrealized possibilities of thought and experience. His resultant ethic thus incorporates the new as both the motivator of self-transformation and the value that defines the transformation aimed for.

Having put together a portrait of ‘Blow Your Mind’ in Sinnerbrink's film-philosophy, let me ask in closing how one is to imagine the actual practice of his transformational ethics. On this front as well he provides much for us to work with – not least the romantic paradigm that he relies on. He makes clear that the occasion of his ethic-in-practice should be seen as our thinking *with* cinema. Cinema thinks in its own complex and ambiguous ways, and in response viewers think, along with it (see 2011a: 8; 2011c: 38). In more concrete terms, Sinnerbrink (2011c: 36) sees this thinking-with as a mutually transformative *dialogue* – a notion not really in need of the adjunct, considering that its esteemed history as a *technique* of self-transformation goes back to Socrates and the model exercises of the Platonic dialogues (see Hadot, 1995: 89–93; Gordon, 1996). Still, what makes our thinking with cinema a transformative dialogue, says Sinnerbrink, is that on the one hand it helps draw out the thought immanent within particular films, while on the other it spurs us to respond creatively in thought to what those films allow us to experience. Related to this dialogue, then, Sinnerbrink suggests that we can also conceive of the practice of his ethic as an experiment; not a set thought experiment as we encountered in ‘Know Yourself’, but an open-ended experiment *in thought* (Sinnerbrink, 2013b: 212, 2011a: ix). ‘Blow Your Mind’ as experiment is thus to try out different styles of reflection in response to cinematic experiences, and devise a language appropriate to their aesthetic particularity. And this experiment, as a broader contemplative technique, finds its most concrete expression in the technique of *writing* – a performative practice that Sinnerbrink especially associates with Stanley Cavell (see Sinnerbrink, 2011b; 2014a), but which his own writings on films are certainly also meant to demonstrate.

Everything above however hinges on a conspicuous ‘if’: we can only respond to the new, and cultivate new thinking, *if* we are indeed sufficiently open and receptive to the supposed newness of cinematic thinking. We must first be prepared to ‘get’ the new, to put it bluntly, if we want to go on and think it. This provision is yet another point that Sinnerbrink is quite clear on. And I consider it a significant one. For it anticipates the place of preparatory ethics within the bigger picture of the cinemakeover that I am to sketch in this chapter.

Sinnerbrink emphasizes that cinematic thinking – for both its claimed effects on philosophy, and its ethical effects on us – requires an appropriate attitude on the part of the philosopher-viewer. In essence, he is asking for prior measures of self-transformation by which viewers set up the (further) self-transformation desired through film. Such measures are what I label preparatory ethics. The preparatory elements in Sinnerbrink’s ethic start, already, with the most basic tenet of his romantic film-philosophy, which is that it “*responds* to film as a way of thinking” (2011c: 26 [emphasis added]). And to help ensure this responsive attitude to film, he singles out what are basically three imperatives for the philosopher-viewer to make. I consider them ethical preparations because they each entail a measure of work on the self. The first is a clearly *ascetic* imperative calling for philosophical self-restraint: we must *avoid* applying any ‘readymade conceptual framework’ as a key to a film’s philosophical meaning. (His own romantic framework appears to be exempted from the category of ‘readymade’.) The second imperative is to maintain a ‘sustained receptiveness’ to what films disclose for us. Understood in terms of transformational ethics, this is a cultivation in oneself of the *value* of *receptivity*. Receptivity is the normative twin that must accompany Sinnerbrink’s pursuit of the New. For “[t]he new is not something we will”, as Kompridis (2006b: 4) explains, “it is something we let happen”. In this sense, “[r]eceptivity is essential to ‘making’ the new possible” (ibid.). Hence for us to make possible new thinking, we must practice receptivity towards the thinking immanent to films; and we do so through devoted film critical attention to the aesthetic particularities that they disclose. Sinnerbrink’s third imperative, then, centers on the closely related value of *openness*: to be able to respond to the (remember: transformative) thinking of film, we need an “openness to transforming how we think and write philosophically about film” (2011c: 38). We thus allow for a potential transformation of thought through our openness to such a transformation. This openness we must instill through preparatory acts of self-transformation, whereby we search in ourselves for the thoughts, the words, and the writing that can open us up to the thinking in film.

As I see it, preparatory ethics pose certain thorny issues to the project of film-philosophy, issues well illustrated by Sinnerbrink’s measures for making ‘Blow Your Mind’ happen. Among other things, his preparatory ethics raise questions over where the main initiative for our transformation through film comes from, and suggest that films perhaps play a far less eminent, more incidental role than he would like to admit. But for now I leave this and other questions for the concluding section of the chapter.

### **Daniel Frampton: Posit a ‘Filmind’ to ‘Blow Your Mind’**

‘If we begin to understand how film “thinks”, Daniel Frampton declares in a promotional article for his book, “we will start to understand how moving images affect our life and being” (Frampton, 2006b). However, before going into Frampton’s up-front ‘if’, and the ‘life and being’-part that depends on it, let me



first sum up how *philosophical thinking* gets affected, and transformed, within this audacious scheme that Frampton names ‘filmosophy’.

Wherever filmsophy considers the impact of film-thinking on philosophy, it conveys a ‘Blow Your Mind’ transformational ethic very similar to that of Sinnerbrink.<sup>186</sup> Taking his cue from Deleuze, like Sinnerbrink, Frampton characterizes ‘film-thinking’ as a thinking radically distinct from ours: it is ‘languageless’ non-conceptual, and imagistic. It is film’s own thinking, it goes beyond our thinking, it is thinking that we cannot replicate (e.g. 2006a: 10–11, 92).<sup>187</sup> Not that film-thinking is better than ours, he cautions – it’s ‘just different’ (2008: 366). Yet it is this difference that generates the power for film-thinking to transform our thinking; which, Frampton suggests, occurs through the same *modes* of transformation that I described in Sinnerbrink. First there are the moments of *contemplative endurance* and *asceticism*. Frampton claims that film-thinking makes us recognize the ‘limits’ and ‘impower’ of our logical thinking: we struggle to formulate the direct, affective, indistinct meanings that film-thinking conveys; we cannot think images (or ‘image-concepts’) as clearly; hence we cannot create and show new ideas and concepts in the way that film-thinking does. Yet, as with Sinnerbrink, our grappling with film-thinking culminates also in a *contemplative mysticism*. By thinking new realities, says Frampton, film moves us to construct *new ways of thinking*. “Film-thinking forces thought to think the unclear, blurry, dispersive, outside” (2006a: 102). It can even provide new categories for us to think by (ibid.: 212). It thus drives our thinking outside of itself, beyond its entrenched forms – to thereby reveal (he takes the term from Deleuze) the ‘unthought within thought’ (ibid.: 101–102, 155, 160, 166 ff.).

Yet *before* we can have any of this, Frampton is quite clear, we must take up filmsophy as a new approach to understanding film. Frampton’s entire filmsophy is really an envisioned *practice* for the filmsophical filmgoer. It is essentially what I call a preparatory transformational practice, since it orients the viewer for an optimal experience of cinema. Frampton is after all not describing cinematic experience. He is *re-describing* our experience of cinema, by effectively *prescribing* that we receive film as a thinking entity. For the philosopher, “[f]ilmosophy thus offers a practice, a skill to do something; a strategy for being philosophical about film and seeing the philosophical in film” (ibid.: 212). So to accomplish ‘Blow Your Mind’, you first need to harbor the idea of a ‘filmind’, with the rest of Frampton’s conceptual inventions, as your preparatory mindset towards cinema. Because, he makes clear, “[f]ilm bleeds its ideas *if* you allow yourself to become attuned to its thinking” (2008: 373 [emphasis added]). Also, Frampton doesn’t reserve the practice of filmsophy for the philosopher alone. While filmsophy

186 To be fair, Frampton’s book predates most of Sinnerbrink’s writings on cinematic thinking – so, in this regard, it is in fact Sinnerbrink who echoes Frampton (and both of them who echo basic tenets of Deleuze). However, since Frampton’s account of cinematic thinking comes with more conceptual/terminological preconditions, I discuss him second.

187 See Chapter 1, Section 4.5, where I detail the lengths at which Frampton dissociates – strictly – cinematic thinking from anthropomorphic forms of thinking.

may “reconfigure our [theoretical] understanding of the encounter between film and filmgoer”, it helps more generally to “shape the experience of the [everyday] filmgoer” (2006a: 148). Prepped with filmosophy’s concepts, filmgoers enhance for themselves cinema’s capacity to immerse, to mean, and to affect: “[Filmgoers] will have a more suitable *mode of attention*, and thus *experience more*, and thus have more meaning possibilities to steer their interpretations” (ibid.: 149). Unlike any other philosophical work covered here, Frampton’s book is quite consciously a *guiding text*: one for attaining both a transformed and, in return, transformative experience of cinema.

### Filmosophy, the Prequel: Preparatory Ethics

However much Frampton’s filmosophy’s casts the ethical picture of ‘Blow Your Mind’, then, its greater emphasis is on the preparatory self-transformations that must precede that picture. Thanks to the detail that Frampton goes into, we can formulate his preparatory ethic in the same terms of domain, paradigm, and value of transformation that hold for the other ethics discussed so far.

The main *domain* that Frampton designates for preparatory transformation is *cinematic experience*; as filmgoers, that is, we are to enhance what we may experience of cinema (in accordance to a set of values that I will get to in a moment). Yet this must go hand in hand with self-work in the domain of *concepts and language*.<sup>188</sup> In Chapter 2 I explained that transformational ethics often stipulate multiple domains, with particular hierarchies and interactions between them. Here Frampton demonstrates an exchange between what I called a ‘target’ and ‘source’ domain: he poses the self’s experience of cinema as the target-domain, which is operated upon via self-work on our concepts and language as the source-domain of transformation. In effect, Frampton proffers his own Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: to change our experience of cinema, he is saying, we need to pay attention to our words.<sup>189</sup>

In Frampton’s compilation of neologisms – involving the ‘filmind’ as ‘film-being’, doing its ‘film-thinking’ – the filmgoer has a “certain kind of knowledge (concepts) of film’s action, resulting in a certain type of linguistic direction (rhetoric)” (2006a: 158). To adopt these concepts, and let them govern one’s cinematic experience, is the basic self-work on language that filmosophy requires. Frampton describes the practicalities hereof in a number of ways. He speaks of filmgoers having to ‘use’ these concepts when experiencing a film (e.g. 2006a: 99), or to experience film |with this language in their knowledge” (ibid.: 149). He also speaks of having “to see the film ‘through’ the concept of thinking” (2008: 366). But apparently, also, our recourse to such a new concept should not be too

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188 Of course, although a transformational ethic may conceive of language as domain within the self, it overlaps with (the attempted transformation of) language as an obviously far broader, supra-personal, cultural domain. Accordingly, Frampton thinks of filmosophy as also providing a new discourse for film writing and criticism in general – and not only for the hypothetical individual filmgoer (see 2006a: 169–182).

189 Frampton notes, for example that “reconfiguring (renaming) forms of film with thoughtful poetics (the feelings of thinkings) will change the experience of film for the filmgoer” (2006a: 171).

calculated and effortful. “[I]ts true habitat”, says Frampton, “is in the *back of our thinking* [...] to be learnt, then forgotten, even though it never goes away” (2006a: 98).

What does Frampton’s call for inducting ourselves into his alternative vocabulary tell us about filmosophy’s guiding *paradigm*? Certainly, one cannot ignore his indebtedness to *phenomenology*, with its characteristic striving for the words that may best describe our experiences. But we should keep in mind that Frampton’s philosophy is of a Deleuzian breed (or a compromised one, at least) that must, for example, answer to Deleuze’s anti-subjectivism (cf. Ferencz-Flatz & Hanich, 2016: 51–52). While he takes considerable inspiration from Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenology, therefore, he is just as quick to distance himself from the ‘anthropomorphic’ conceptions of cinema that drives her approach (e.g. Frampton, 2006a: 46). And to add a further complication, Frampton’s main business is not a phenomenological description of the filmgoer’s experience, but its *re-description*, unto an *ideal* experience. If anything, he is formulating a consummate ‘best-case’ phenomenology.

For these reasons, I find more illuminating for my analysis the negative motivations of filmosophy. In Chapter 2 I explained that guiding paradigms of transformational ethics often exhibit also an anti-normative pole, which defines the ‘enemy paradigm’ that the prescribed act of self-transformation (in this case, a preparatory one) is meant to counteract. That paradigm, for filmosophy, is what Frampton describes as the abounding *technicism* of film studies and criticism, epitomized by the formalism of David Bordwell and others (see 2006a: 99–107). Filmosophy takes issue with the experiential effects of what he deems as a technicist rhetoric: those supposedly ‘clunky’ and ‘cold and calculating’ terms like panning, tracking, zoom-in, and close-up, together with talk of schemata and formats and cues (ibid.: 100, 106). This “lumpen technical terminology”, Frampton argues, gets in the viewer’s way: it “obscures the possible poetic experience of film” (ibid.: 172; cf. 2008: 368). The technicist rhetoric dissects film in terms of techniques and mechanics that explain nothing of the full experience thereof. It only categorizes. It cuts up. It separates (ibid.: 99, 105–107). (This reasoning – having noted Frampton’s debts to phenomenology – is fully congruent with phenomenology’s long-standing *anti-scientism*.)

In response, the concepts of filmosophy engenders a “poetic rhetoric” – “an emotive and fluid language” – that replenishes the film experience so reduced by technicism (ibid.: 99). The strict ‘technicist-poetic’ dichotomy that Frampton draws here is typical of how transformational ethics construct their anti-paradigms. Rather than “technicize” the filmgoer’s experience, he reasons, filmosophy attempts to “organicize” it (ibid.: 106). And whereas technicism breaks up the experience, filmosophy aspires to bring the pieces back together in “a new organization of the whole”, under the unifying concept of an intending, thinking filmind (ibid.: 171). One may question, as Philipp Schmerheim (2008: 117–118) does, whether it is entirely possible (or even desirable) to completely excise technical conceptions from a poetic appraisal of film. But Frampton sticks

resolutely to his dichotomous either-or, because, as I will show in a moment, technicism (by his rhetorical definition) is simply not compatible with the kind of experience that he wishes to fashion. Doing away with technical language is of course a measure of *contemplative asceticism* required on our part, which he calls “an *unlearning*, a more ‘suitable’, more cinematic reconceptualization” (2006a: 212 [emphasis added]). Note, however, the ironical twist: we need to make our own a set of concepts in order to attain an experience of film-thinking that Frampton defines as inherently ‘languageless’ and ‘non-conceptual’. Yet even apart from the apparent contradiction, I cannot but question whether a mere reconceptualization of cinema can achieve such an experience.

Despite these issues, it remains the ambition of filmosophy to ensure for the filmgoer an enhanced experience of the cinema. By which transformational *values* does Frampton define this enhancement? There are at least three general values that come to the fore: fullness, openness, and unity (or wholeness).

First and most evident, is that Frampton wants to cultivate “the fullest and most poetic experience for the filmgoer” (ibid.: 101). He qualifies this fullness of experience especially as a fullness of *meaning*. The concept of the filmind, he claims, gives a poetic reason for everything we encounter in a film. By seeing film as thoughtful we experience all its forms and actions “as fully intended, giving every formal move a possible meaning” (ibid.). Whereas “technicist rhetoric weighs-down the meaning possibilities of film” (ibid.: 100), filmosophy proliferates possible meaning by transfiguring film into the product of thoughtful intention.

I turn to the second value. The ‘meaning’ that Frampton refers to above is clearly not in the conventional sense of knowledge or an insight derived from interpretation. Frampton speaks outright of “affective meaning”, adding that “the meaning is in the experience” (ibid.: 168); or he speaks of the “meaning to be experienced” (ibid.: 101).<sup>190</sup> So it is our access to this sort of meaning – thus, the filmgoer’s *openness* to it – that filmosophy is meant to foster. It is to this end that Frampton emphasizes the immediacy and directness of experience that filmosophy facilitates between filmgoer and film. Whereas the technicist mindset removes the filmgoer from the experience, the filmosopher experiences film ‘directly’ and ‘more intuitively’ (ibid.: 8). In the latter case, “[t]he affects of film produce immediate, pure meaning”, since “[f]ilmosophical (affective) ‘meaning’ [...] arises directly from experiencing the film” (ibid.: 168).

Frampton’s aim for both fullness and openness (directness) in the filmgoer’s experience is arguably an extension of his third and clearest transformational value: *unity* (or *wholeness*). As a marker for enhanced experience as Frampton sees it, unity in fact manifests itself in more than one way. On one level, it refers to the unification of the various elements of films in the viewer’s experience. Unlike technicism, filmosophy aims to “organicize” and remove the separation between style and content; form and meaning; or in Frampton’s terms the ‘object’

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<sup>190</sup> The type of knowledge resulting from these indistinct, tentative, gut-like meanings is at best “a ‘rough’ knowledge” (2006a: 168).

of film-thinking (e.g. a character) and the film's particular 'thinking of' (framing, movement, etc.) that object (ibid.: 100–101, 162). This unification of form and meaning through the use of the concept of film-thinking, creates for the filmgoer an 'integral whole' (ibid.: 101).

On a further level, however, filmosophy engenders unity also in the 'organic uniting' of filmgoer and film (ibid.).<sup>191</sup> Frampton fancies that his theory has been labeled 'science fiction' (Frampton, 2008: 373; cf. Price, 2008: 103). And, at this point, his science fiction seems like an account of a cinema-worshipping mystic cult: he envisions "a filmosophical filmgoer who actively merges with the affective thinking of film" (2006a: 12). It so happens that Vivian Sobchack (2004: 66) alludes to the same mysticist topos of unitive experience: she suggests that cinema undermines our usual separation of subject and object, owing to the relational structure between the viewer's body and the film's body. But Frampton, remember, refuses to impose Sobchack's anthropomorphic 'body' or 'embodied experience' onto film (although he is quite happy to impose a 'mind'). In a polemical distancing act, he rather assumes the role of the classical 'mystic' who harbors an anti-materialist disinterest in the body. He maintains that "[f]ilmosophy sees a mix of minds rather than bodies", adding that "our bodies remain with us, merely forgotten, redundant" (2006a: 160). Yet, to be fair, Frampton is not simply proposing that we 'become one' in mind with the filmind – as if he's Plotinus who discovered the movies. He takes care to underline this as a unification of *two* thinkings – a 'mix of thinkings' between the filmgoer and film, a joint creation of thoughts, coalescing into a 'unique third thought' (ibid.: 162–164). Where Sobchack tends to pose a continuity between the bodies of the filmgoer and film, Frampton wants to forge a unity of thinkings that, from the outset, are discontinuous and indeed remain distinct. This distinctness-in-unity is reflected by delicately chosen metaphors for the two thinkings united a new whole. He speaks in terms of linking, joining, weaving, combining, fusing, or merging; which results in – depending on varying degrees of optimism – a 'mix', a 'collision of ideas', a 'dialogical connection', or an 'organic unity' (e.g. 2006a: 8, 12, 102, 161–162, 164).

It is ultimately on the basis of providing this uniting 'link' with film-thinking, I gather, that filmosophy promises also the (meaning-)fullness, directness, and openness that define Frampton's ideal film-going experience. Yet Frampton readily admits: filmgoers will not necessarily make the connection. Because, he says, "the link is not one that filmgoers are *practiced* at recognizing" (2006a: 158 [emphasis added]). Hence, I must again stress: we are still squarely in the sphere

191 Apart from the filmgoer's unification with film-thinking, there is yet another level on which filmosophy's aspiration for unity manifests itself: Frampton wants to consolidate the active and passive dimensions of film-going (2006a: 156). He considers the traditional active-passive division forced, and insists that both these facets of film-going are of equal importance to filmosophy. He specifically recommends the notion of 'feeling the thinking of film' as a way of bridging the division. In the ideal terms of filmosophy, then, the filmgoer's mind is both "active in working out the film" and "subconsciously receptive to the film"; "active in thinking with and against the film" and "open to the film, ready (conceptually) to receive its subtle thinkings in their subconscious" (ibid.).

of preparation, where filmsophy spells out the practices of self-transformation that must shape our experience of film.

Yet why take the trouble to shape our experience? What are the benefits that the filmsosopher may reap from it?

### The Sequel to the Prequel: Filmsophy's Transformational Effects

'Throw out your usual technical jargon, and see film as a thinking filmind'. Check. 'Come to enhance your experience of film'. Check. Here ends the preparatory dimension of the cinemakeover as filmsophy conceives of it. Now the filmgoer, who up to this point had to transform (the experience of) cinema, can just as much expect to be transformed by it. From here on, therefore, Frampton foresees the resulting transformational *effects* of our engagement with film (understood) as a thinking entity. And it is by reason of *these* effects that his ethic earns the 'Blow Your Mind' label.

I have already noted the transformational effects that Frampton foresees for film-thinking on philosophy. But the transformation of philosophy forms part of a broader set of effects – at the mentioned scale of 'life and being' – that he expects from film-thinking. These latter effects are not quite as grandiose as they sound: as a rule they relate to the domain of the filmgoer's *perceptions* or *ways of seeing*.<sup>192</sup> Frampton states in the introduction to his book, for example, that film "*allows us to re-see reality, expanding our perceptions, and showing us a new reality*"; *right after he has noted that it "perhaps even heightens our perceptual powers"* (2006a: 3). *And, once established, the perception-motif thrives up until the book's closing passages:*

"[F]ilm can show us ordinary things in a new way, can make us look again at what we thought we understood, can make us see ordinary things anew. Film-thinking transforms the recognisable (in a small or large way), and this immediate transfiguration by film provokes the idea that our thinking can transform our world" (ibid.: 208–209).

Frampton thus poses a direct relation between the way that film transfigures the things that it shows (or 'thinks') and, as a result, the transformation of our perception of those things. His particular emphasis on perception and sight in this regard – unlike most philosophers that I discuss in this chapter – suggests that Frampton even qualifies to be called a 'revelationist'. Revelationist film theories, according to Malcolm Turvey (2008), value cinema for uncovering features of reality that are otherwise inaccessible to normal human vision, and thereby extending our perceptual powers. Frampton, in fact, has no problem with openly extolling cinema as 'an instrument of revelation' (2006a: 212). And where he does

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<sup>192</sup> The common claim that films transform the viewer's perceptions, perspectives, or ways of seeing is also at play in Mulhall's 'Expand Your Mind'. In Chapter 4, on the philosophical reception of Terrence Malick, I group these notions together as claimed 'perspective-effects'. See Section 4.3.

so, unsurprisingly, he appeals to the very writers who Turvey describes as fathers of the revelationists tradition – Epstein, Vertov and Balázs (see Frampton, 2006a: 3, 204, 208, 212; cf. Turvey, 2008: 21–48).<sup>193</sup>

Frampton also shares with the revelationist tradition what seems to be a strategic vagueness on how notions of perception and sight are used.<sup>194</sup> Take the double meaning alluded to with the phrase, “film-thinkings [...] change our perception of the world” (2006a: 211). Frampton blurs the distinction between the concrete sensual perception of things as opposed to the rational, cognitive ‘perception’ (understanding) we have of them – something that he does just as much with the term ‘seeing’. This equivocation is convenient to his larger project. It enables him to make an easy transition from claims that film transforms our physical perceptions (which in any case cannot be as straightforward as he makes it out to be), to claims that it transforms also our ‘perceptions’ of reality, which brings the philosophical relevance of film into the equation. He thus posits something of a chain reaction between three transformational domains: film transforms the base domain of *perception*, which then pools our *understanding* of life and being, which in turn affects the more specific domain of *philosophical thinking*. This constellation of domains is thus clearly at work in a statement such as: “Philosophically, film affects our way of understanding life, because it affects our ways of perceiving our lives” (ibid.: 209).

Lastly, however, I need to be more specific about what it is that Frampton as a ‘revelationist’ takes film to reveal. In terms of transformational values, the classical revelationists were interested in truth or truthfulness – thus, how film reveals ‘the true nature of reality’, or reality as it *truly* is (Turvey, 2008: 3). Not so for Frampton. By now we have seen that a cherished value of ethics of self-expansion – which the ‘Blow Your Mind’ ethic of filmosophy most certainly is – is that of the *new*. For Frampton, film’s transformation of perception, the effect of its revelatory capacity, comes down to how it shows and engenders what is new (e.g. 2006a: 151, 155, 208–209). Film shows the new, thinks the new, conjures up new realities; and as a result engenders in us new experiences, new perceptions, new thinking – in sum, “a new point of view about the world” (2006a: 212).

Yet the next ethic asks: what is so new about ‘a new point of view about the world’ if it is still *your* point of view? This ethic, in contrast, sees in film a promise of ridding viewers of a subjective point of view altogether.

193 While Turvey singles out Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer as the classical revelationists, he also branches out to contemporary incarnations of the tradition, where among other theorists he deals with Deleuze (see Turvey, 2008: 89–98).

194 Turvey (2008:18–19) notes that revelationist theories are often defended with the objection that they employ perceptual concepts in a metaphorical sense. Throughout his book, he patiently dismantles such objections from his standpoint of ordinary language philosophy.

### 3.3 'Lose Your Self': Deleuzian Inspirations Take #2 (Radical Immanence)

The ubiquitous motto 'to lose yourself' (in the moment... the pleasure... the spectacle...) is a frequently invoked incentive for our consumption of movies. However, for the philosophers who follow here, as for the transformational ethics of film that they propose, this Subjectivity-affirming motto is too meek. At the very least, they require to be set apart under the fine-tuned bumper sticker, 'Lose Your [note the space] Self'.

Similar to 'Blow Your Mind', the 'Lose Your Self' ethic moves within the topos of *ekstasis*. Yet whereas 'Blow Your Mind' wants to transcend forms of thinking, 'Lose Your Self' wants to altogether leave behind the individual self or subject that does the thinking. The ethical imperative to 'Lose Your Self' takes self-expansion to its most extreme: it pursues a self that expands, that opens up, to the point of its own dissipation. In a sense, 'Lose Your Self' pushes *ekstasis* to a point where it spills over to an equally prominent topos: *kenosis*, or self-emptying; a pouring of oneself into the world from which the Subject can only pretend to stand apart. As a transformational ethic of film, 'Lose Your Self' thus envisions film as the means to a profound reconciliation: of the supposedly separate, individual subject with the world to which it in any case belongs. In effect, it proposes that to 'Lose Your Self', is to *truly find* yourself – not as a transcendental Subject, but as a thoroughly immanent agent, in fundamental connection to film, and all other agents and things that comprise the world. In short: you lose yourself only to find that self everywhere.

Whereas endorers of 'Blow Your Mind' take their inspiration from Deleuze's two *Cinema* books (1986; 1989), those of 'Lose Your Self' concentrate on the wider Deleuzian 'metaphysics' that in the *Cinema* books recedes more into the background. Pivotal in Deleuze's ontology for the 'Lose Your Self' ethic is his commitment to the pure *immanence* of being: Deleuze insists on reality as absolute immanence in itself; "it is not in anything, nor can it be attributed to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject" (Deleuze, 2006:385). This plane of immanence knows no outside, and allows for no true transcendence. It implodes the distinction between inside and outside, and – significant in this context – fuses subject with object.

This ontological leveling act represents one of the more radical instances of Continental philosophy's abiding quest of 'decentering the subject'. Deleuze decenters the subject straight off the map. An immanentist ontology such as his leaves no room for subjectivity in any conventional sense. He eschews the very notion, preferring instead to speak of 'pre-personal individualities' or 'non-personal individuations' (cited in Rushton, 2008: 135). These individuations – expressed through matter, movements, forces, affects, intensities, and speeds on a plane of immanence – are effectively like 'little selves' underneath the self, which render an 'active' subject possible (Deleuze, 1994: 75). Deleuze thus speaks of "our 'self'



only in virtue of these thousands of little witnesses which contemplate within us”, seeing that “it is always a third party who says ‘me’” (ibid.).<sup>195</sup>

This perspective enforces the same ontological leveling between the viewer and film, fused together on the same immanent plane, as testified to by the Deleuzian maxim ‘the brain is the screen’ (Deleuze, 2000: 366). Talk of subjective experience or consciousness, in this context, can only be conceived of as an emergent event of the viewer’s ontological merger with film. As Richard Rushton (2009: 48–49) explains, for Deleuze one cannot posit a ‘subject’ prior to its encounter with film. If we are to suppose such an anterior entity (which in any case would be dismantled by the film encounter’s flow of forces) it is for all practical purposes a non-subject. An eventual ‘subject’ can emerge only from the flow of sensations and thoughts between the film and the viewer, based on their fusion with one another. Rushton (2009: 49) furthermore makes clear that the sensations and thoughts of cinema “are not things that can be possessed by or attributed to subjects, for they are, Deleuze writes (with Guattari), ‘independent of a state of those who experience them’” (ibid.:49). In fact, I would add, even the ‘experience’ itself is independent of the self (or subject) that is assumed to have the experience – for it is supposedly outsourced to a third party. When ‘I’ experience a film it is really the multitude ‘little selves’, in circulation with those of film, that are going through the real motions.

By now, I trust, my chosen label ‘Lose Your Self’ must seem a misnomer, and one on a number of counts. I would welcome this judgment. The shortcomings of the slogan merely reflect dilemmas that are intrinsic to the ethic itself. My defunct bumper sticker thus helpfully obliges us to note these dilemmas before I go into particular cases below.

The most *self*-apparent issue: the reliance on Deleuzian-type immanence, as *paradigm* to the ethic, in many ways rules out the very ‘self’ that we are supposed to ‘lose’. To think of ‘Lose Your Self’ in terms of *mysticism* solves little of this, since self-transcendence still implies an initial self to be transcended. (Thinking along any lines of transcendence would in any case be branded a ‘distortion of immanence’ (Deleuze, 2006: 385) – but I get back to this tension in a moment.) In the particular ‘Lose Your Self’ cases discussed below, I instead attribute to the ethic the transformational mode of *asceticism*, which is the most natural fit with its assumption that film elicits a *loss* – a *lessening*, a *giving up* – of individual subjectivity. This ascetic self-*less*-ness, we will see, finds articulation in a range of terms and figures: desubjectivisation, deterritorialization, destratification, self-dispersion, self-dismantling, self-destruction, and self-shattering, to name but a few. Not that the option of asceticism makes the predicament go away, however. As an ethic of selflessness, ‘Lose Your Self’ still designates the self as the *domain*

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<sup>195</sup> I am indebted to Richard Rushton (2008) for drawing my attention to this particular passage in *Difference and Repetition* (1994).

where transformation must occur, even though that very domain is called into question by the immanentism that motivates the ethic.<sup>196</sup>

When reflecting on 'Lose Your Self', therefore, I constantly grapple with this ambivalence: does the ethic bespeak our *actual* ontological condition, or an *ideal* condition, still to be actualized? Does it insist on our selflessness as already given, or does it set selflessness as a goal? The acceptance of pure immanence suggests the former, although we clearly also have an ethical directive here – a call to action – which affirms the latter. Each of the philosophers discussed below, I believe, try to uphold some compromise between actual condition and ideal condition: namely, that immanence and immanent becoming *is* our actual condition; but also, that we need various 'Lose Your Self' types of ethics to *maintain* ideal immanence, in the sense that such forms of ethics must undo the distortions from which our immanent condition inevitably suffers.

Now for 'Lose Your Self' to make the dual-assertion of selflessness as both actuality and ideal, brings into play further transformational *values* that, by further specifying the 'selflessness' strived for, help ease the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal. As will become clear, to *merely* lose the self is hardly what the philosophers concerned are after – the basic ideal of selflessness is but shorthand for more definitive values.

The most prominent of the definitive values, and a crucial intermediary between accepted ontological actuality and ethical ideal, is the transformational value of *nature*. Generally, this value betokens the good as a life aligned with, or even abandoned to, nature and its forces. For any version of 'Lose Your Self', accordingly, the apparently negative act of losing the self is at once an affirmative losing of self *to* nature, *to* the world, in what we may call a '*becoming-world* of the self' (Braidotti, 2006: 157 [emphasis added]). Therefore, as I detail later on, the ethic can be understood as urging a 'return to nature', recommending film as our means to nature and the self's absorption therein. Not that the ethic suggests nature to be something 'out there'. Rather, it sees film as allowing the viewer an engagement with nature "as it is incarnated in our selves and as it forms the background to our selves" (O'Sullivan, 2008: 100). (Needless to say, the philosophers involved exhibit a corresponding Nature-motive in their conceptions of film as philosophy – described at the close of Chapter 1 – according to which the philosophical value of films derives from their capacity to connect with or instantiate nature/the real. By near default, therefore, these philosophers are investing their efforts in the transformational question of how films-as-philosophy may effect a 'return to nature'.)

However, being the broad notion that it is, the value of nature itself requires qualification by still other values. For Deleuze & Guattari's Body without Organs,

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196 Considering that ethics of self-transformation must assume a *self* with formative intentions *toward itself* (see Chapter 2 on both Visagie and Foucault), one could even say that the immanentist paradigm of 'Lose Your Self' in fact refuses two selves: not only the 'second' self as object or transformational domain, but also the 'first' self as the intending agent of transformation.

as I will show, ‘Lose Your Self’ is to submit to the *flux, change, and becoming* of immanent nature; whereas for the likes of Bersani & Dutoit it is rather to submit to nature’s *oneness* or *connectedness*. Concepts like change versus connectedness are obviously ontological descriptors. Yet here such descriptors take on a double role as also ethical values in an ontology-focused ethic. The values echo a variety of privileged assumptions *about nature*, and thus provide distinct measures of what an ideal self-lost-to-nature is supposed to look like.

Undoubtedly, then, the various values above clarify the extent to which ‘Lose Your Self’ turns the all-out immanence of subjectivity into an ideal: such immanence (related to notions of nature, change, connectedness, etc.) is as much something *to attain* – or, at the very least, *maintain* – as it is our most basic ontological condition. By positing our condition of radical immanence (actuality), the ethic is by default committed to undoing every imposed dualism, hierarchy, or bit of transcendence that may distort it (ideal). I therefore cannot but agree with Kristien Justaert (2012a: 101) that the radically immanent in Deleuze’s philosophy emerges as a goal – an ethical-transformational goal, I insist. The various ‘Lose Your Self’ ethics inspired by the Deleuzian plane of immanence only makes this more evident.

However, at this point we run into another dilemma inherent to ‘Lose Your Self’, and one not without irony: for when the radically immanent becomes an ethical goal, immanence itself has about it a whiff of transcendence. Justaert describes this transcendence of immanence in Deleuze’s thinking as follows:

“[The Deleuzian plane of immanence] is indeed wholly other than this world. Deleuze creates a new dualism, between the ‘old’ world of representation and the new, creative plane of immanence [...] The radically immanent can be understood as transcending our lives, because the whole interpretation of immanence as goal to strive for, away from the world of representation, pictures this form of immanence as quasi unattainable. To reach it, we have to transcend our own ego, give up our personality. With his plane of immanence, Deleuze creates a place where all egos are left behind [...] So transcendence does have a meaning in Deleuze’s philosophy, but it is the dynamic meaning of transcending as an act of human beings or of beings in general. Their static form transcends towards a more dynamic constellation in which they can be creative, in which they can produce again. This is what happens on the plane of immanence: all these moving ‘lines’ produce different intensities of Being. The act of transcending has nothing to do with verticality: on the contrary, it is meant to annul any kind of hierarchical position” (ibid.: 101–102).<sup>197</sup>

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197 Justaert, I take it, is less interested in criticizing this paradox of transcendent immanence in Deleuze. Her broader project is to test the theological relevance of different aspects of Deleuze’s philosophy, which among other themes involves his concept of immanence. See also Justaert (2012b).

Building on Justaert's account, I detect at least two senses of a transcendent immanence in 'Lose Your Self'. First, a broader sense. Any transformational ethic, even if only in the slightest way, aims for a higher plane of personal existence. Here, ironically, the hierarchy-annulling plane of immanence functions as that 'higher' plane. To aspire to fullness of immanence – from an ethical-practical standpoint – implies that we must *transcend* our world of everyday experience where assumptions of subjectivity, hierarchy, and other supposed distortions of immanence thrive. Yet immanence is also transcendent in the stricter, more direct sense: namely that the aimed-at condition of pure immanence appears to lie *beyond* our reach. The fullness of such immanence, for all practical purposes, remains inaccessible. What better evidence do we need? Not even Deleuze seems able to conceive of pure immanence outside of the terms of transcendence that it is supposed to undo (just like he also cannot avoid speaking of subjects and selves – though, theoretically, he rejects the notions). Deleuze as a 'Lose Your Self' proponent – as the other proponents of this ethical imperative – cannot avoid the category of transcendence when they make immanence a goal of self-transformation.

### **Dismantle Your Self: The Body without Organs (as Return to Nature)**

Before moving on to examples of 'Lose Your Self' ethics of film, let me first consider a more general, paradigmatic instance of 'Lose Your Self', as emerges from Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari's meditations on the 'Body without Organs' in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987: 149–166). Sketching this Deleuzian-Guattarian exemplar helps to flesh out the broader Deleuzian paradigm that informs the transformational ethics of film following below. The 'Body without Organs' usefully demonstrates how immanence – to 'attain' immanence, in effect – translates into ethical-practical matter and indeed an ideal of personal transformation. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to show how 'Lose Your Self' goes hand in hand with the transformational ideal of 'a return to nature'.

The uninitiated reader would be forgiven for confusing the plateau 'How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?' with a (perplexing) self-help manual. Indeed, Deleuze & Guattari emphasizes that the 'Body without Organs' is not a notion nor a concept, but "a practice, a set of practices" and moreover "an inevitable exercise or experimentation" (1987: 151). Yet what is the aim of this practice? Deleuze & Guattari explains:

"Where psychoanalysis says, 'Stop, find your self again,' we should say instead, 'Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self.' Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs" (1987: 151).

The authors appropriated the notion from Antonin Artaud (1976), who pits the ideal of a changeable Body without Organs against what he considers the

inherent stasis of the organism. The organism, says Artaud, is indicative of the judgment of God: it is static, a fixed consolidation of organs, each 'organ-ized' into a discrete function. The Body without Organs, in contrast, is not an organism. As an inherently open condition, not organ-ized, and not fixed; it is capable of fundamental change; and can therefore escape Artaud's supposed judgment of God (Adkins, 2015: 98).

In their elaboration of Artaud's idea, Deleuze & Guattari argues that it is ultimately not the organs that are the enemies of the Body without Organs. It is precisely the *organization* of the organs – called the organism – that the Body without Organs is opposed to (1987:158). They see the organism as concretions and layers that accrue on the Body without Organs: "[I]t is a stratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences" (ibid.: 159).

To make oneself a Body without Organs, consequently, is to dismantle the inhibiting forms, strata, and organ-izations that make you an organism. In my own framework, this emphasis on doing away qualifies Deleuze & Guattari's challenge as one of radical *asceticism*. Although they never use the term, they make quite clear: their project with regard to the organism is to 'diminish' and 'shrink' it (ibid.: 162). Moreover, they state, the Body without Organs "is what remains when you take everything away" (ibid.: 151). Yet they do caution: this self-dismantling is an art of dosages requiring due temperance. "You don't reach the BwO [...] by wildly destratifying" (ibid.: 160). You must invent self-destructions only bit by bit, and still retain sufficient rations of subjectivity that enable you to respond to the dominant reality and turn it against itself.<sup>198</sup> "Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself", they explain, "but rather opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor" (ibid.).

How does Deleuze & Guattari envision the limit or destination of this practice? When you take everything away, they say, you arrive at an immanent field – 'nonstratified, unformed, intense matter' (ibid.: 153) – upon which only intensities can pass and circulate. In other words, the Body without Organs is ultimately occupied and populated only by intensities. So Deleuze & Guattari's challenge is clear: forget about finding your self – and look instead to dismantle

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198 In slightly more practical terms, Deleuze & Guattari advises as follows:

"Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. Connect, conjugate, continue: a whole 'diagram', as opposed to still signifying and subjective programs" (1987: 161).

the (sedimentations of) self, causing an open flow “of singularities that can no longer be said to be personal, and intensities that can no longer be said to be extensive” (ibid.: 156). This resultant field of immanence knows no Selves, as they conceive of it, because the interior and exterior are equally part of the immanence (the ‘absolute Outside’) in which they have fused (ibid.). Subsequently, “[t]here is no longer a Self [*Moi*] that feels, acts, and recalls; there is ‘a glowing fog, a dark yellow mist’ that has affects and experiences movements, speeds” (ibid.: 162).<sup>199</sup>

Perhaps Deleuze & Guattari would balk at my calling their proposed ethical practice ‘ascetic’ – ever the Nietzscheans, they would point out that the making of a Body without Organs is an affirmative, liberating process. Yet the real issue at this point is not the ascetic *mode* that I identify. To do justice to their position, instead, one only needs to recognize the particular transformational *values* that Deleuze & Guattari espouses, values that are unlike the repressive ideals that normally get associated with asceticism. They do not consider a diminished or dismantled self an end in itself. As Brent Adkins (2015: 96–107) rightly notes, the basic ethical challenge that the Body without Organs poses is to realize in ourselves the tendency towards *change* and, ultimately, a state of *becoming*. The self, when leveled out to a field of flows and intensities, can open up to new relations and new combinations. This flattened, continuous ontology enables change and creation, and affirms becoming over static being (see Adkins, 2015: 105). Deleuze (1998b: 51) astutely captures this transformed state of becoming when in a different context he instructs: “Stop thinking of yourself as an ego (*moi*) in order to live as a flow (flux), a set of flows in relation with other flows, outside of oneself and within oneself”.

These transformational values behind the practice of a Body without Organs correspond to the selfsame change and becoming that characterizes Deleuze’s process ontology, as it conceives of reality as a constant flux of forces. A related way of construing Deleuze & Guattari’s ethical project, therefore, is to say that we are to abandon our selves to Nature, in the sense that we submit to the ceaseless flux of matter-energy that is the plane of immanence. In this case, the values of change and becoming link up with the further transformational value of (submitting to, connecting with, or even instantiating) *nature*.

This is an interpretation offered by John Sellars (1999), who in an illuminating essay brands the Deleuzian-Guattarian Body without Organs as an injunction to ‘live according to nature’. (The ‘nature’ that Sellars invokes here is of course nature in the Deleuzian sense of the plane of immanence, which encompasses both the animate and inanimate, as well as the artificial and natural.) What Deleuze & Guattari sees as a dismantling of the self, Sellars understands as an “overcoming of the division between man and nature” (1999: 2). Deleuze & Guattari ultimately proposes that we engage in a destructive, deterritorializing process in which we

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199 The phrase “glowing fog, a dark yellow mist” is taken from Carlos Castaneda’s *Tales of Power* (1974), which Deleuze & Guattari also cites a few passages earlier. Telling about this otherwise enigmatic reference, to my mind at least, is the indistinctness and diffuseness of fog and mist.

open up the organism-self to new connections within the flows of nature. Hence, Sellars concludes, to make oneself a Body without Organs is to work towards “a dissolution of the man-nature dichotomy” (1999: 7).

The main aim of Sellars’ essay, however, is to demonstrate the indebtedness of Deleuze & Guattari’s idea of a Body without Organs to ancient Stoicism. Sellars argues that their philosophy of a Body without Organs follows the same metaphysical-cum-ethical model of ‘a return to nature’ set out by the likes of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>200</sup> Central to the Stoic model is the notion of adopting a ‘point of view of the cosmos’, based on a naturalism (and, I may add, anti-subjectivism) similar to that of Deleuze.<sup>201</sup> As Sellars explains, both Marcus Aurelius and Seneca frequently resort to the image of a cosmic perspective as a means of relocating the self within the infinity of nature in order to escape one’s limited point of view (ibid.: 21). When Marcus Aurelius, for example, uses the phrase ‘to live in accord with nature’, he means to disregard the way things appear from our limited and subjective human judgment in favor of the way they are from the objective, overall point of view of nature. Most of Marcus Aurelius’ famous *Meditations* can thus be seen as an initiation into the contemplative technique of observing one’s life from this cosmic point of view, from which “local encounters between bodies become insignificant compared to the vast flows of matter-energy that form the system of nature taken as a whole” (ibid.: 18).

Sellars considers a Body without Organs to involve the same shift in perspective. Much like Marcus Aurelius, Deleuze & Guattari wishes to relocate the individual organism within the greater context of nature. They ask that we dismantle the perspective of the individual organism in order to “move towards a limit-perspective from which everything would be experienced as unformed flux” (ibid.: 5). It is thus in this sense that Deleuze & Guattari, like the Stoics, wants to overcome the human-nature dichotomy that Sellars speaks of. They also propose a transformational reorientation, in which the perspective of the finite self is transcended by our submitting to the boundless, extra-subjective perspective of the cosmos.

Yet while these are both aspects of the ‘Lose Your Self’ ethics, with a mutual naturalistic emphasis, I must insist that the Stoics do urge our self-abandonment to nature with markedly different end goals in mind. The Stoics do not have any apparent investment in Deleuze & Guattari’s transformational values of change and becoming. A figure like Marcus Aurelius, rather, practices the point of view of the cosmos as a technique for attaining inner *peace* and *tranquility*. As he sees it, our personal value-judgments inevitably cause anxiety. So to alleviate our anxieties, we suppress our individual judgments by contemplating our lives from

200 Sellars draws this genealogical line to Stoicism via the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, who takes similar inspiration from the Stoic dictum to live according to nature (1999: 7–12).

201 Pierre Hadot (1995: 238–250) situates this Stoic theme within a broader philosophical tradition that practices ‘the view from above’ (involving the contemplation of individuals and society from the universal viewpoint of the cosmos), which in the ancient context he traces from the Homeric epics and later Platonic philosophy, to its apex in the Epicurean, Cynic and Stoic schools.

the objective, judgment-free point of view of the cosmos (Sellars, 1999: 16; cf. Hadot, 1995: 242–245).

### **'Lose Your Self (to Nature)'... Through Film**

In light of the Body without Organs as a 'Lose Your Self' exemplar, let us consider how its ethical principles recur in the context of film-philosophy. I turn to three film-philosophy cases – that of Elena del Río, William Brown, and Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit. Although these philosophers have not yet featured in this thesis, their cases are deeply indicative of how a (Deleuzian inspired) immanentist outlook on film-philosophy lead to the same 'Lose Your Self' ethical picture sketched above. Much as in the Body without Organs philosophy, each case advances the 'self-less' immanence of the viewer-subject not only as an ontological actuality but also – in one way or another – as an ethical ideal. The main difference, however, is that these film philosophers construe *film* as initiator of our transformation unto self-less-ness – a move that privileges our encounter with films as a special node, somehow, in the flows and intensities that populate the plane of immanence. All three of the cases therefore rely on a motive of Nature for their conception of film as philosophy: the philosophical relevance of films derives from how they express, instantiate, or move forces of nature/the real. And by mobilizing nature, these philosophers propose, films eat away at the artifices of individual subjectivity, and encourage an abandoning of self to nature. Accordingly, in what follows, I give special attention to the connection between the asceticism of 'Lose Your Self' – the ambition to do away with the individual self through film – and the ethical *topos* of a 'return to nature'.

#### *Affect Your Self: Elena del Río*

Elena del Río's affective-performative approach to cinema presents a first sample of 'Lose Your Self' understood as a transformational ethics of film. Inasmuch as 'Lose Your Self' entails a return to nature, that 'return' in Del Río's case is specifically to the realm of body and affect. At first glance, therefore, it would seem that her conception of self-transformation makes for a comfortable fit with 'Sense Your Senses' – the ethic that I earlier identified with reference to Vivian Sobchack's film phenomenology. Not unlike Sobchack, Del Río positions herself against traditional representational approaches in film theory. In her *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (2008) she argues for a non-representational paradigm of performance, in which performance is understood as the mobilization of affects, and affects themselves are understood as the powers of bodies. Moreover, Del Río recognizes the ability of cinematic images to both affect and be affected, meaning that, like Sobchack, Del Río takes a special interest in affective exchanges between the 'body' of the film and the body of the filmgoer (ibid.:4,12).

However, Del Río's simultaneous insistence on desubjectivized immanence, as she adopts from Deleuze, bares assumptions that are at odds with those behind 'Sense Your Senses'. Whereas Sobchack's film-philosophy is based on a motive of Subjectivity, Del Río proceeds squarely from a motive of Nature. Most notably,



when Del Río speaks of affect, she does so from a tradition that conceives of affect as a strictly de-personalized, intensive *force* – not a personal state (see Ott, 2017). Affect rests only upon “the workings of a nonorganic, anonymous vitality” (Del Río, 2008: 115). For Del Río the whole point of addressing affection thus understood – as the power of all bodies to affect and be affected – is to downplay individual subjectivity, to carry out a leveling across human and non-human bodies, and thereby to consider ‘the human event’ in ‘a less personal way’ (ibid.:211).<sup>202</sup>

In the same Deleuzian vein, Del Río means by ‘body’ an assemblage of forces or affects, which combine and recombine with other forces in a greater process of creative becoming (ibid.: 3,12). A body, as much for Del Río as it is for Deleuze, is thus by definition a moving body: its powers of affection and becoming are ceaselessly in the making. It is this inherent movement or becoming of bodily forces that she takes to be ‘ontologically akin’ to a performance – the central theme of her film-philosophy (ibid.:3). Yet notice how she has to strip ‘performance’ from all aspects of subjective intent in order to equate it with creative becoming. It is only by trimming performance down to “the expression and perception of affect in the body” that Del Río can claim that performance coincides with the creative becoming of existence itself (ibid.: 10).

Against this broader affective-performative backdrop that Del Río sets, let me outline three senses in which a return to nature emerges from her approach to film. The first of these senses pertain to her account of film-philosophy, and the latter two to the ‘Lose Your Self’ ethic that emerges from that account.

In the first sense, Del Río proposes a theoretical reorientation, a ‘return to nature’ that promises to galvanize the philosophical potential of films. She proposes the need to (re)consider cinema from the viewpoint of nature, which is to say from the pre-human, ego-less world where she situates *affect* – the world which she privileges over the “human-all-too-human world of phenomenology” (Boundas cited in Del Río, 2008:12).

What philosophical potential exactly does this viewpoint hold for films? From the immanent viewpoint of nature, Del Río explains, “performance involves a mobilization of affective circuits that supersedes the viewer’s investment in the image through representational structures of belief and mimesis” (2008: 4). From this viewpoint, that is, the affects mobilized by performance are unassimilable; they circumvent language, binary structures, ideological functions, and similar static forms. Mobilized affects summon a creative ontology operating outside of such static forms and compels them to change.<sup>203</sup> It is in this inevitable displacement of

202 For a similar Deleuzian inspired conception of affect, and what its implications are for how we understand film form, see Brinkema (2014).

203 Restated in the more exact Deleuzo-Guattarian terms that Del Río resorts to: static bodies and organizations on a ‘molar’ plane (populated by subjects, identities, binaries, and other inhibiting strata) are all susceptible to the destabilizing movements of intensive forces and affects on a ‘molecular’ plane of impersonal becoming (Del Río, 2008: 9, 16; also see Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 39–60).

static forms that Del Río sees the philosophical promise of cinema's performing bodies: she finds these bodies "capable of transforming static forms and concepts typical of a representational paradigm into forces and concepts that exhibit a transformative/expansive potential" (ibid.: 6). To single out one example: in her treatment of Sally Porter's semi-autobiographical drama, *The Tango Lesson* (1997), the static concept in question is that of narcissism (ibid.: 129–143). Del Río seeks to demonstrate that the film – which deals with a turbulent dance partnership between a filmmaker (Sally Porter) and her conscripted dancer-actor (Pablo Verón) – transforms the traditional notion of narcissism by undoing the subject-object binary, and fixation on identity, that underpin it. (As Del Río explains, narcissism in the film refers not only to the self-absorbed filmmaker in it but also – as some critics hold – to Sally Porter casting herself in that role.) Contrary to traditional notions of narcissism as a self-absorbedness at the expense of the other, Del Río finds, *The Tango Lesson* enacts the narcissistic impulse as an affirmative, creative power: the narcissistic body thrives in its affective connections with other bodies, in an open-ended unfolding of its potential for becoming. Yet this particular disclosure of narcissism still depends on a radical reconsideration of bodies and selves from the viewpoint of de-personalized forces – Del Río's proposal for film-philosophy to return to nature.

Intertwined with her approach to film-philosophy above, is Del Río's 'Lose Your Self' ethic, where 'return to nature' emerges in a second – now ethical – sense. Just as we have seen with Deleuze & Guattari's *Body without Organs*, nature here manifests as a transformational value; that of a life submitted to nature. In Del Río's thinking, submitting to nature translates to submitting oneself to *affection* – the interplay of body, affect and force on the plane of immanence – in an effort to undo the self, to dismantle static structures of subjectivity. As she notes, "the capacity to engage with the powers of affection goes hand in hand with the capacity to live in an expansive, creative way" (ibid.: 212). It is true, though, that powers of affection as Del Río conceives of them are an ontological given. This she would not deny. At a certain (molecular) level, bodies and affects are in any case on the move, always chipping away at static (molar) structures such as the subjective self. Yet, as much as powers of affection are inevitable, Del Río's whole project hovers around the suggestion that cinema *intensifies* affection and thus creates an opportunity for viewers to engage actively with affection's powers. And the more abstract and impersonal the films (she singles out the work of Claire Denis and David Lynch in this regard), the greater the affective intensity that cinema can deliver (see ibid.: 49, 212). Cinema therefore allows viewers to quicken in themselves the principles of motion and exchange that characterize an ontology of becoming. This transformational return to nature, as in all other variants of 'Lose Your Self', marks an ideal of desubjectivization. Del Río states that affective intensity pairs off with the weakening and dismantling of subjectivity, meaning that she places subjectivity in inverse proportion to affect (ibid.: 6–7; 212). For the viewer to engage with the intensified affection mobilized by cinema – as 'return to nature' – is thus to enter a process of shedding (static structures of) subjectivity. The implied transformational ethics here has the same basic features

as that of Deleuze & Guattari's Body without Organs. Del Río posits an *ascetic* mode of self-less-ness, of *doing away with* subjectivity – the only difference being that she identifies cinema as a concrete (re)source for this transformational mode; for cinema sets in motion de-personalized affects that *withhold* viewers from relying on static, subject-affirming structures. Del Río furthermore posits the same transformational value of *change* or *becoming*, which qualifies what it means to return to nature and, thereby, realize self-less-ness. To realize self-less-ness, as much for Del Río as for Deleuze & Guattari, is to flee a static, stratified self; thus, to give up one's self to the fundamental change and becoming that characterize nature. In short: they reject a constant self in resistance to flux, pursuing instead a resistant self in constant flux.

How do we imagine this somewhat abstruse transformational ethic play out in practice, though? What needs to happen between film and viewer? Del Río portrays the cinema situation as an assemblage of desubjectivized forces and bodies, generating an array of intensified affective circuits on the basis of “the affective continuum that joins life and the cinema” (ibid.: 208). These circuits run between the bodies *in* cinema, and cinematic images *as* bodies, in a performative exchange with *viewer*-bodies too. Though Del Río herself does not explicitly draw the connection, the exchanges between film and viewer happen to find a pertinent model in the affective push-and-pull between dancer-bodies in Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson*. In her reading of the film, the mobilization of affective circuits between the dancers occurs only once Sally Potter refrains from reactive self-preservation, and actively embraces the powers of affection within the dance partnership. It seems to me that Del Río envisions the same process for the film viewer, for whom the transformational technique of cinema-going supplants that of dancing. Instead of a dance partner, the viewer depends on films to initiate an “ethical process that ensures the maintenance of the movement and flow of forces between bodies” (ibid.: 141). It is up to cinema to, as it were, ‘take the lead’ by raising the affective circuits running between the viewer and itself. Then it is up to the viewer to help maintain that flow, by abandoning the self – quite literally – to the resultant powers of affection on display.

Parallel to the transformational ethics above emerges a third and final sense of ‘a return to nature’ – a more modest ethical thread in Del Río's thinking, suggesting a more conventional transformational ethics. This is not the radical ethics of ascetic self-dismantling in the name of becoming, but an ethics of awareness, where ‘a return to nature’ simply means to become aware of your capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies. She notes, for example, that “one of the foremost functions of the cinema is to bring to consciousness the body's powers of affection” (2008: 212–213). A few passages on she adds that “the cinema has a unique capacity to bring to living consciousness the most intense, transformative affects in our lives” (2008: 216). According to the implied ethics, then, *affects* (inevitably) bring about transformation – the transformational function of films is only to enhance awareness of these affects and their effects. A return to nature in this instance is thus qualified by the transformational value of *awareness*, an awareness *of* nature; in Del Río's terms, awareness of “a field of forces that are already here and now” (ibid.: 215).

To bring Vivian Sobchack back into the picture, Del Río's agreement with 'Sense Your Senses' is nowhere stronger than with the particular ethic of awareness that she expresses here. Despite her mismatching assumptions about the nature of affects, Del Río is at this point just as invested as Sobchack in the ideal of cultivating awareness of affect through cinema. According to Sobchack, we have seen, viewers need this technique of transformation because of conditions of habituation and abstraction that estrange us from our bodies (e.g. Sobchack, 1992: 28). Del Río cites similar negative motivations for a transformational engagement with cinema: conditions like 'our cultural alienation from sensual and bodily experience', and 'our customary state of numbness' (Del Río, 2008: 174, 210). The problem for Del Río, however, is that her ethic of awareness runs up against the overall desubjectified approach to cinema that she is trying to put across. It remains unclear how she ultimately reconciles the ideal of films bringing to consciousness the body's affection, with her stated agenda of "[d]e-emphasizing ego-centered, individual subjectivity" (ibid.: 211). Even if she insists that this is 'consciousness' in a different, depersonalized sense, I am not sure what value such a bringing to consciousness could have apart from an enrichment of individual subjectivity. Del Río therefore poses what seems to be two opposing strands of a transformational 'return to nature': to weaken or dismantle subjectivity by our *submitting* to affect (understood as de-personalized, intensive force) is at odds with our *becoming aware* of affect. If anything, the latter will only strengthen individual subjectivity.

*See Your Self Enworlded: William Brown*

My second sample of 'Lose Your Self' as film ethic comes from Willam Brown's immanentist explorations (which, again, I take to be mainly Deleuzian inspired) of digital cinema in his *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (2013).

I want to focus on a key claim that runs throughout his otherwise wide-ranging book: Brown argues that digital technology begets an enhanced cinema, a 'supercinema', that enables us to see our 'enworlded' nature<sup>204</sup>, as he likes to put it, by which he means that we see ourselves embedded in the fundamental continuity of the world (e.g. ibid.: 154, 156). Brown's implied ethic picks up on the same thread that we left off with Del Río above. Here we again encounter 'Lose Your Self' as essentially an ethic of *awareness* – not a radical ethic of self-dismantling. The point for Brown is not to lose yourself, but to recognize – in terms of my bumper sticker – that the self is *already* 'lost' in fundamental connection to the world. The transformational role of cinema is but to dismantle our mistaken *notions* of a self that stands in opposition to the world. Digital cinema thus fosters a 'return to nature' inasmuch as it makes us mindful of how the self is already thoroughly enworlded.

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204 With this term, Brown takes particular inspiration from Varela, Thompson, & Rosch's (1991) arguments in favor of the mind's 'enworlded' nature, according to which the mind does not operate in objective detachment from the world, but actively emerges from relations between environments, brain and body (Brown, 2013: 144–146).

How does Brown arrive at this ethical stance? To start with his Deleuze-inspired conception of film-philosophy, the primary question that Brown asks is not whether cinema does philosophy, but simply what cinema does. He underlines that one of the things that cinema does is to make us think; it creates new thoughts, as Deleuze & Guattari (1994) would have it (Brown, 2013: 6). Therefore, he says, cinematic experience is at least ‘philosophical’ insofar as it always involves the production of thought between film and viewer (ibid.: 123).<sup>205</sup>

So what is it that digital cinema, in particular, does? What ‘thought’ is produced between the digital film and its viewer? That thought concerns the continuity and interconnectedness of all things. Whereas analogue cinema with its obvious material limitations is compelled to cut, Brown argues, digital cinema is predicated on continuity (ibid.: 2). Citing films like *Fight Club* (notably its opening sequence) and *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé, 2009), he describes how digital technology enables films to present continuous spaces in which supposedly empty space and solid objects melt into a single continuum. Analogue cinema fragments space. A film such as *Fight Club*, in contrast, exemplifies “a conception of space as a continuum, in which space consists not of discreet units, or points, but instead in which all space is interconnected [...] in which empty space and the objects that fill it share an equal ontological status” (ibid.: 43). By presenting the interconnected nature of entities, events and space (a reality affirmed by the contemporary theoretical physics, as Brown repeatedly points out) digital cinema paradoxically achieves a greater realism – a realism based not on indexical realism, but on how it enacts ontological continuity. Naturally, most films in the digital era persist with the convention of cutting. But, Brown stresses, we know that *they do not need to*. For this reason, he speaks of the ‘supercinema’ capacity of digital cinema: although it possesses powers of perfect continuity, digital cinema is like Superman who, for the sake of fitting in, limits himself to the Clark Kent-countenance of analogue cinema (see ibid.: 9–12).

The super-continuity of ‘super’ digital cinema presents an equal ontology in which bodies, minds, physical objects, and space exist in a seamless continuum. Such continuity according to Brown – and here he really earns the ‘Lose Your Self’ label – gives an indubitably post-human, non-anthropocentric impulse to digital cinema. “[I]f space becomes indistinguishable from all that fills it”, he explains, “then this brings about a fundamental decentering of the figures that fill that space [...] [T]he result of this ‘decentering’ is a minimizing of anthropocentrism in digital cinema” (ibid.: 2). With this posthuman continuity, consequently, cinema has the capacity to “take the viewer beyond the human” (ibid.: 8), as it “allows us to transcend our limited human perception” (ibid.: 47). Clearly, though, Brown is not advocating here a wholesale transcendence of self, but a transcendence of perception (akin to the mode of contemplative mysticism, as identified in ‘Blow Your Mind’) that lets viewers apprehend their existing connectedness and

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205 Extending this line of reasoning, Brown casts Deleuze’s much analyzed time-image, not as something ‘out there’, nor as part of a certain taxonomy of techniques, but primarily as a mode of viewing, a relationship and emergent consciousness, that occurs when film and viewer fuse with one another (2013: 154, 156).

interdependence with the world. Hence, my assessment that Brown's implied transformational ethic is an ethic of awareness: to engage with digital cinema, he makes quite clear, enables us to become conscious of our fundamentally enworlded nature, and so to rethink our relationship with the world.

However, the same issue raised with Del Río could be raised here. That is, does a growing *awareness* of our enworlded nature – which implies a distancing of the aware self from its object of awareness – not work against Brown's insistence on a self that is fundamentally inseparable from the world? Brown is no doubt aware of this inner-tension in his position. To allay this tension, I gather, he prefers to speak of an awareness 'with' the world, not 'of' it. Because a properly rethought relationship with the world, as he conceives of it, will affirm that we are *with* the world – not *in* it, and even less so *apart from* it. Therefore, through digital cinema, he argues, we ultimately "achieve consciousness not of, but with films, and consciousness not of, but with the world" (ibid.: 156).

In the final chapter of his book, I can add, the ethical investments that Brown puts into 'enworldment' finds an explicit *crescendo* (ibid.: 147–156). According to his 'sophophilic' conclusion, to achieve consciousness with the world – "to understand that we only exist in relation with the world" – amounts to *loving* the world" (ibid.: 154). To discover our enworlded nature is thus an act of love. It is not to love this or that, Brown says, but to love everything, holistically. And the effects of this love, especially how he phrases it, would certainly be fully endorsed by Bersani & Dutoit, who follows next. Such a love, as Brown puts it, exhausts and shatters the human. Moreover, it promises to turn an egocentric being into one 'dispersed everywhere and everywhen' (ibid.).

*Disperse Your Self: Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit*

For a final sample of the idea(l) of 'Lose Your Self' through film, I turn to the philosophical aesthetics of Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit in their *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity* (2004). Whereas in Del Río, I identified the primary transformational value of change or becoming, and in Brown a particular value of awareness, Bersani & Dutoit's implied ethics is principally concerned with that of connectedness – to not just recognize our connectedness, that is, but to further actualize it. And once more we have an ethic that relies, and quite openly so, on a strict ontology of immanence, even while the name 'Deleuze' drops with far less frequency in this case.

In the spirit of an immanentist imploding of the inside versus outside, I start off with the outside of their book. On the cover it states of the three films that the book examines – Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963), Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (1999), and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998) – that each of them, by means of a visual argument, re-imagines the relationship between subjectivity and the world. The subject's relationship to the world is a well-established theme for the two steady collaborators, especially for Leo Bersani. His long and varied career as literary theorist can arguably be summarized under the heading of 'relationality' – or, better even, 'connectedness'.

This is for example the only overall theme that he is willing to ascribe to his recent *Thoughts and Things*, a collection of previously unrelated (pun unintended) essays. He notes that the essays all share “the question of connectedness: of how the human subject connects or fails to connect to other human subjects and to the nonhuman world” (2015:ix). Significant here is his recognition of the *failure* to connect. While Bersani accepts an intrinsic ‘oneness of being’, he recognizes in the same breath that the oneness is opposed by a destructiveness intrinsic to being human, “a destructiveness always ready to shatter the oneness of being” (ibid.: xiii). Our intrinsic condition may thus be a oneness of being, but for Bersani our effective connectedness amidst that oneness is not a given. It remains something to be achieved – and notably so with the aid of art, in which Bersani finds the potential to open up alternative relational fields for our connection to the world.

In *Forms of Being*, then, Bersani & Dutoit stages this drama of separation and connection through the films, *Le Mépris*, *All About My Mother*, and *The Thin Red Line*. Their project, in Bersani’s own words, is “to define a different relational mode, one of exchanges and correspondences between the subject and the world, exchanges that depend on the anti-Cartesian assumption of a commonality of being among the human subject and both the human and the nonhuman world” (2015: 62). Accordingly, the particular visual argument that they trace in the three films is that they each “propose the implausibility of individuality” (2004:6). The films do so, they argue, by enacting the subject’s ‘dispersal’ – their preferred metaphor for the subject’s effective connection to the world – sometimes exchanged for related figures like the subject’s ‘dissemination’, ‘dissolving’, or ‘shattering’, any one of which results in a ‘multiplication of being’ (e.g. ibid.: 6, 8, 169–170, 177). These notions speak of nothing else than – once again – ‘Lose Your Self’ as a transformational *return to nature*: the self-dispersal that Bersani & Dutoit envisions, to relinquish individual subjectivity to the oneness of being, is at once a multiplication “that allows us to reoccur, differently, everywhere” (2004:9). The ascetic imperative, ‘lose’, in the ‘Lose Your Self’ slogan could thus not be more pertinent. Because “the multiplication of the individual’s positionality in the universe is, necessarily a *lessening* or even a *loss* of individuality” (ibid.: 5 [emphasis added]).

How does their selection of films achieve this dispersal of the subject? Or more to the point, how do these films present the said correspondences and commonalities of being – between the human subject and the world – which would provide the basis for a dispersed subject? Bersani & Dutoit’s reponse: since “[i]mmanent in every subject is its similitudes with other subjects (and other objects)”, the films bring about the subject’s dispersal through ‘unexpected couplings’ (ibid.: 8). Consequently, Bersani & Dutoit is constantly on the hunt for any instance in these films of what they variously call couplings, doublings, pairings, correspondences, replications, repetitions, reoccurrences, and reappearances. They never put things as plainly, but it is plain enough to see that ‘coupling’ (or any of its substitute-terms) always entails ‘connection’. And while they take note of large structural or thematic connections, it is visual connections that interest them most. For it is the visual connections or ‘couplings’ that enable the films to be visual arguments that “propose an ontology of universal immanence”; an ontology that grants the subject’s

dispersal; "an ontology that treats as merely incidental, as a by-product of the illusion of individuality, the opposition between the outside and inside" (ibid.: 169–170).

As to be expected, the promise of the subject's dispersal is not limited to the on-screen subjects of Bersani & Dutoit's three elected films. It holds also for the viewing subject. Take their analysis of *The Thin Red Line* (which I revisit in greater detail in Chapter 4, when I discuss the philosophical reception of this and other films by the director, Terrence Malick). Bersani & Dutoit claims that *The Thin Red Line* performs a "reworking of the individual within a new relational ethic" (ibid.: 135). Yet the claim, it soon becomes evident, deliberately conflates two matters: the film's aesthetic reworking of individual characters, on the one hand, and a transformational 'reworking' of the individual viewer on the other.

In terms of character, Bersani & Dutoit repeatedly plays up the film's presentation of private Witt (Jim Caviezel) as the raw embodiment of receptivity and connectedness (e.g. ibid.: 151, 159, 169–170, 175–176.). They pay special attention to the film's persistent facial close-ups of Witt. These close-ups, they say, show how his face registers the world, and thereby demonstrate the open, all-absorbing nature of the character's look. For Bersani & Dutoit the openness of his look testifies that, in terms of losing the self, Witt has earned his wings:

"[T]he precondition of his wholly receptive gaze is a *subject divested of subjectivity*... Witt's look designates a subject without claims on the world, who owns nothing... Witt approaches the limit of *subject without selfhood*, ideally *an anonymous subject*" (ibid.:164–165 [emphasis added]).

Witt's connectedness however exceeds the film's diegetic boundaries, extending also unto the film viewer. Bersani & Dutoit points out that Witt's open, self-effacing look is mostly directed at *us*. This, then, is the standout 'coupling' that *The Thin Red Line* enacts – one that defies the assumed separation of film and viewer, and which Bersani & Dutoit loads with transformational potential. For this particular coupling, as they see it, spurs us to collaborate with and form part of Witt's look: the film summons us to both the world that Witt so openly receives, and at the same time to reciprocate that receptivity as our own mode of connection to the world. Clearly, the 'new relational ethic' that Bersani & Dutoit attributes to the *The Thin Red Line* is an ethic of transformation. Owing to Witt as ethical model and instigator, the film petitions an exercise in self-transformation whereby we as viewers may solidify our own connectedness to the world. As Witt divests himself of individual selfhood – as an act of connection to the world – we, presumably, are prompted to do the same.

That Bersani & Dutoit posits a transformational ethics of film aimed at the main *value* of connectedness is easy enough to see. Their implied *mode* of transformation, however, is harder to settle. To say that they pose a mode of contemplation may well be seen as going against the whole idea of undoing individual subjectivity. Yet, more than once, they do suggest the mode of *contemplative endurance* that



has come up throughout this chapter, particularly in my appraisal of Sinnerbrink and Frampton. Bersani & Dutoit, for example, notes the need for a film viewer's assumption of individuality to be jolted out of place.<sup>206</sup> The seventh art, which thrives on the film star, at least in the classical era, they see as especially conducive to our accepting the existence and priority of individuality. For this reason, "the film-maker must somehow *traumatise* our perception [...] *shock* our visual habits, and in so doing at least begin to train us to look" (ibid.:8 [emphasis added]). Such a 'traumatized perception', they explain, both shatters the security of individual selfhood and makes evident the dispersed self's "limitless extensibility in both space and time" (ibid.:9).<sup>207</sup> However, to touch on another recurring theme, this transformation cannot occur without willing and prepared viewers. The contemplative endurance thus requires some preparatory 'effort' and 'work of spectatorship' on our part: "It involves, first of all, *allowing ourselves* to be transferred from one mode of vision to another, to be jolted out of our ingrained habits of cinematic viewing" (ibid.:8 [emphasis added]).

Naturally, also, any 'Lose Your Self' ethic – having the general aim of giving up individual selfhood or subjectivity – is by definition framed in terms of the mode of *asceticism*. Normally the ascetic gives up certain things for self-transformation. Here, however, the condition for achieving a transformed connectedness with the world is to give up and give over the *entire* individual self. This self-surrender in Bersani & Dutoit's vocabulary is a 'lessening', 'withdrawal', or 'retreat' (ibid.: 5–6, 8). They moreover speak of making the self 'superfluous', with an 'active passivity' that multiplies your being within the world – because, at bottom, "[l]essness is the condition of allness" (ibid.: 165).

However, in terms of the transformational ethics of film that Bersani & Dutoit proposes here, it is not so clear where the main initiative for the viewer's ascetic mode of 'lessening' springs from. Once more, we touch on the issue of preparatory ethics: is it the film that, at least initially, elicits a lessening of the viewer-self? Or is the supposed effect of the film merely incidental to the preparatory self-work of the viewer? They do suggest that artefacts by their very nature induce a lessening of the subject. For instance, they note that "artful ascesis is the precondition for a lessness that allows us to reoccur, differently, everywhere" (ibid.: 9). In addition, their notion of the 'aesthetic subject' – which presumably emerges from the spectator engagement with art – marks by definition a 'retreat' or 'withdrawal' from any fixed subjecthood (ibid.:6,9). Yet, in the same breath, they uphold the mentioned 'work of spectatorship' that is required for lessening the subject. They also call this work a 'relational discipline' whereby spectators must open themselves up (ibid.:177). This preparatory work of the viewer is by far the more explicit precondition that Bersani & Dutoit sets. Indeed, they make it clear that the 'precondition' for private Witt's unreserved connectedness to the world – which prefigures and initiates also the *viewer's* connectedness to the world

206 At a later point in the book, Bersani & Dutoit (2004:170) speaks of individuality as a downright illusion.

207 They speak of such traumatized perception with specific reference to Jean-Luc Godard's *Oh, Woe Is Me* (1993) and the sudden visual displacements of characters that Godard achieves through jarring montage.

through film – is for him to be 'subject divested of subjectivity' (ibid.:164). In the viewer's case, it may be that the film can help the process along. Yet, ultimately, it seems to be the viewer's responsibility to *initiate* the condition of self-lessening upon which Bersani & Dutoit predicates their ethics of connectedness.

### Prepare to Lose Your Self: The Deleuzian Model Viewer

To cap this discussion, it is worthwhile to briefly consider the kind of viewer that a 'Lose Your Self' ethics envisions – especially in light of the Deleuzian paradigm that it so strongly relies upon. To this end, I find particularly illuminating Richard Rushton's propositions on Deleuzian spectatorship (2008; 2009). Rushton points out the lack of any explicit conception of the film viewer in Deleuze's writings, and undertakes to flesh out such a conception – the result of which usefully captures what the 'Lose Your Self' ethics generally implies for the viewer.

Rushton's central claim is a provocative one with respect to Screen Theory's traditional championing of the active and engaged spectator: he argues that the Deleuzian spectator eschews activity (2009: 46–48). In other words, the Deleuzian spectator excels at a certain *passivity* (which, of course, is the *one* p-word that sets political alarm bells ringing among Screen theorists). By passivity, Rushton means a relinquishing of our control or mastery over films, "that we lose control of ourselves, undo ourselves, forget ourselves while in front of the cinema screen" (2009:53). Simply put, the cinema experience should *happen to* the subject, and not be *caused by* the subject (see Rushton, 2008:130). Note, however, that Rushton primarily speaks of this passivity as an ideal to be attained. It is not the given condition of the viewer; passivity is ultimately a 'challenge' that Deleuze throws down to us (2009:53). Obviously, the idea of striving after passivity risks being a contradiction in terms. But Rushton probably has in mind what Martin Seel (2016) describes in another context as the viewer's 'active passivity'. Drawing on Theodor Adorno, Seel commends active passivity as giving oneself over to the play of powers of an artwork at hand. Active passivity essentially means to let oneself be determined (cf. Seel, 2006). In the context of the cinema experience, it means for viewers to "actively determine themselves in giving themselves over to a passive state of being determined" (Seel, 2016). This measure on the part of the viewer allows films to unfold their own processual nature, in a manner that draws the viewer into this process.

Rushton further elaborates on this ideal passive spectatorship in terms of immersion versus absorption – or, at least, in terms of what he understands by the two notions.<sup>208</sup> When a viewer's relationship to film is one of immersion, he says, then the film comes out towards *me*. In other words, the film enters *my* space, *my* perception, *my* body, even. An active self is the controlling central point around which immersion unfolds. Absorption is a reversal of this arrangement. In

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208 Rushton connects his notion of absorption to art historian Michael Fried's use of the concept. He also adds that his understanding of immersion is roughly the same as what Fried labels 'theatricality' in art history (2009:51–51).

absorption, Rushton explains, it is not the film that comes out to the spectator, but the spectator that goes into the film. To be absorbed is to be drawn into the world of the film, which gives the sensation of bodily occupying the space of another world, and even that of another being. Absorption necessitates a passive self that relinquishes control.

Rushton argues that absorption, thus conceived, is the more fruitful path for understanding Deleuzian spectatorship. It is not difficult to see why. His carefully devised distinction between immersion and absorption is really shorthand for a relationship to film that that is either subject-*affirming* or subject-*negating*. Immersion for Rushton only reinforces subjectivity and identity – it reaches out to me on *my* terms and thus “offers only the option of remaining firmly within the bounds of one’s own selfhood” (Rushton, 2009:51). Its affirmation of the subject makes immersion more suitable to the ethics of self-concentration covered in the first half of this chapter. Rushton’s notion of absorption, in contrast, is tailor-made for an ethics of self-expansion, and none more so than ‘Lose Your Self’ with its aim of negating individual subjectivity. Absorption takes you where you are not, and lets you become someone – or, more exactly, *something* – that you are not.

“What absorption encourages in the beholder is a sensation that one is no longer oneself, that one has lost one’s selfhood in order to become something other, that one has lost the coordinates by which one’s subjectivity can be defined in order to occupy a position that is in some sense objective rather than subjective [...]” (Rushton, 2009: 50–51)

Remember that Rushton describes absorption as part of the Deleuzian ideal for spectatorship, thus suggesting that it is the viewer’s responsibility to ensure it. So what must the viewer do to be absorbed in film to the degree of a loss of selfhood? Rushton’s answer – the answer echoed by all advocates of ‘Lose Your Self’ – is be passive; surrender; give yourself over to the film. Yet for the viewer to attain that passivity requires work of the self on itself, a measure of self-transformation, which once more raises the topic of preparatory ethics.

As in most cases of preparatory ethics, we shall see in a moment, the prepared Deleuzian viewer must practice self-transformation in the mode of *asceticism*; to be suitably passive entails giving up things. The act of giving up constitutes the unavoidable activity inherent to the passivity that ‘Lose Your Self’ requires from viewers. As a means to passivity, the viewer must actively give up control, mastery, even activity itself. In Seel’s terms, the domain of transformation in this instance is self-determination as such: you let yourself be determined by giving up – surrendering to film – your own determination of self. Only then “will we be able to loosen the shackles of our existing subjectivities and open ourselves up to other ways of experiencing and knowing” (ibid.: 53).

True to form, then, the potential for contradiction in ‘Lose Your Self’ only grows when we consider its preparatory dimension. In keeping with its implied viewer,

the ethic in effect states that you can only realize ‘Lose Your Self’ (through film) based on a preparatory measure by which you already lose your self (to film). (I respond to this sort of circularity stemming from preparatory ethics in the concluding section below.) On top of that, the mere preparatory measure to lose the self – that is, to make oneself appropriately passive, determined, and absorbed – can only occur by exerting that active, determining self which the viewer is meant to put out of play.

### ***Intermezzo:***

#### **On Stanley Cavell & Some Stickers that ‘Could’**

My analysis here would be far from complete without a consideration of what Stanley Cavell brings to this ethical party. Yet what hope can one have to assign a single bumper sticker to an (*in*)famously *indirect* philosopher who, according to one recent assessment, “won’t get to the point”, and apparently has good reasons for not doing so (see Jackson, 2015). I can therefore only take a leaf out of Cavell’s book: to not get to the point, but to take the scenic route along some contender-stickers that *could* fill the bumper, even if only to conclude that perhaps it is a bumper better left blank.

#### **From ‘Overcome Yourself’ to ‘Connect Yourself’: The Moving Image of Skepticism**

Our guiding question is straightforward enough: in what ways can we picture self-transformation through film from the perspective of Cavell’s film-philosophy? Granted – Cavell’s ‘film-philosophy’, as such, entails various things. So let us set off from the earliest and most familiar Cavellian contention in this regard: that the philosophical value of film consists in how it addresses the philosophical problem of skepticism – encapsulated by Cavell’s famous description of film as a “moving image of skepticism” (1979: 188), which I examined in Chapter 1.

The transformational potential of this moment in Cavell’s thinking can no doubt be elaborated upon along the lines of a ‘Know Yourself’ ethic.<sup>209</sup> In Cavell’s version

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209 Naturally, Cavell’s interest in self-transformation of the ‘Know Yourself’ kind reaches far beyond his work on film. See, for example, Andrew Norris (2017: 15–48) on the way Cavell construes ordinary language philosophy as a practical act of self-examination. In short, the ordinary language philosopher’s review of ‘what we say when’ is a technique for gaining self-knowledge of the unacknowledged commitments we make in speaking (*ibid.*: 38; cf. Rothman & Keane, 2000: 18). The self-knowledge with which Cavell credits ordinary language philosophy is in fact equally reminiscent of ‘Remind Yourself’, visited earlier in this chapter with reference to Noël Carroll. As Norris puts it: “The ordinary language philosopher, like Socrates, does not give us new information [...] but, in questioning and commenting upon our rehearsals of what we do, reminds us of what we already know (how we speak) and in so doing changes our relation to what we know and do” (*ibid.*). And to add another twist: when Carroll puts his own ‘Remind Yourself’ cards on the table with his account of film-philosophy, it is Cavell (along with Wittgenstein) whom he invokes as his final reinforcement – noting that “Stanley Cavell finds movies exemplary in their capacity to dramatize what is in front of our eyes and thereby to rediscover the philosophical insights we already know, but may not acknowledge” (Carroll, 2013: 169). So in addition to the many bumper stickers that I already attach to him,

of ‘Know Yourself’, film-viewing initiates a contemplative mode by which we encounter – not hidden assumptions in our thinking about this or that, but – our *condition of subjectivity* as such. Here the value of *self-knowledge*, or *awareness*, concerns knowledge of our own subjectivity. In particular, we encounter in this self-reflective process our distinctly modern experience of subjective *isolation* from the world. For cinema’s screening of the world expresses – dramatizes, even – our being screened off from the world by subjectivity itself. Subjectivity is the only ‘screen’ present to our isolated selves; it is interposed between us and the ‘presentness’ of the world, and we experience it just like the cinema screen (Cavell, 1979: 22–24; see also Bauer, 2005; 2012). From the very conditions of cinema, therefore, we get insight into our “human distance from the world” (Cavell, 2005a: 116). This challenging self-insight William Rothman and Marian Keane summarize as follows:

“Movies awaken us to the world’s reality and thereby awaken us to the reality of our unnatural condition, a condition in which we have become displaced, have come to displace ourselves, from our natural habitation within the world” (2000: 180).

Indeed, movies awaken us to the *world’s* reality too. The flipside of Cavell’s moving image of skepticism, let us not forget, is that at the same time it promises respite from our (self-inflicted?<sup>210</sup>) subjective isolation and distance from the world. The transformational ethics implied by this side of Cavell’s argument can be elaborated upon under a number of slogans. A noticeable candidate is ‘Overcome Yourself’. (For good measure, we could also throw in ‘Reach Outside Yourself’, in a quite literal sense – as if to ‘Escape Yourself’?<sup>211</sup>) As much as cinema expresses the problem of skepticism, Cavell suggests, it simultaneously beckons towards the possibility of its overcoming. That possibility resides, as detailed before, in the automatism of photography. Photography reproduces and presents the world mechanically, without any intervention of a human subject. By screening the world, therefore, cinema makes the world *present* to the viewer in a way that ‘bypasses’ subjectivity, as it were, and so breaches our subjective isolation from the world (see Cavell, 1979: 23). Yet to brand all of this as an ‘Overcome Yourself’, I have to admit, is an overstatement of Cavell’s position. (Bumper stickers revel in the hyperbolic.) The only transformation that this ethic can reasonably foresee is that the viewer stands to gain a sense of the world’s ‘presentness’.<sup>212</sup> And that outcome is but a spit in the

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Cavell also seems to be a silent partner in ‘Remind Yourself’ as I have analyzed it.

210 Rothman & Keane (2000: 64) notes that, for Cavell, our distancing from the world is as much as a mythical event (“like the Biblical fall from grace”) as it is a historical event springing from the Protestant Reformation, Shakespearean theatre, and the rise of modern philosophy.

211 Here I am thinking of Cavell’s reference to “the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to *escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation* – a wish for the power to *reach this world*” (1979: 21 [emphasis added]).

212 Cavell’s notion of presentness, which he adopts from Michael Fried, is not to be confused with the common transformational value of ‘being in the present’ in a strictly temporal sense. Nor, as Rothman & Keane

sea compared to a complete escape from our subjective isolation. The satisfaction of this metaphysical wish, Cavell seems to say, is something that cinema can point towards, but never actually can reach.

It is worth noting how this apparent impasse has recently been navigated by a flourish of commentary on Cavell's moving image of skepticism (e.g. Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 102–108; 2016a: 28–32; Kelley, 2012; Abbott, 2013; Trahair, 2014). A rough consensus reads that, though you cannot truly 'Overcome Yourself' or 'Escape Yourself', cinema's breaching of our subjective isolation does warrant a more modest attempt to 'Connect Yourself'. This iteration, however, demands a more nuanced understanding of how cinema addresses the problem of skepticism: that is, rather than 'solve' the problem of our subjective isolation, cinema *re-orientates* our relation to it (Abbott, 2013: 171). Or: rather than let us 'get out of' skepticism, cinema lets us 'get over' it (Sinnerbrink, 2016a: 32). By, in effect, exacerbating the experience of our skeptical condition (as per Cavell's 'Know Yourself' moment above), cinema encourages us to forego the obscuring desire for certainty of knowledge, to instead *acknowledge* that which is nevertheless right in front of us.<sup>213</sup> In this position, we cannot but acknowledge our subjective finitude. Yet, understood as our finitude in relation to the world, we precisely acknowledge that we have some sort of existent(ial) relation with the world. This is the claim made on us by cinema's screening of the world: that the world is made present to us, at least, in spite of our finitude, no matter how incomplete or fleeting. Almost paradoxically, then, it is by enlisting acknowledgement of our subjective isolation – hence by a change of epistemological attitude – that cinema leads us to "experience reconnection to the world, a connection we feel has been severed in modernity" (Abbott, 2013: 171; see also Rodowick, n.d.: 3). Note, however, that this transformation into a connection with the world is not of the subject-negating kind sought by 'Lose Your Self'. It is indeed a (subjective) *sense* or *experience* of connectedness. Though Cavell affirms a motive of Nature (by insisting on cinema's present-making of the world), he does not do so at the expense of an equal motive of Subjectivity (cinema, after all, makes the world present to *me* as subject).<sup>214</sup> In keeping with this dual-affirmation, then, acknowledgement fosters a connectedness with the world – construed by commentators also as a

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(2000:64) cautions, is it synonymous with the philosophical concept of 'presence' associated, typically, with Jacques Derrida's deconstructive critiques. They insist that Cavell attaches no special or technical meaning to 'presentness' at all. For him it is as ordinary a noun as 'whiteness' or 'blackness'. It refers to the same, everyday quality we refer to when we speak of someone or something *as* present.

213 Richard Eldridge (2005) eloquently sums up Cavell's notion of acknowledgement as "the taking up, articulating, and registering of what in our experience calls for various routes of feeling and interest that we are also inclined to suppress". This may range from the acknowledgement of the pain of another, to acknowledging our own finitude.

214 Compare Rothman & Keane's observations that "our wish to escape subjectivity cannot be separated from our wish to achieve selfhood" (2002: 65), since the wish for presentness is "to reach this world *and* attain selfhood" (ibid.: 90 [emphasis added]).

conviction, belief, or trust in the world<sup>215</sup> – while thoroughly recognizing our ongoing separateness from it (see Trahair, 2014: 142–145).

In sum: by bringing our skeptical condition to the fore, cinema compels viewers to respond with a transformation of self that fundamentally reorients that condition. It is therefore the type of event (to link it to a different context) “in which a *crisis* forces an examination of one’s life that calls for a transformation or reorienting of it” (Cavell, 2004: 11 [emphasis added]). What this link shows, however, is that the moving image of skepticism has been moving within an ethical province all along. In *Cities of Words* (2004), Cavell calls that province ‘moral perfectionism’.

### **Not ‘Perfect Yourself’, but ‘Become Yourself’: Emersonian Perfectionism**

In view of our guiding question, there are certainly much more direct ways of getting to the theme of film and self-transformation in Cavell’s thinking than going via the ethics of the moving image of skepticism. Like his overall philosophical enterprise, the best share of Cavell’s philosophy of film has explicitly ethical questions at its forefront. And at the forefront of those questions is Cavell’s abiding interest in moral (Emersonian) perfectionism – which, of course, is nothing other than an interest in personal transformation.

A promising route map through this winding ethical terrain in Cavell’s thought is his essay, enticingly titled “The Good of Film” (2005b). As I explained at the outset, this chapter is about how philosophers concerned with film-philosophy answer the question of ‘the good’ of film. And here – finally – we have one philosopher who actually devotes an essay to this exact topic. Yet what at first glance looks like a definitive statement on the ethical value of film quickly becomes a trademark detour. Contrary to his title, Cavell goes into what he takes to be ‘good films’ (ibid.: 334–336). Not that one could hope to accuse him of dodging an essay title of his own choosing. Rather, opting for his usual indirect course, Cavell in this case narrows down the question – from ‘the good of film’ to ‘the good of *good films*’ – thereby making a very long story, if not short, at least somewhat more manageable.

So what are ‘good films’, according to Cavell? I pick up three criteria worth noting. Firstly, he says, good films have the “capacity to sustain and reward criticism” (ibid.: 335). This is a capacity sometimes realized by the most popular of films and genres, yet this may remain unacknowledged by viewers taking these films for granted.

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215 See, for example, Schmerheim (2013b), Früchtel (2017), and Sinnerbrink (2011a: 90–91). As these authors point out, Gilles Deleuze advances a claim similar to ‘Connect Yourself’ by suggesting that cinema gives us reasons ‘to believe in this world’ (e.g. Deleuze, 1989: 171–172). What makes this pairing of Deleuze with Cavell awkward, however, is that Deleuze rejects – on ontological grounds – the assumption of an individual subject who is separated from the world. This leads me to conclude that by ‘belief in this world’ Deleuze has something very different in mind. One possibility, as Ronald Bogue (2007: 11) submits, is that that ‘belief in this world’ for Deleuze is an anticipation of the production of the *new* – which would mean that the notion fits far more comfortably with ‘Blow Your Mind’, or ‘Lose Yourself’, that it does with Cavell’s ‘Connect Yourself’.

Secondly, he mentions that all films of great interest, intelligence, and passion feature a common sort of crisis: “a crisis is precipitated in the name of demanding a new beginning, another chance” (ibid.: 345). And, finally, presupposing the first two criteria, and the clincher for Cavell: a large class of good films bears an affinity with a “particular conception of the good” – a conception which we find in moral perfectionism, and specifically the strand of perfectionism that Cavell deems “Emersonian”, after Ralph Waldo Emerson (Cavell, 2005b; see also 1990; 2003). Although a host of films satisfy this final, crowning criterion (indeed, an aim of Cavell’s essay is to consider how certain recent film trends measure up to his idea of ‘good films’<sup>216</sup>), Cavell finds its quintessence in the Hollywood “remarriage comedy” (ibid.: 337–338; see also Cavell, 1981).<sup>217</sup> Citing films such as *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), and *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), Cavell in fact credits the subgenre for effectively spurring his personal interest in perfectionism. The only other genre that piques Cavell’s perfectionist interests to the same degree, mentioned but not examined in this particular essay, is melodramas of the unknown woman, which he calls a “comedic cousin” of remarriage comedies (ibid.: 337; see Cavell, 1996). In these minor subgenres, curiously enough then, lies the major intersection between the themes of film and self-transformation in Cavell: that *good* films, like the remarriage comedies that Cavell so cherishes, are films that busy themselves with moral perfectionism. In my own analytical terms: these films ostensibly express and examine the human motive of personal transformation.

Evidently, what Cavell generally means by ‘moral perfectionism’ and what I call ‘transformational ethics’ roughly carves out the same ethical space. Transformational ethics, no less than perfectionism, “has something to do”, as Cavell puts it, with being true to oneself, caring for the self, moreover, a dissatisfaction with the self as it currently stands, and therefore with a progress of self-cultivation too (2005b: 336). Similarly, where I have emphasized that transformational ethics find its kernel in the self’s relationship to itself, Cavell bases moral perfectionism on a conception of a “divided self”, an “insistent split in the self”, without which a better future self cannot be envisaged and pursued (Cavell, 2004: 2,5; cf. Hadot, 2002: 190; Davidson, 1986: 228).

Key to Cavell’s treatment of moral perfectionism in the terms of the classical remarriage comedy, therefore, is the stress in these films on “becoming, or being

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216 Cavell notes the then-emergent trend of films – of which *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* also feature in this thesis – that concern a “quest for transcendence”, which is not so much about becoming another person than it is about “being recognized as the one you are by having, or giving, access to another world” (2005b: 344). His conjecture is that this trend of films ultimately relate to “film’s affinity for the transcendental moment that has not come out”, which is the theme of the “transcendental ordinary” (ibid.: 346–347). By drawing this connection, presumably, Cavell admits these films into the esteemed category that he reserves for remarriage comedies, seeing that remarriage comedies typically also feature an extraordinary ordinary place (Connecticut, often) where the strained couple finds perspective and resolution.

217 Since Cavell coined the term in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) ‘the comedy of remarriage’ has acquired the status of a recognized subgenre.



changed into, a certain sort of person” – a process prompted by a marriage in crisis, and carried out by means of recurrent passages of conversation between the couples concerned (2005b: 338). Notable about these typically exquisite conversations, says Cavell, is that they entertain very little of what one would regard to be standard moral reasoning. (Namely, talking about moral duty, or ends justifying means, *à la* Kantianism and Utilitarianism.) “The issues the principal pair in these films confront each other with are formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, what it would be best or right for them to do, than by the question of how they shall live their lives, what kind of persons they aspire to be” (Cavell, 2004: 11). Not that such perfectionist concerns are in competition with the familiar goals of either Kantian or Utilitarian moral reasoning; if anything, moral perfectionism assumes it has a place – sometimes preparatory, sometimes supplementary – in both (Cavell, 2005b: 339). Much as I have argued that self-transformation is an inescapable aspect of morality (see Chapter 2, Section 3), Cavell deems moral perfectionism “not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life”, one “that spans the course of Western thought” (1990: 2). Cavell thus suggests that there is something inevitable about moral perfectionism; that it will always show up in moral reasoning – or films – of any sort.

However, as the essay is at pains to show, Cavell’s fascination with the moral perfectionism that emerges in remarriage comedy is a moral perfectionism of a very specific breed. Whereas classical perfectionism as expressed in Plato’s *Republic* would read ‘Perfect Yourself’, the outlook that Cavell reclaims from Emerson’s writing is of a perfectionism without perfection – motivated, if anything, by a wariness of our finitude, a sense that will always render perfection remote and irrelevant (see Norris, 2017: 217). To distinguish this type of moral perfectionism, Cavell first and foremost invokes the Romantics who spoke of self-transformation as “becoming who you are” (2005b: 336). Hence, considering its opposition to ‘Perfect Yourself’, let us name Cavell’s Emerson-inspired outlook on personal transformation, ‘Become Yourself’.

How are we to profile ‘Become Yourself’ as a transformational ethic, seeing that it is only ‘yourself’ that you aspire to be? Cavell explains:

“The decisive difference of Emerson’s outlook from that in Plato’s *Republic* is that the soul’s journey to itself is not pictured as a continuous path directed upward to a known point of completion but rather as a zigzag of discontinuous steps following the lead of what Emerson calls my ‘*unattained but attainable self*’ (as if there is a sage in each of us), an idea that projects no unique point of arrival but only a willingness for change, directed by *specific aspirations* that, while rejected, may at unpredictable times return with new power” (2005b: 337 [emphasis added]).

The transformed self, according to Emersonian perfectionism, is never completed; it remains a self-underway. Locked in pursuit of an ever-retreating unattained-but-attainable-self, 'Become Yourself' seeks neither a final nor a fixed state, nor any particular state (see Norris, 2017: 215). Though many would want to call this outlook non-teleological (e.g. Rodowick, n.d.: 4; Sinnerbrink, 2016a: 32), I am inclined to think that 'Become Yourself' still has a transformational telos or aim, only that that it is an inherently open-ended one. The 'point of arrival' aimed for is in itself a state of ongoing *becoming*, of a willingness for *change*. (In this respect 'Become Yourself' – certainly in light of what emerged in this chapter – is not unique. Many transformational ethics, notably when they dismiss the mystical or dualist kind of the ontological assumptions one finds in a Plato, are just as set "against any idea of ultimate perfection" (Cavell, 2004: 3). For all such ethics, self-transformation is effectively the work of ensuring and maintaining one's endless change.)

Yet while the cited passage poses the broad, open-ended transformational values of becoming, and (a willingness to) change, Cavell does admit this continuous becoming to be directed by further "specific ambitions". With these ambitions, 'Become Yourself' declares a set of more immediate transformational values. These values usher our continuous becoming into definite directions, and thus fix a number of touchstones for what becoming *yourself*, then, would in fact mean.

The value of *singularity* is one such touchstone in the essay under discussion. Cavell refers to it as "that without which one cannot become the one one is" (2005b: 344). Hence, in light of this guiding aim, 'Become Yourself' is a matter of one becoming more *singular*, *individual*, or *authentic* (in contrast to conformity, as denounced by Emerson). For Cavell, this is a transformational value with intrinsic democratic promise, distancing 'Become Yourself' from the traditionally elitist manifestations of perfectionism. "In being universally distributed", he says, singularity "is the signal negation of elitism", even if it is "for the most part buried in distraction and conformity" (ibid.). Unlike transformational aims such as wisdom or perfection, that is, the potential for singularity is in everyone's purview – hence, he calls it "the sage in each of us" (ibid.). And this is what so much enthuses Cavell about the (equally democratic) medium of film: film presents a laboratory that can call into question the elitism of perfectionism. For this laboratory demonstrates how the perfectionist call to singularity, in this instance (which is inevitably also a call to its correlate, self-knowledge), stems from the sort of "undramatic, repetitive, daily confrontations [...] with respect to the reality, the separateness, of another" that remarriage comedies are so apt at calling attention to (ibid.: 340).<sup>218</sup> In these films, 'Become Yourself' dictates, transformation is not the attainment of exclusive sophistication or prominence or transcendence. It is rather a matter of recovering our singular selves from the ordinary everyday – where it sits in plain view, and within anybody's reach.

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<sup>218</sup> Cavell views these daily confrontations as everyday manifestations of skepticism, which may be encountered "in our slights of one another, in an unexpressed or disguised meanness of thought, in a hardness of glance, a willful misconstrual, a shading of loyalty, a dismissal of intention, a casual indiscriminateness of praise or blame", or any other sign of our separateness from one another (2005b: 340).

Another touchstone for ‘Become Yourself’ that the essay raises is “the demand to make ourselves, and to become, intelligible to one another” (2005b: 339). From the perspective of this aspiration, to become yourself is to make yourself intelligible – as much to yourself as to the other. It is thus a call to give account of yourself, to provide reasons for your conduct, and a justification for your life; all of which is to give an account of your moral standing with the other (see Cavell, 2004: 24–26, 42). Stated in terms of transformational values, we here have different permutations of the basic value of *knowledge*. As a call to make ourselves intelligible, ‘Become Yourself’ is about accruing *self-knowledge* (making oneself intelligible to oneself). Such knowledge of oneself – of the motivations, attractions, aversions that precede and inform one’s moral reasoning – invariably stands in need of “the perception of a friend” (ibid.: 42). On the other hand, this self-knowledge in ‘Become Yourself’ corresponds to also becoming increasingly *knowable* (making oneself intelligible to others). That is, by giving account of yourself in a growing acknowledgement of the other, you increasingly become ‘yourself’ to the other. This becoming-known to one another Cavell considers foundational to social consent, the possibility of community, and a shared life in pursuit of happiness.

The demand to make ourselves intelligible at the same time foregrounds the *mode* of transformation most vital to ‘Become Yourself’. Even though acts of making oneself intelligible obviously call upon the mode of contemplation, Cavell’s version of perfectionism ultimately anchors these acts within the mode that I distinguish as *ministering* – self-transformation realized through either ministering to, or being ministered to by, another. In Cavell’s case, the emphasis lies on the latter. He underlines that moral perfectionism is essentially concerned with “the responsiveness to and examination of one soul by another” (2005b: 339). Indispensable to Cavell’s outlook on self-transformation, therefore, is the inevitable intervention of the Friend (who Cavell insists is an equal, not a guru-esque mentor) who guides the progress of ‘Become Yourself’ through everyday instances of confrontation and conversation (2005b: 336; 2004: 27). In light of the particular importance that Cavell attaches to (conversion through) conversation, the role of the Friend, in more concrete terms, is to initiate the classical transformational technique of *dialogue* as a means to (mutual) self-change (see Hadot, 1995: 89–93). Of course, our embarking on this transformational exchange of words is almost never a preconceived project, but something that develops, can develop, from a relationship that is a necessary given. ‘Become Yourself’ only becomes intentional self-transformation as a response to – or better, an acknowledgement of – the unavoidable moral claim that the Friend *will* make on you. Elsewhere, Cavell notes that though any moral outlook will attach significance to friendship, only perfectionism “places so absolute a value on this relationship” (2004: 27). And it is ultimately the presence of a demanding form of friendship – that with the marriage partner – that establishes Cavell’s remarriage comedy as such a captivating study of how to ‘Become Yourself’.

## Open-Ended Ends

By the end of Cavell's "The Good of Film" essay, however, I find myself still suspended on the edge of my seat in unfulfilled anticipation of what its title had promised. In proposing to speak about 'the good of *good films*' (such as remarriage comedies) Cavell went on to say much about 'the good' *in* those good films (namely, their affinity with the 'Become Yourself'-type of conception of the good, as prescribed by Emersonian perfectionism). But, at the end of the day, he has said surprisingly little about 'the good' that these films may be *for* – to *us*. That Cavell is leaving this question hanging is no doubt something that he is fully aware of. In his closing paragraph he indeed proposes to formulate "some initial answer" to the question of the good of "that species of film" that he distinguishes as remarriage comedy (2005b: 347–348). Yet there, again, he only goes on to note what he takes to be an important perfectionist issue raised by these films (in this instance: the ethico-political significance of the remarriage comedy's affirmation of the ordinary, and acceptance of compromise with respect to the pursuit of happiness); and then he ends, cryptically, with the observation that the lingering influence of remarriage comedy on recent films is "worth stopping over" (ibid.: 248).<sup>219</sup>

What I would have loved to hear more of from Cavell is not the perfectionism that these films thematize for our sake, but the potential perfectionism that the films inspire, evoke, even demand, from us, their viewers. There can be little doubt, as the French Cavell-expert Sandra Laugier (2018: 143–144) sums up, that Cavell finds in popular culture the same capacity for pedagogy and self-transformation ('education for grownups') that he attributes to philosophy; and that he sees 'good films' as providing viewers with moral resources for working through their own sentiments and situations. So surely in his essay, then, Cavell is gesturing us towards the thought that the same conception of the good *in* good films – their preoccupation with personal transformation of an Emersonian kind – marks also the good *of* good films, their ethical value to us. That is to say, in the process of busying themselves with 'Become Yourself', Cavell's good films inevitably appeal to their viewers to 'Become Yourself' too. Yet why not say it outright? This, I believe, would be much too didactic for Cavell's particular pedagogical ambitions. To leave the question hanging, thereby inviting his reader to answer it, is precisely to enact the perfectionist claims that he is trying to drive home.

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219 I quote the closing passage of Cavell's essay in full:

"The lives of remarriage couples, among the films of lives seeking the existence of the transcendental, arrive at a moment in which they have to reaffirm their marriages by taking them intact back into participation in the ordinary world, and attest their faith, or perception, that they consent to their society as one in which a moral life of mutual care is pursuable, and worth the show of happiness sufficient to encourage others to take their lives further, as if happiness in a democracy is a political emotion, and a pair can undertake to represent a general future. The *Republic* asks whether the life of injustice can be happy. Remarriage comedy asks whether the life of good enough justice, of compromise, can be happy enough. That remarriage comedy is still invoked on film, if not exactly continued, is, so I have been suggesting, worth stopping over" (2005b: 348).

With the exemplar of the remarriage comedy still in mind, the invitation at hand is thus to consider how the kind of self-transformation that transpires *between remarriage couples on-screen* may be echoed by *the viewer's exchange with the remarriage comedy screened*. This is 'Become Yourself' construed as a transformational ethic of film, which effectively gives us Cavell's perfectionist vision of the cinemakeover. Most striking in this vision is that film (the remarriage comedy as 'good film') now steps into that crucial role of 'the Friend', who initiates for the viewer a transformational mode of ministering through its own forms of confrontation and conversation. For instance, insofar as remarriage couples find between them occasions of "making themselves incomprehensible to others" (Cavell, 2005b: 334), it seems that they can confront the viewer with the same everyday crises of skepticism, of separation of the other, that they confront one another with on-screen. One could go as far as saying that the remarriage couple comprises 'a Friend' who reaches beyond the screen to form a 'couple' with the viewer. And, as part of *this* couple, the viewer can just as much expect "the responsiveness to and examination of one soul by another" (ibid.: 339). With the confrontations that they present to one another, and to the viewer, the remarriage couple thus invites the viewer into a transformational dialogue not unlike their own, despite the fact that this particular 'Friend' cannot exactly reciprocate the moral demands that it puts on the viewer. (Cavell's moving image of skepticism reminds us here that although the screened couple is made present to us, and therefore may make certain claims on us, we remain absent to them.) Even if not an occasion to make ourselves intelligible to this particular 'other', then, the remarriage comedy as Friend may at least call us to self-knowledge. It turns us inward to our own unattained-but-attainable-selves by means of conversations that it stages and, thereby, elicits. This purpose of remarriage comedy, according to 'Become Yourself', is rather like Cavell happens to describe the effect of reading an Emerson essay: seeing that the remarriage comedy is just as much a "conversational text", it too provides "an exercise in coming to oneself" (2005b: 337).

In the end, however, this vision of the cinemakeover depends on whether we as viewers can *acknowledge* a remarriage comedy as 'Friend', urging us to 'Become Yourself'. Recall Cavell's observation that many 'good films' remain unacknowledged only because we are so familiar with them. In the event of such a failure of acknowledgement, the call to 'Become Yourself' – though it can be accepted or refused – is one that we are unaware of altogether.

So perhaps the true 'Friend' in this scenario is Stanley Cavell, who, like his hero Emerson, writes so as to guide his readers to acknowledgement – of good films, in this case, and, by implication, the good that they hold for us. I do not believe Cavell is out to win praise for this, much less devout reader-disciples. I would say (and I assume he would) that with his writing he is simply taking up the conversation that good films extend to him – by virtue of their capacity to sustain and reward his criticism. If anything, his writing as an act of conversation stems from his readiness to be a reader himself, whether a reader of other philosophers or a 'reader' of Hollywood films. Cavell conceives of philosophy as "a kind of reading", by which he has in mind "a kind of responsiveness" (2012: 32). "Philosophy's first

virtue”, for Cavell, “is responsiveness, and it is in reading and responding to the works of those who have come before us, and doing so together, that we learn who we are and how to become who we are” (Cavell quoted in Norris, 2017: 7) .

In Cavell’s writing – which is writing as response, an extension of how he reads – we therefore have the clearest instance in this chapter of a film philosopher who performs, right before our eyes, his personal attempts at transformation.<sup>220</sup> What Cavell’s writing most immediately testifies to is his embrace of *writing as a technique* of self-transformation. Cavell’s writing is his act of practicing responsiveness. To read his writings on films is to be at the very site of him cultivating, honing, his own responsiveness to them, in a continual search for ways-with-words that might do justice to the experiences and insights that they afford (see Sinnerbrink, 2014a). Considered from another angle, as he explains in an interview with James Conant (1989: 58–61): Cavell finds in the concrete practice of written prose a means to foster the *conviction* that formal argument and poetic persuasion cannot provide. In light of everything considered up to this point, it would not be unreasonable to translate him as saying here that writing offers him a means to foster *acknowledgement* – especially, acknowledgement of the ministering that good films, as conversational Friends, afford him in his personal efforts to ‘Become Himself’.

Yet the perfectionist self-work that Cavell performs *before* us, he surely also intends to be *for* us. By that identical technique of writing, prompted by the ministering of film as Friend, Cavell in turn becomes a Friend offering transformational ministering to his readers. After all, much like remarriage comedies, “Cavell’s texts, many of which revolve around and end with questions, consistently seek to enact and elicit a *conversation*” (Norris, 2017: 6 [emphasis added]). Certainly, Cavell will hope that for his reader there is self-becoming to be gained from conversing with him alone. But, more so, the conversation aspires to prepare the reader for her own conversations with as-yet unacknowledged good films.

So why is it, then, that Cavell ‘won’t get to the point’? One reason, it seems, is that for his readers to be guided to open ends is itself to practice ‘Become Yourself’ in the way that good films, as Cavell suggests, teach us to.

#### 4. ‘Ready Yourself’: Model Viewers & Their Preparatory Ethics

As I hope to have demonstrated, the motive of personal transformation at work in film-philosophy finds a range of distinct expressions, each suggesting an ethic of transformation that I distinguished under the heading of a bumper sticker. These stickers – from ‘Know Yourself’ to ‘Lose Your Self’, whether an ethics of

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<sup>220</sup> See Chapter 2 Section 2.1 where I discuss this level of analysis distinguished by Johann Visagie (namely, where the philosopher’s theoretical reflections on personal transformation itself manifests as a practice of transformation) with reference to Michel Foucault’s personal reliance upon writing among other techniques.

self-concentration or self-expansion – help us to piece together an outline of the cinemakeover; of what it may look like when we seek self-transformation through film.

However, our picture of the cinemakeover still has one gaping hole in need of filling. Peeping out from underneath each of the stickers laid out in this chapter is a prior sticker that reads ‘Ready Yourself’. It speaks of the ideal viewers posited by film-philosophy, and the preparatory self-work that they are supposed to do. For the twist in this tale is that philosophers not only envision self-transformation as an *effect* of film-philosophy referred to by the bumper stickers. Paradoxically, philosophers also envision certain forms of self-transformation as *preconditions* for film-philosophy – that is, forms of self-transformations required from the model viewer *before* any of those sticker-stated-transformations can ever occur.

In what follows, I develop a general account of what I call the ‘preparatory ethics’ of film-philosophy – starting with the question of film-philosophy’s model viewer, and ending with a number of critical observations.

### Aspects of the Model Viewer

I take it to be an uncontroversial claim that each account of film-philosophy, with the transformational ethic that it entails, relies on an image of its ideal viewer.<sup>221</sup> The issue here is to identify appropriate lines along which to unravel the general model viewer that has taken shape in this chapter.

An obvious aspect to begin with is the implied model viewer’s assumed philosophical proficiency. Most philosophers take their hypothetical viewer of films-as-philosophy to be a (film) philosopher or a theorist. For a viewer to discern how films do philosophy, let alone appreciate its implications, she has to be versed in relevant philosophical theories, moreover, theories of film. However, clearly going against such assumptions concerning the viewer as philosopher-theorist, one or two philosophers opt for an everyday, non-theorist model viewer. The clearest example in this chapter comes from Noël Carroll, who sets out to establish how films do ‘popular philosophy’ that primarily engage the ‘layperson’ of the general public – not the scholar (see Carroll, 2013: 174–175).<sup>222</sup> Yet, unsurprisingly, in order for such a popular philosophy to take effect, Carroll still has to qualify the ideal layperson as at least a ‘reflective viewer’ who forms part of a ‘thoughtful audience’ (e.g. *ibid.*: 168, 171, 214–215). Another possible

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221 Besides the model viewers envisioned by these philosophical accounts of film, I must of course acknowledge the model viewers that particular films *themselves* aim to address. Much like Umberto Eco argued of the ‘model reader’ of texts, films too are inherently open aesthetic forms that require completion and therefore a preferred manner of cooperation from a model viewer (e.g. Eco, 1979: 7–11). And one should not take for granted that these two kinds of model viewer necessarily conform to one another. It may well be that a philosophical interpretation of a film depends on a model viewer that is at odds with the model viewer constructed by the film. The possible model viewers of films themselves however fall beyond the scope of my considerations below.

222 Dan Flory’s account of film-philosophy drawing on socio-political twist films suggests a similar public pedagogy, particularly with regard to questions of race (see Section 2.1).

example comes from the likes of Elena del Río, having everyday filmgoers in mind when they envision the cinematic encounter as a dramatically de-subjectivizing event. Del Río would say that the affects unleashed by cinema do not discriminate between different kinds of viewers. Although, as far as film-philosophy goes, I assume that the everyday viewer is not exactly her *ideal* viewer: only philosopher-viewers will be able to fully appraise – both on their own behalf and on that of unknowing everyday viewers – the philosophical and ethical significance of the de-subjectivizing encounter with film that Del Río envisions.

Alongside inherent qualities, such as the viewer's philosophical proficiency, a model viewer encompasses also an ideal manner of engaging with film.<sup>223</sup> That is to say, for films to do philosophy, the viewer must assume an appropriate attitude or state. Considering that the topic in question is philosophy, it may come as a surprise that not a single case of film as philosophy in this chapter calls for a distanced, critically detached viewer. Put differently, the philosophers concerned have no interest in an attitude of 'suspicion' (Ricoeur, 1970: 32–36). As we have seen, the required manner of engaging with film may lead to such a critical attitude (for example, in Dan Flory's socio-critically inflected film-philosophy), but such an attitude is never set as a precondition for an ideal encounter with film-philosophy. In fact, most philosophers discussed in this chapter would respond that a critical attitude would only undermine film-philosophy. If the whole point is to see how *films* initiate or do philosophy, then a predetermined critical posture gets in the way of film actually taking the philosophical initiative. For this reason, philosophers in this chapter imagine more or less the inverse of the critically detached viewer: their model viewers are wholly immersed, even to the point of deception (Wartenberg), open and receptive (Mulhall, Sinnerbrink), 'fused' with the films they are viewing (Frampton, Brown), and surrendered to their affects (Sobchack, Del Río). One could even think of this inverse attitude as the viewer pursuing a certain passivity – the notion of which I have already highlighted in Rushton's explanation of Deleuzian spectatorship.

However, our understanding of a model viewer cannot stop at the viewer's most appropriate attitude or state. It must include also those things that the viewer must do in order to be in that state. This question of *praxis* is key to film-philosophy's model viewers. The issue is not only whether the viewer is adequately immersed, receptive, or passive, but – prior to that – whether the viewer also takes the measures necessary to ensure those states. Most accounts of film-philosophy indeed count on their ideal viewers taking such measures. These implied measures or preconditions ensure that viewers engage with films in the appropriate manner, which then enables the films to bring about their philosophical effects.

Because these measures invariably involve some form of work on the self, they can be described in the same ethical-transformational terms that I have used

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<sup>223</sup> A related aspect of the model viewer at this point is that it involves also a basic conception of cinema's relation to the viewer's body. This is the focal point of Elsaesser & Hagener's survey of film theory, where they organize different theories around how they each imagine the "relation between the (body of) the spectator and the (properties of the) image on screen" (2009: 4).



up to this point: they can be reconstructed as practices of self-transformation. Admittedly, these instances of self-transformation are of a different order from ‘Know Yourself’, ‘Remind Yourself’, and the rest of the bumper slogans in this chapter. Hence I distinguish this order of transformational ethics as ‘preparatory ethics’; and I band them together under their own, separate bumper sticker slogan: ‘Ready Yourself’.

### The ‘Spirituality’ of Film-Philosophy

So how exactly do we demarcate film-philosophy’s preparatory ethics from the rest of the transformational ethics explored in this chapter? Not for the first time in this study, Michel Foucault provides a convenient reference point to help elaborate the concept under discussion: *preparatory* ethics. This elaboration requires but the briefest of visits to Foucault’s 1982 course at the Collège de France, released as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005). He wraps up the very first hour of the course by distinguishing ‘spirituality’ from ‘philosophy’, within the context of philosopher-subject’s relation to truth.<sup>224</sup> Suppose we call ‘philosophy’, says Foucault, the form of thought that examines the nature and extent of the subject’s access to the truth. If this is ‘philosophy’, then:

“[...] we could call ‘spirituality’ the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth. We will call ‘spirituality’ then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth” (2005: 15).

Here, Foucault deals with “*preparatory transformational* work on the subject”; Rabinow (2009: 37 [emphasis added]) could not put it any better when he refers to Foucault’s topic in these terms. Foucault draws attention to a class of transformational techniques through which a subject may render herself ‘available’ to the truth. Yet, clearly, these techniques are preparatory, as Foucault goes on to explain, since they are understood to open subjects up to return effects (what he calls ‘rebound’ effects) that the truth may have on them. By gaining access to the truth, therefore, subjects gain enlightenment, beatitude, or tranquility from the truth in return (Foucault, 2005: 16; Rabinow, 2009: 37–38).<sup>225</sup>

<sup>224</sup> Foucault’s recourse to the notion of spirituality here marks the onset of what Jeremy Carrette (2013) identifies as Foucault’s late discourse on spirituality, which he separates from Foucault’s earlier uses of the term. The broader context and problematics of this late use of the term does however not concern us here.

<sup>225</sup> All of this of course resonates strongly with Pierre Hadot’s contention that ‘spiritual exercises’ were inextricably part of how the Ancients – in particular – practiced philosophy (e.g. Hadot, 2002).

The rough comparison that I wish to make between Foucault's concept of spirituality and the preconditions of film-philosophy is as follows: film philosophers in this chapter suggest the need for viewers to carry out transformations on themselves in order to have 'access' to film-philosophy, as it were (which substitutes Foucault's 'truth'). Gaining such 'access' would be for viewers to fully discern, grasp, or experience the particular form of philosophy that films potentially (are said to) 'do'. Then (under these right conditions) viewers can anticipate the resultant film-as-philosophy to have certain transformational effects on them in return (as with Foucault's 'rebound effects'). My comparison thus applies also to Foucault's overall distinction between philosophy and spirituality. One can distinguish between the 'philosophy' of film-philosophy, i.e. *theoretical* formulations of the nature of film-philosophy; and the implied 'spirituality' of film-philosophy, which concerns the *practical* self-transformation required to be open to film-philosophy and to receive its transformational effects. To say films can do philosophy is one matter. To say that film as philosophy brings about self-transformation in the viewer is another. But to speak of the measures that viewers need to take – so that films can do philosophy, and so that their transformational work can take effect in us – is a matter of an altogether different order. What Foucault would call the order of 'spirituality', then, corresponds to the special class of transformational ethics that I demarcate as preparatory ethics.

All of the transformational ethics explored up to this point rely on the help of films – films doing philosophy – to initiate self-transformation in viewers. 'Ready Yourself' concerns transformational ethics that *precede* that encounter, the *prior* self-work by which the viewer becomes *available* to the help afforded by films. In saying that preparatory ethics are 'prior', and that they 'precede', I mean it in a conditional, constitutive sense – not in the chronological sense. The viewer's preparatory measures, as philosophers imagine them, may well co-occur with the act of viewing film. But such measures remain 'prior' or 'preliminary' self-work inasmuch as they make possible both the viewer's access to film-philosophy and, consequently, its transformational rebound effects – even while the viewer may be 'in the moment' of watching a film.

In short, preparatory ethics (self-transformation *that ensures* film-philosophy) enables transformational ethics of film (self-transformation *afforded by* film-philosophy). 'Ready Yourself' paves the way for 'Lose Yourself', 'Blow Your Mind', and the rest of the ethics defined in this chapter. In fact, preparatory ethics lies at the heart of the project of film-philosophy as such – even prior to any consideration of the transformational effects that film-philosophy may yield. Why? Because film-philosophy, whichever way you want to construe it, requires that we attend to films precisely *as philosophy*, and not merely as films. Only doing the self-work that comprises such attending will give you access to film's philosophy, and the potential rebound effects that it holds.

## Ascetic Preparations & Ethics of Interpretation

Having clarified what I mean by preparatory ethics, let us now consider the preparatory ethics upon which the project of film-philosophy relies. The question of preparatory ethics has already proved to be unavoidable in my analysis of certain cases (those of Sinnerbrink, Frampton, Bersani & Dutoit, as well as Rushton's account of Deleuzian spectatorship). So I offer here a more general impression of preparatory ethics in the field, by pointing out the predominant modes, domains, and values at stake.

In terms of a transformational mode, most evident is the general *ascetic* character of the measures that film philosophers expect from the viewer of film-philosophy. One way or another, the sufficiently prepared viewer must enact some form of preparatory giving up. Typically guiding this imperative are the transformational values of *openness* and *receptivity*, as well as particular conceptions of *immersion* (*absorption*) or *passivity* towards film.

Below I list some prominent cases in point, taken from philosophers surveyed in both this chapter and the next.<sup>226</sup> Note especially the general ascetic imperative that runs throughout these examples, whether implied or articulated head-on: each posits a mode of self-work in which viewers must withhold, suspend, disregard, relinquish, renounce, or surrender.

### From 'Expand Your Mind':

- *Stephen Mulhall*. In light of his claims of how films can be philosophy in action, Mulhall (2008:145) regrets viewers who "permit their preconceptions about the nature of film to dictate what their experience of particular films might be". Ideally, viewers should instead allow "experience of particular films to teach them what ethics, art, imagination, emotions and thinking might be" (ibid.). To not do so, he says, is a failure of 'self-questioning', as well as a failure "to be sufficiently open to one's experience" (ibid.).
- *Simon Critchley*. Addressing the films of Terrence Malick as a form of philosophizing, as we will see in the next chapter, Critchley (2005:139) cautions against reading "from cinematic language to some philosophical meta-language". Doing this, he explains, "is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated" (ibid.). He equally rejects Malick's *own* early philosophy career as the source for a philosophical 'pre-text' or 'meta-text' by which to interpret Malick's cinematic images (ibid.: 138–139).

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<sup>226</sup> I deal with Simon Critchley and Steven Rybin's accounts of film-philosophy, with respect to the cinema of Terrence Malick, in Chapter 4.

- *Steven Rybin*. Also in the next chapter, Rybin echoes Critchley in a similar assessment of Malick’s cinema as philosophical thought. He advises that “film philosophers must encounter the cinema itself – the cinema *by itself* – as non-textual, non-meaningful, non-philosophical” (2012: xxxi). According to Rybin, Malick’s films call for aesthetic immersion without the external interventions of philosophical texts that aim to master their meaning. The work of film philosophy begins in asking “how a film immerses us” and “why that engagement is valuable” (2012:xv–xvi).
- *Rupert Read*. In his reflections on *Avatar*, which came up under ‘Expand Your Mind’, Rupert Read emphasizes – repeatedly – that the film can only do the transformational work of opening our eyes, if the viewer manages to ‘really see’ the film (2015: 88). To do this, viewers must *leave behind* a particular bias: “the too-knowing cynicism that immunizes us against hope by insisting that nothing good can come out of anything that is popular or money-making [i.e. a mainstream movie like *Avatar*]” (ibid.: 90). Much like the film’s protagonist struggles to truly see things for what they are, Read argues, the viewer too must struggle to see *Avatar* – despite its status as a Hollywood money-spinner – for the source of self-transformation that it in fact is (ibid.: 94).

#### From ‘Sense Your Senses’:

- *Vivian Sobchack*. Recounting some central tenets of the phenomenological tradition that informs her approach to cinema, Sobchack states that phenomenology as method proceeds from “a commitment to the openness of its object of inquiry, rather than to any *a priori* certainty of what that object already ‘really’ is” (Sobchack, 2008:436). Central to this commitment, in the foundational Husserlian formulation, is the making explicit and consequent ‘bracketing’ (*epoché* – a *suspension*, or *setting aside*) of presuppositions about the object of phenomenological enquiry. Bracketing presuppositions rooted in acculturation and habit (what Husserl calls the ‘natural attitude’) serves to reveal the full possibilities or ‘essence’ of the object (ibid.). In Sobchack’s articulation of the phenomenological method, we have seen, this bracketing of presuppositions helps disclose the richness of our sensual, embodied experience in response to cinema.

#### From ‘Blow Your Mind’:

- *Robert Sinnerbrink*. As discussed before, Sinnerbrink’s romantic film-philosophy, seeking to respond to film as a way of thinking, requires from the viewer a commitment to receptivity and openness – not only towards what films disclose, but also to what philosophical thinking may become in response to those disclosures (e.g. 2011c: 26, 37–38, 43). This demands from

viewers sufficient immersion, enabled by “the *relinquishing* of one’s engaged perception, thought, and action in favor of a sensuous receptivity, affective engagement, and reflective openness towards virtual cinematic worlds” (ibid.: 35 [emphasis added]). Also necessary, for the philosopher-viewer, is to *eschew* all attempts at ‘theoretical mastery’ over films, as well as to *avoid assuming* any ‘readymade conceptual framework’ or theoretical approach that is supposed to reveal a film’s philosophical relevance (2011c: 43).

- *Daniel Frampton*. Although one is easily tempted to read Frampton as simply claiming that films think, and do philosophy,<sup>227</sup> Frampton is quite clear that he envisions his filmosophy as a preparatory “practice [...] a strategy for being philosophical about film and seeing the philosophical in film” (2006a: 212). Filmosophy thus offers a manner of transforming (our experience of) film, which establishes the possibility for viewers to be transformed by it in return. The primary preparatory measure that Frampton prescribes, we have seen, is for viewers to *give up* technicist language about film, and instead feed their experience of films with the more suitable, poetic concepts provided by filmosophy (2006a: 100–101, 172, 212).

#### From ‘Lose Your Self’:

- *Elena del Río*. Although Del Río argues that films generate (desubjectivizing) affection, as well as a growing awareness of affection, she does concede that viewers require a certain pre-awareness of affects for all this to take effect. That is, we have to acknowledge powers of affection in our own and other bodies – be attentive to them, even – in order for them to have to have transformative effects on us. The need to intuit such de-personalized forces requires that viewers *disregard* the limitations of their own visual perception – since, when it comes to affect, “it is the invisible level that is most important in a culture that increasingly depends on the visible” (Pisters quoted in Del Río, 2008: 210). This, in Del Río’s own words, is one of the most radical thoughts that Deleuze & Guattari has ‘bequeathed’ to us: “the existence of an incorporeal materialism that *calls on us to become attentive* to a micropolitics of the affections, a virtual plane, no less real than the actual, on which affects, thoughts, and desires continue to brew and transform long before and after they take a shape that we can see, name, or recognize” (Del Río, 2008: 210 [emphasis added]).
- *Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit*. The ‘Lose Your Self’ ethic of Bersani & Dutoit demands viewers who are willing to *give up* their commonplace assumptions about individual subjectivity; or, as they also intimate, to *renounce* the myths of subjectivity that we cling onto (2004:8–9). On this point, they do accept that

<sup>227</sup> See, for example, Botz-Bornstein (2011), or even the blurbs on the back of Frampton’s *Filmosophy* (2006a) itself.

films may help ‘jolt’/‘shock’/‘traumatize’ viewers out of their ingrained habits of cinematic viewing, but it is still up to the viewers, as part of their ‘work of spectatorship’, to *allow themselves* to undergo this shift (ibid.:8). Moreover, as I have made clear, Bersani & Dutoit suggests that ‘Lose Your Self’ through film can only occur if viewers themselves first initiate a condition of *self-lesseening*. Among other labels, they refer to this preparatory condition as a ‘retreat’ from identity, ‘active passivity’, making one’s self ‘superfluous’, opening oneself up, and being a ‘subject divested of subjectivity’ (ibid.: 9, 164–165, 177).

Clearly, the domain for ascetic self-work that the philosophers above most frequently designate is the (existing, established) *knowledge* that the viewer brings to film. In preparation for film-philosophy, most notably, viewers must give up their preconceptions, beliefs, and biases – especially those concerning what viewers think film’s philosophy might, or should, be. Likewise, viewers must give up the philosophical concepts, frameworks, or even the technical language in terms of which they would normally want to consider a film. In short, the philosophers above all call for some measure of epistemological self-restraint. To be more exact, then, the mode of transformation required from viewers is a *contemplative asceticism*. What we have here, as explained before, is asceticism of a specifically reflective nature; it involves a giving up of things specifically in your thinking about films.

The perceived need for such ascetic conditioning of knowledge – a measured, preparatory giving up or reduction of certain elements of one’s knowledge, as the philosophers above urge – marks what is in fact a perennial ethical topos in philosophical thinking, both in the West and the East. The topos of contemplative asceticism is quite evident, for example, in the long trajectory that one can draw from phenomenological bracketing as contemplative *askēsis* (cf. Ricoeur, 1996: 38–43),<sup>228</sup> through Descartes’ practice of assent (involving the systematic withdrawal of particular preconceptions or judgments), back to the Stoics from whom Descartes derives his method (Hadot, 2002: 265). A clear equivalent to this in Eastern philosophy is the well-known Zen Buddhist concept of *shoshin* or ‘beginner’s mind’, an attitude of openness that is to be cultivated by clearing the mind of its preconceived ideas, subjective intentions, and habits (see Suzuki, 1970). The topos of contemplative asceticism that I am tracing here, however, includes not only such restraint in knowledge, but also in the related domains of the *will* or *desire* that impels one to impose knowledge – as demonstrated by film philosophers’ pleas for viewers to relinquish attempts at theoretical *mastery* or *control* over films. This aspect of the contemplative asceticism – that is, for

228 In the introductory remarks to his *A Key to Husserl’s Ideas I* (1996), Paul Ricoeur speaks on more than one occasion of the ‘asceticism’ of the phenomenological method, which he even refers to as ‘phenomenological asceticism’ (e.g. Ricoeur, 1996: 38–39, 42–43; cf. Gregor, 2017). Even though he most likely have in mind a more general notion of asceticism (*askēsis*) than I have, I still find it revealing that Ricoeur apparently sees no need to qualify the connection between asceticism and the phenomenological method. I can only conclude that, like me, he considers that connection quite self-evident.

viewers to have a non-willing, actively-passive epistemological attitude towards films – finds a major common reference point in Martin Heidegger’s call for *Gelassenheit* (‘releasement’), a practice of detachment and letting-be that he appropriated from the Christian mystical tradition, and Meister Eckhart in particular (Heidegger, 1966). In Heidegger’s ethos, *Gelassenheit* is to give up of calculative and representational thinking in the interest of letting beings be; and, more generally, to eliminate every trace of willing in favor of an openness which, ultimately, ‘lets Being be’ (Caputo, 1986: 178–179).<sup>229</sup> Lastly, Geoffrey Harpham (1992: 239–269) further magnifies the cultural prominence of contemplative asceticism with his claim that the entire Western tradition of textual interpretation and criticism is invariably conceived in terms of asceticism. Any general account of interpretation, he proposes, is predicated on the ascetic imperative to resist temptation, and at least implicitly prescribes to the interpreter ways of restricting and directing her impulses (again, in the domains of will and desire) in response to a given text (1992: 239–240).

It is worth pointing out that Harpham’s views have an especially close affinity with the theme of preparatory ethics I have been investigating here. It is not only that his claims about interpretation exemplify the topos of contemplative asceticism at work in film-philosophy’s preparatory ethics, his claims also indicate what is essentially at stake in such preparatory ethics: that the transformational self-work that film philosophers require from viewers fits within the broader field of hermeneutics and its ethics. I grant that there is much more at stake in film-philosophy than resisting temptation and suppressing impulses that transgress the meaning-limits of ‘texts’. The preparatory ethics of film-philosophy is patently guided by transformational values of *openness*, *receptivity*, *fullness of experience*, even *oneness* with film – far more so than values of accuracy or fidelity of meaning. But, even so, to situate film-philosophy’s preparatory ethics against the larger horizon of hermeneutics raises perspectives that mutually enrich our understanding of both film-philosophy and interpretation. As for film-philosophy: it proves productive to not lose sight of the fact that these film philosophers are indeed busying themselves with interpretation; they are guiding viewers to interpret (encounter, receive, experience) films as philosophy; moreover, they construct different forms of ethics of interpretation, by prescribing contemplative-ascetic measures that viewers must take for their interpretations of films as philosophy to be adequate. As for interpretation: the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy – as but one case in the long tradition of deciding how we should interpret – offers a design for thinking specifically about the ethics of interpretation. Like film-philosophy

<sup>229</sup> As John D. Caputo (1986) explains, the ‘letting-be’ that Heidegger pursues with his notion of releasement is a matter of giving up the domain of ‘willing’ in the broadest conceivable sense. This includes giving up ‘representational’ thinking, which in the subjectivist tradition is the will to re-present Being and thereby render it an “object” to the thinking subject. The ascetic implication that releasement holds for thinking, therefore, is that thinking must be “strict” and “disciplined” in letting Being simply be. That is to say, “it must resist the temptation to explain Being in terms of ‘reasons’, to produce a ‘highest being’ and a ‘first cause’” (Caputo, 1986: 178). For this reason, Heidegger repeatedly emphasize the *effort* of thought and meditation required to realize releasement.

requires self-work to access the philosophical and transformational potential of films, or doing philosophy requires self-work to access to the truth (Foucault), interpretation requires self-work to access the meaning of texts (Harpham). Any account of what the act of interpretation should ideally look like will have a preparatory-ethical dimension; it will inevitably posit measures of self-work to be taken by the interpreter, measures analyzable within the same framework that I here use for analyzing the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy.

### Questions & Problems

The preparatory ethics sketched above represent a final – and highly significant – piece in the mosaic of the cinemakeover that emerges from film-philosophy. If anything, it sets up camp right in the middle of that picture. For there is much to suggest that without the necessary measures that preparatory ethics prescribe, no cinemakeover, let alone film-philosophy, would be able to occur.

Not surprisingly, then, it is precisely in the sphere of preparatory ethics that some of the most pressing questions regarding the cinemakeover come up. Here difficulties such as contradiction and inconsistency – things already touched upon in this chapter – come into especially sharp focus. Therefore, to bring this chapter to a close, I raise the most important of these questions as a manner of drawing my conclusions. In posing my respective questions of exclusivism, idealism, contradiction, and initiative, I start with what may be perceived as more peripheral issues, and work my way to those questions with more urgent implications for the cinemakeover and the project of film-philosophy as such.

#### *Exclusivism*

A first question worth raising is whether the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy encourages an undue exclusivism in our consumption of cinema (which, as many would have it, is ever *the* celebrated medium of the masses). Now one might argue that the very idea(l) of wanting films to do philosophy already expresses exclusivist intentions to elevate 'mere movies' above the supposedly impoverished popular functions that they normally fulfill. Yet the point for some philosophers (Carroll, explicitly so, but to a degree also Flory, Wartenberg and others with similarly moderate conceptions of film-philosophy) is that films may precisely do *popular philosophy*. By this, they mean that films, despite being mass entertainment, may still encourage philosophical activity and self-transformation in the ordinary, unsuspecting viewer, who has no prior commitments to making such effects occur. For this reason, you will find, these philosophers require little preparatory ethics from the viewer. Any member of the ordinary masses should suffice as the model viewer that their moderate conceptions of film-philosophy aim to address.

However, the *bolder* philosophers grow in their claims that films can do philosophy, the weightier the 'Ready Yourself' requirement becomes that they set for viewers. And the *more important* the requirement for viewers to prepare themselves for the effects of films, naturally, the *fewer* the viewers who will in reality experience those effects. In these bold conceptions the emphasis is thus less on what films alone



may achieve, and much more on what the viewer *also* has to achieve – meaning that, by default, far fewer viewers make the cut. By having to put in the extra mile of self-work, it will only be the sufficiently prepared model viewer who opens up a philosophical-transformational dimension to otherwise ‘mere movies’, a dimension which most (ordinary, unsuspecting) viewers would simply not be privy to. So, in effect, these visions of film-philosophy, reliant upon preparatory ethics as they are, forecasts an exclusive class of viewers: they are the ones who are ethically prepared, the self-mastering viewers, the select few who manage to fashion the ordinary activity of film-going into an extraordinary event.

I find a striking example of how preparatory ethics entails such elitism in Rupert Read’s (2015) assessment of *Avatar*, visited twice already in this chapter. He defines for *Avatar* a model viewer who must strive – in the face of his or her prejudices about Hollywood blockbusters – to ‘really see’ the film, and thereby reap the true benefits that it has to offer (e.g. 2015: 88). In an earlier, related piece on *Avatar*, Read (2013) stresses the same need for seeing-beyond-prejudices, so much so that his tone on this occasion borders on that of a guru. He notes, for example, to cynics who look down on or dismiss *Avatar*:

“If you find yourself resisting what I am saying in this paper, it may be because what I am saying is wrong, or silly, or whatever; or it may be because you are *not quite ready* to embrace these teachings and make them your own” (2013: online).

The irony here is that Read himself is denouncing what he sees as an *intellectual* elitism that rejects films like *Avatar* as mere popular entertainment. He points out that it is tempting “to remain on the barren heights of cleverness and intellectual superiority” and “to look down on a popular film, to ‘prove’ yourself superior to it – because then you are by implication ‘superior’ to the tens or hundreds of millions who love it” (2013: online). Yet, in denouncing such intellectual elitism, Read supplants it with what I take to be an even more exclusive *ethical* elitism. Next to the millions who love the film, and the supposedly disapproving intellectual elitists who reject the film, he postulates a third hypothetical group of viewers: those who manage to find in themselves the necessary courage and openness to see the film for the philosophical depth that it truly has (2013: online). This group of ethically prepared viewers, it appears to me, is even more select than the group of intellectualists who supposedly look down on *Avatar*, much as they are also set apart from the millions who may be assumed to *simply* love the film (given its box office results). Therefore, in spite of his own objections against elitism, Read draws his own elitist line between two classes of viewers: the majority, who ‘merely see’ the film (whether they be disapproving intellectualists or lovers of the film); and the select few, who ‘really see’ the film – because they excel at the ethical self-preparedness that enable this privileged way of ‘seeing’.

This sentiment in Read really only echoes a much more pervasive exclusivist tendency in transformationalist discourse: to set apart some higher plane of

existence that not only transcends (and often de-values) the ordinary-everyday, but also remains out of reach for the majority of average Joes who will never master the specialist self-transformations that define that plane. In Read’s case, as with the preparatory ethics posed in other bold conceptions of film-philosophy, that higher plane concerns an *extra*-ordinary way of viewing film. I would like to think that, ideally, notions of film-philosophy should be concerned with how films may do philosophy to the transformational benefit of most viewers. However, the preparatory ethics of the philosophers highlighted here suggest quite the opposite. The inherent demands for self-work set by their bold positions imply that film-philosophy and its ethical benefits are by no means open and available to all. According to their visions, instead, the cinemakeover becomes exclusive, the privilege of a select few, the ones who manage to transform and elevate their reception of films above that of the ordinary masses.

### *Idealism*

Of course, the philosophers concerned may respond to the above by saying that there is nothing wrong with what I label ‘exclusivism’: genuine self-transformation by its very nature cannot occur without effort, which implies that not everyone can or will make the cut. Fine – this is a position that many of us could live with. Yet, if we then drop the potential charge of exclusivism, we would do well to ask whether all of this is in fact achievable. Is the preparatory self-work required by the bold versions of film-philosophy feasible, something that *anyone* could in reality achieve? Simply put, are these preparatory requirements not overly idealistic?

The idealism that I have in mind here concerns the recurring contemplative-ascetic requirement that the ‘bold’ camp set for their model viewers. To what extent can you really give up *your* frameworks, concepts, assumptions, and beliefs – so that film can have enough room to do *its* philosophy? Is it at all possible for viewers to exercise such restraint in the knowledge that they bring to films? I struggle to see how such a cognitively open, assumption-free encounter with a film (or any other experience, event, text) could exist or be fostered (not the least, as I will still get to, because that hypothetical attitude itself proceeds from very definite assumptions). Even if a viewer somehow succeeds in completely giving up her philosophical assumptions, with the ambition of making the film’s own philosophy to emerge, at some point I take it that she nevertheless needs to *recognize* the film’s philosophy and the relevance that it may have for her. And, surely, this recognition can only occur with reference to existing assumptions, concepts, and knowledge that must breach her supposedly unprejudiced openness to film-philosophy.

This set of issues abound in the approach to film-philosophy argued for by John Mullarkey (2009a; 2009b; 2011), who we last met in Chapter 1. Recall that Mullarkey’s approach radicalizes the idea of cinematic thinking: he argues that if we are to take seriously the idea that films think in their own distinctive ways, “then we must first of all *get away from* any definition (that is, philosophy) of film, as well as any definition of thinking, or indeed of philosophy itself” (2009a: 77 [emphasis added]). In Mullarkey’s more radical outlook, therefore, we need to rid ourselves of *all* philosophical judgments in order to be entirely open to what the

‘philosophy’ of films might turn out to be(come). Again, I simply do not see this as humanly possible. And, apparently, neither does Mullarkey. His core claim is that all film philosophers fall short of this requirement. While they may express the desire for *films* to think in their own way, they still define this thinking in *philosophy’s way*, meaning that film’s thinking is still pre-figured and ultimately reduced by the particular assumptions that philosophers have about philosophy (see Chapter 1, Section 4.6).

So how, then, does Mullarkey hope to meet his own uncompromising requirement for letting film-philosophy simply be whatever it becomes? I have already addressed his Laruelle-inspired solution of ‘non-philosophy’ in the first chapter, where I also expressed my doubts whether it actually succeeds in ridding film-philosophy of any pre-figuring definitions of philosophy. (Is non-philosophy itself not after all a philosophical concept?) Let me only point out here the preparatory practice that appears to go together with Mullarkey’s solution. On occasion, Mullarkey speaks of the need for what he calls a process of ‘unknowing’ (see Mullarkey, 2009b: 14, 211, 214–218).<sup>230</sup> This process of unknowing accepts that the potential philosophical contributions of film may well be unforeseeable, even unrecognizable, in terms of our existing definitions of philosophy, seeing that cinema thinks in a *non*-philosophical way. Mullarkey’s process of unknowing is therefore not something that philosophy gives to film. It is instead an effort to unknow or ‘unphilosophize’ philosophy so as to allow for the event of something new – something that *could* be ‘philosophy’ – to emerge from film (ibid.: 214).

Is the ‘unknowing viewer’ who Mullarkey envisions someone who can realistically get away from *any* definition of philosophy, though? It does not seem so. For one thing, Mullarkey himself reserves a necessary place for such definitions in the process of unknowing. In this process, which is immanent in the relationship between the viewer and film, as he argues, it is film that ‘unphilosophizes’ philosophy by *resisting* the philosophy that we bring to it. Film “breaks our definitions of what is and is not ‘thinking’ by retrospectively creating new possibilities in the wake of its own actuality”; and thereby it co-engenders new, unanticipated possibilities for philosophy (ibid.: 213). Therefore, even though Mullarkey urges that we must first of all get away from any of our definitions, his line of reasoning at this point portrays the viewer’s definitions of philosophy as integral to the work of unknowing. As I see it, the model viewer implied here is someone who is simply willing to put forth her definitions before film – so that, in a mode of *contemplative endurance* rather, those definitions may be resisted, abraded, or even broken in an ongoing process of revision and regeneration. This strikes me as a far more practicable alternative to a strictly ascetic ideal of ‘getting away from’ any of our philosophical definitions. But, construed in this way, the process of unknowing runs counter to Mullarkey’s overall ideal for film-philosophy: since the process inherently acts on the viewer’s definitions, the ongoing ‘philosophy’ that emerges from film will still in one way or another remain a function of those definitions.

<sup>230</sup> Frampton (2006a:212) uses a similar notion when he notes that filmosophy involves an ‘unlearning’ of our usual conceptualizations of the cinematic experience.

Suppose, however, the hypothetical 'unknowing viewer' of Mullarkey *can* realistically get away from any definition of philosophy. Then it may well be that film will have enough room to do something new that could become philosophy. However, once this 'something new' comes about, at some point we would still have to recognize it as such. And would this not require that we resuscitate some of our discarded definitions of philosophy in order to appreciate the new philosophy that film (may) have produced? Mullarkey does advise that the knowledge at stake in this process is an emergent and performative knowledge; not knowledge as a representation, but knowledge as an affect (ibid.: 206). "Hence", he argues, "we do not know or define what the new is because the new *can only* be felt – that is why it is new, why it is a 'shock to the system', and why it consequently engenders new thoughts" (ibid.:211).

My response to this is that even the most minimal of considerations of the new – as to how it makes us feel, its effects, or indeed the new thoughts that it engenders – cannot proceed without activating the order of knowledge and definitions that the new supposedly defies. I am assuming that the new and its implications are things that we in fact want to take up. If not, we embrace an otherworldly idealism according to which film does new things, yet things that can only remain new as long as we do not pin them down to our impeding definitions or explanations or appropriations. In that case, we opt to simply let the 'something new' of film be, to let it run its own course within its own, ineffable order – that of knowledge as an affect; something that we can at best only feel. Then film-philosophy and its potential value to us amounts to just that: nothing more than an (indefinable) feeling.

### *Contradiction*

Another problem with the degree of epistemological self-restraint that film-philosophy often demands from viewers is that it courts contradiction. The avid logician will no doubt have a field day dissecting the issues hatched by the preparatory requirement to give up one's philosophical beliefs about film (also: assumptions, definitions, or frameworks, all of which I henceforth bundle up in the term 'beliefs'). As I see it, the preparatory requirement to give up one's philosophical beliefs is not necessarily a contradiction; but the hypothetical act of *meeting* the requirement is a clear-cut performative contradiction. To give up one's philosophical beliefs in accordance with the ascetic requirement (assuming this could be done) would mean that the accepted requirement being met, as well as that the philosophical beliefs by which it is motivated, are *not* given up. You would be performing a mental state that is incompatible with the very state that you claim to achieve. This hypothetical act – that of the film philosopher who succeeds in giving up her philosophical beliefs about film – can thus be characterized, to borrow a term from a different context, as 'self-performatively incoherent' (Clouser, 2005: 82–87).

For all that, one hardly needs recourse to logical nitpicking to see *the* contradictory elephant in the room: precisely by urging a drastic abandoning of our philosophical beliefs about film, philosophers still affirm very definite beliefs about film and

film-philosophy. Most essentially, these philosophers affirm a belief *in film* as such. One way of articulating this belief is that the film somehow ‘knows’ more than we do; and, therefore, that our receptive submission is the most appropriate response to it. Stanley Cavell, to name an example, is always ready to acknowledge the claim of such knowingness on us, as when he notes that “we must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them” (1981: 25). This is the main contradiction of film-philosophy’s precondition that we have to give up our beliefs about film: it exonerates at least one basic belief of undeniable philosophical significance. It is the belief that the film knows something, or does something, that is worth letting ourselves in on.

This belief in film marks a telling resemblance between film-philosophy’s preparatory ethics and what Colin Davis (2010) expounds as the practice of ‘overreading’. Overreading refers to philosophical interpretations of literature and film that push – and often completely overrun – the boundaries of how we normally gather meaning from a work. (Both Cavell and Deleuze happen to belong to the ‘canon’ of overreaders that he identifies and explores.) Central to the hermeneutics of overreading – and its resemblance to preparatory ethics – is the extent to which it really is a matter of faith. As Davis puts it, the overreader has an “unshakeable faith that the text *knows something* that it will reveal to us if only we ask it in the right way” (2010: 166). Accordingly, Davis labels this a “hermeneutics of conviction”, by which he means to contrast it to both “hermeneutics of suspicion” and hermeneutics as “the recollection of meaning” (cf. Ricoeur, 1970: 28–36). Like the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy, the hermeneutics of overreading does not set out to unmask works of art in terms of its own critical agenda. Yet neither does it have a straightforward confidence in the possibility of retrieving meaning: it requires conviction, even to the point of desperation; a conviction that (and note also here the exclusivist sentiment that I diagnosed before) “the work rewards the *devoted attention* that is paid to it because there is in it a kernel of knowledge which *only the most unstinting reader* can discover” (Davis, 2010:185 [emphasis added]).

Both film-philosophy’s preparatory ethics and the hermeneutics of overreading thus proceed from a supposed belief in the knowingness that films and related works possess. However, apart from submission and attentive devotion to that knowingness, Davis points out, the overreader may also need to apply some necessary pressure or even violence to a film, in order for it to yield to us what it knows (e.g. 2010: 185). Surely this is where the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy and overreading part ways? After all, the former’s asceticism is about guarding viewers from pressuring films with their own beliefs, assumptions and frameworks. Or is it not? Does the belief or expectation that a film somehow ‘knows’ not place upon it, paradoxically, *that very pressure of preconception* which film philosophers want us to abandon?

The contradiction to film-philosophy’s preparatory asceticism thus grows grander. Film-philosophy’s basic gesture of openness is to refrain from governing films with our preconceived philosophical beliefs about them. Yet when we give up those

beliefs in the name of letting films 'speak' for themselves, we impose on them the deeper belief that they do in fact have something to say. And I do mean 'impose'. For it may turn out that film – as James Elkins (1996: 594) once described the drawing – is simply a "stubborn, silent object" with zero stake in the philosophical expectations that we bring to it. However, film-philosophy innocently passes over this option by the very nature of its endeavor. Philosophers' ambition *to allow* films to 'do' philosophy rides on a belief that in principle already *obliges* the films to do so.

An ironic implication of the contradiction proposed here is that the film philosophers concerned (and also Davis' overreaders, for that matter) are not as far away from hermeneutics of suspicion as they think. They simply harbor a more particular breed of critical agenda. Theirs is the suspicion that the unassuming medium of film hides its profound knowingness from us. And they work at unveiling this knowingness (or epistemological agency or power – as this kernel is conceived of in many ways) to reap the philosophical and transformational rewards that it supposedly promises. Yet indispensable to this project is a belief *in film*, a fervent conviction, which these philosophers – in breach of their avowed ascetic stance – have to impose *on film*.

Philosophers do not ask themselves whether this belief is justified. It is a pre-theoretical commitment that their entire project takes for granted. And, even if not justified, I suspect that they would still seize on it as the "enabling self-delusion" (Davies, 2010: 186) that sustains the promise of films doing philosophy.

### *Initiative*

My final question regarding preparatory ethics concerns the locale of the 'engine room' by which the cinemakeover is understood to run. In short: where lies the main initiative for the supposed self-transformation that follows from films doing philosophy? Or even more to the point: who initiates and sustains the cinemakeover – the film or the viewer? The answer should be simple enough. 'The film, of course.' Is that not the point of the cinemakeover: that *film* is the prime mover behind the transformational process; much as film is the mover behind its *own* philosophy? By now, it should be obvious that the lingering theme of preparatory ethics suggests quite the opposite. Yet not so obvious, perhaps, are the pressing implications that this holds for the transformational ethics of film-philosophy and even film-philosophy as such.

Let us briefly take stock: the view that film-philosophy elicits self-transformation constantly goes with delicate disclaimers which in one way or another imply to 'Ready Yourself'. It states that the ideal viewer here is the prepared viewer. And the prepared viewer is the viewer who accomplishes those measures of self-work (notably: acts of giving up, letting go, submission, opening up, becoming aware) that will ensure access to a transformative experience of film-philosophy. This proviso of preparedness, we have seen, proves to be especially prominent in bolder conceptions of film-philosophy, with the more radical 'ethics of self-expansion' that they tend to impress. Yet even in conceptions that are more moderate it

remains hard to ignore the place of preparatory ethics as precondition for the cinemakeover envisioned by film philosophers.

What is notable about preparatory ethics as precondition is the circular shape that it gives the envisioned process of transformation. Reminiscent of circular reasoning, the cinemakeover must *begin with* what it is in fact meant to *achieve*. That is, viewers have to engage in self-transformation (in preparation *for* film) in order to achieve self-transformation (*through* film). In the case of 'Lose Your Self', as I have pointed out, these two orders of self-transformation even involve transformations of the same kind. There, in preparation to 'Lose Your Self' through film, you must already in some way or other have lost (lessened, passivized, or abandoned) your individual selfhood. In a manner of 'like attracting like', therefore, you must lose your self to 'Lose Your Self' some more. And the preparatory ethics of film-philosophy in general is not all that different. Here the circularity only widens beyond self-loss: overall, you must *transform* yourself to *be transformed* by film (which is to actually be transformed by *your* transformed experience of film).

If the point was not yet clear enough, this back-to-front circularity brings it home: because preparatory self-transformation must *precede* the transformational effects of film-philosophy, the burden of initiative in the cinemakeover rests squarely on the viewer. As many accounts in this chapter suggest, it is up to viewers to *enable* film to perform its transformational work on them. They must at least open the door for film to work; and possibly even maintain that work once it gets going.

This conclusion however holds challenging implications. Most pressingly, it calls into question the real extent to which *film* would actually do the work of personal transformation. Frankly, how can we be so certain – considering how the initiative rests on the viewer – that films will do any substantive transformational work at all? Even if it seems to actual viewers that film does do such work, they would not be able to know whether it is the effect of the film or the effect of their own transformational efforts.

What I fear, consequently, is that the supposed transformational affordances of film may be far more incidental – or worse: dispensable – than philosophers would like to believe. If a film's effect comes down to the ethical-preparatory excellence of its beholder, then who is to say that a poem, a painting, or a pleasant conversation could not be put to the transformational use? The deciding factor, after all, is the openness, giving up, or submission of the beholder – which can be brought to bear on film, yes, but presumably many other things too. Film can lay no special claim to transformational effects just because it happens to be (one of many possible things) intended for such effects by someone with the necessary ethical attitude.

Where does this leave the idea of the cinemakeover then? The delegation of initiative to the viewer undermines what I take to be the core incentive for the cinemakeover. The incentive is that films promise a distinctive and potent basis for our ideals of personal transformation inasmuch as *they* (possess the agency

needed to) make this ethical appeal on *us*. Yet when films require our imbuing them with that appeal, as the precondition of preparatory ethics suggests, the incentive goes out the window. Film then no longer promises to be a necessary agent that leads us to otherwise-unattainable ethical outcomes. Instead, it offers only an incidental accessory – one of many possible substitutes – to its transformation-bent beholder, upon whose initiative film’s ethical contributions essentially depend. The cinemakeover thus loses both its presumed potency and distinctiveness as a potential source of personal transformation.

The above issues concerning initiative prove equally pressing to the project of film-philosophy itself. After all, we would not be talking about the cinemakeover here if it were not for the project of film-philosophy pointing to it. And we should keep in mind that the philosophers discussed here pose the need for preparatory ethics for exactly that: the sake of films doing philosophy. Only once we allow films to do philosophy, they suggest, viewers can expect the transformational effects of those films. Preparatory ethics is thus a precondition for the cinemakeover only insofar as it is first the precondition for film-philosophy, with its supposed effects, to occur. The real burden of initiative on the viewer, therefore, is to enable film to do philosophy – for self-transformation through film could only follow from that. Predictably, then, the same circularity noted a moment ago enters the equation here. For films to do or to be philosophy, we need to *attend to them* as (doing) philosophy. Hence, the preparatory ethics: we need to do the self-work of instilling in ourselves the restraint (or openness, abandonment, etc.) that will let us attend to film as philosophy (and not, for example, as the mere movies that we would ordinarily take them to be). We may even need to enlist concrete techniques such as *writing* to help cultivate the “particular kind of attending” that film as philosophy requires (Baggini, 2011: 211–212; also see Sinnerbrink, 2014a).

Just as predictably, though, the same circularity gives rise to the same pressing questions. If the initiative for film-philosophy depends on the viewer’s preparatory acts, to what extent can we say that it is film doing the philosophy? Can we tell apart the film’s supposed philosophical work from the self-work by which the viewer has to evoke it? Are we not confusing the viewer’s work for the film’s philosophy? An interlocutor may object that I am forcing an ‘either-or’ onto a process that obviously unfolds as an interaction between film and viewer. But remember: the key tenet of film-philosophy is, if not that film can enact its own form of philosophy, that film can at least take the initiative in a philosophically relevant exchange with its viewers. Yet eating away at this tenet, and the transformational ethics it gives rise to, are constant nods to the self-work, the *actual* initiative, that the viewer has to bring to the table. By having to own up to the precondition of preparatory ethics, film-philosophy undermines film’s claim to philosophical initiative, and thereby its own *raison d’être*.

To conclude: if the admittedly exciting notion of transformational ethics of film that emerged in this chapter is to have any future (and this is not to speak of film-philosophy itself), the question of initiative is the one that, to my mind, needs to be addressed most urgently. Considering the significant degree to which



film-philosophy and its effects appear to be dependent on preparatory work and a specific preparatory ethics, we need to tighten our theoretical grasp of the divide that separates the viewer's ethical initiative from the supposed initiative of film. No doubt, in the cinemakeover as we have been imagining here both will have their part to play. But we need more insight into, for instance, how films may nevertheless prompt preparatory self-work in the viewer; and whether such promptings might in turn require yet earlier 'pre-preparatory' acts from the viewer. Whatever the questions, though, we would do well to start clearing up where the 'Ready Yourself' work of the viewer ends; and the active, transformational work of film begins. That is, if such work can be reasonably attributed to film. For it might prove to be the case, to snipe a final bumper sticker-slogan from Hamlet, that 'the readiness is *all*...

# Chapter 4

## There's Something About Malick: From Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation

With my analysis in the previous chapter, I tried to steer clear from any in-depth discussions of individual films, for the sake of the bigger picture: to formulate and distinguish from one another the basic types of transformational ethics that emerge from the project of film-philosophy. However, many film philosophers see film-philosophy as having little to gain from general theoretical positions. For them, to establish whether and how films contribute to philosophy indeed requires careful, detailed analyses of individual films. Notably in this regard, Stephen Mulhall (2008: 129 ff.) begs for what he calls a “priority of the particular”: rather than deal in global claims about the nature of film-philosophy, he says, we need to look at how particular films do particular things of philosophical value (also see Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 122–123; Wartenberg, 2007: 31, 133–134).

Whenever the question of philosophically prone film directors comes up, it is most often Terrence Malick who emerges as *the* quintessential maker of philosophical films (see Sinnerbrink, 2011a: 180; Neer, 2011; Rybin, 2012: xiv).<sup>231</sup> Philosophers simply love to write about Malick.<sup>232</sup> This holds especially true, as will soon become clear, for philosophers with an interest in the idea(l) of films doing philosophy. For these philosophers, quite evidently, *there's something about* Malick. And to ask *what* that something is, and how in different instances philosophers *respond to it*, will bring more concreteness to the bigger picture of transformational ethics in film-philosophy that I have been sketching so far.

To be clear: even though this chapter deals with a particular filmmaker and a selection of his films, my overall agenda still remains a meta-critical one. I am analyzing philosophical discourse on Malick, with a special focus on the film-philosophical analyses of Malick's ‘contemplative style’, as I recapitulate it. My analysis will consist of two overall movements: after a brief, contextualizing ‘prelude’ (Section 1), the first movement is to identify and roughly elaborate on Malick's ‘contemplative style’ as that particular quality which makes his cinema

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231 I quote Robert Sinnerbrink (2011a: 180): “[O]ne of the most common ways to approach Malick has been from the viewpoint of philosophy. Indeed, Malick has recently been canonized as one of the few genuinely ‘philosophical’ filmmakers working today”.

232 A host of philosophical articles, edited volumes and books – over the past fifteen years in particular – attest to this. See Patterson (2007b), Davies (2008a), Tucker & Kendall (2011) and Rybin (2012) as notable examples of philosophically inflected books dedicated to Malick's cinema.

so alluring to philosophers engaged in the project of film-philosophy (Section 2). That said, however, I am much less interested in arriving at a definitive picture of Malick's (contemplative) style than I am in tracing the philosophical *and* ethical functions that philosophers ascribe to the filmmaker's style while they mark it as 'contemplative'. The philosophical work that Malick's films are assumed to do includes the (by now familiar-sounding) transformational effects on the viewer: the philosophers under scrutiny here suggest that Malick's films not only move his viewers to contemplation, but potentially transform them to greater awareness, openness and connection. The second movement of my analysis, therefore, is to make explicit such ethical-transformational outcomes, and thereby the value of personal transformation that philosophers attach to Malick's contemplative style (Section 4 – Section 3 is addressed below). These ethical conclusions that philosophers reach about Malick, I maintain, tell as much about the project and pre-interpretive interests of film-philosophy itself. The particular case of Malick demonstrates that there's something also about the broader enterprise of approaching film as philosophy that warrants scrutiny. In addition to raising methodological questions about interpreting style, my meta-analysis of Malick's philosophical reception puts under the magnifying glass, even more clearly than before, the extent to which film-philosophy is an ethically vested, value-laden exercise. In fact, I contend that the motive of personal transformation at work within the project of film-philosophy intensifies in the context of Malick's particular contemplative style.

Similar to my post-script on *Fight Club* earlier on, my explorations in this chapter will briefly traverse further levels of analysis that take us beyond considerations of style, and also outside the strict purview of meta-criticism. In terms of the aims of this chapter, these excursions are meant to reinforce and deepen my findings with respect to what philosophers make of Malick's style. Prior to my meta-analysis, I thus take two much needed detours: to consider narrative-thematic aspects of Malick's films (Section 3.1) as well as the substantial 'authorial' persona that has developed around the filmmaker (Section 3.2). While Malick's style is my chief concern, it *alone* cannot fully account for the philosophical attractiveness of his work. Hence I prepare the ground by first considering how both Malick's narrative interests and the mythologizing around Malick as an 'ex-philosopher' further encourage the kind of philosophical readings that his films receive and, importantly, the ethical commitments that those readings exhibit.

## 1. "I've got style!" – A Prelude

As I have noted, (film) philosophers exhibit an undeniable eagerness to express their thoughts about Malick – a zeal perhaps only exceeded by an equally devoted horde of Malick-haters on the web. Yet every now and then these two camps exhibit a surprising convergence of interests. It is for this reason that a customer review of *The New World* (2005) caught my attention:

“This has got to be one of the most boring movies ever made... I could just picture the director of this awful abortion of cinema sitting with a self-satisfied smile on his face, saying ‘Who needs dialogue or a story? I can put in random images of rocks and trees for 2 and a half hours instead! Who needs substance? I’ve got style!’” (*Amazon Review* by Jonathan Joneson, 24 May 2006).

*So why are philosophers so fascinated by Malick?* As I aim to show, one major source of this fascination – and of some viewers’ frustration, evidently – is the often overwhelming preeminence of Malick’s distinctive *style*. Malick continues to be a mainstay of philosophers’ attempts at marrying film and philosophy; and recent appraisals of Malick’s work, especially, make issues of ‘style’ or ‘form’ – for want of a better term – of key importance to this pursuit.

Although I am aware of the potential difficulties raised by the term ‘style’, from my meta-perspective I simply wish to capture a general shift in attention of film philosophers, which has become less concentrated on (often Heidegger-inspired) narrative-thematic readings of Malick’s films, and more on the potential philosophical virtues of the cinematic techniques and designs that Malick’s ‘contemplative style’ presents his audience with.<sup>233</sup> This shift in attention seems to express a more general urge in the film as philosophy debate to formulate how films can do philosophy in ‘uniquely cinematic’ ways: it is a matter of “getting beyond thematics and taking seriously the look and sound of his films”, as Richard Neer (2011) puts it.

One can argue that Malick also entices this shift, inasmuch as his style is often said to be so obvious, abundant, even excessive. If, like the reviewer cited above, one understands ‘style’ as particular pictorial and sonic expressions of narrative ‘substance’, one can say that Malick’s stylistic hallmarks tend to have *a life of their own*. Be it interjections of nature imagery, streams of voice-over reflections or a camera wandering where it wishes, these elements typically have little narrative motivation or stand in ambiguous relation to events that occur on screen. As a result, philosophers are made to respond to Malick’s style. And for many commentators this is precisely the point: the philosophical substance of Malick’s films *is* his style. But what, then, about Malick’s style makes it so inviting to philosophers – especially those engaged in the project of theorizing how films can do philosophy – to attribute value to things like ‘random images of rocks and trees’?

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233 I therefore have no reason here to take up the long history of the fiercely discussed notion of ‘style’, which can be traced in a host of directions – whether Russian Formalism (such as *Poetica Kino*, the famous 1927 anthology edited by Boris Eikhenbaum), French New Wave criticism (like Alexandre Astruc’s auteurist notion of the *caméra-stylo*) or, more recently, Neoformalism (notably the ‘historical poetics’ of David Bordwell).

## 2. 'Contemplative Style', Philosophy, Transformation

Malick's expositors have settled into a steady lexicon for detailing his distinctive appeal by describing his cinema as 'poetic', 'lyrical', 'romantic', 'visionary', 'mythical' or even 'metaphysical'.<sup>234</sup> Yet virtually any appraisal of his work, whether philosophical or film critical, also includes observations of its *reflective*, *reflective*, *meditative*, and *meditative* qualities. Even though these features may have received less attention than others, film philosophers have latched onto it with enthusiasm. Not to be outdone for lyricism, they describe Malick's way of filmmaking in terms of "contemplative reverie" (Rybin, 2011: 34), "meditative film-thinking" (Frampton, 2006a: 193), "mesmerizing philosophical meditation" (Sinnerbrink, 2011d: 180), and even "prayerfulness" (Pippin, 2013: 274). Such philosophical formulations of Malick's 'contemplative style', as I label it, goes as far back as Stanley Cavell, who linked Malick's films to Heidegger's meditations of Being, and thought that Malick himself had found in film a way to transpose "thoughts for our meditation" (1979: xv).

Of what interest is this view of Malick's style to the idea of film as philosophy? Since philosophy involves acts of contemplation, the connection between contemplative style and philosophy is, quite understandably, one that is easily drawn. What is more, a style that viewers experience as 'contemplative' – however you want to construe it – presents itself as an attractive invitation for philosopher-theorists to explore the nature of thought in, through or of film. Philosophers are therefore keen to use a 'contemplative cinema', such as Malick's, as a testing ground for the premise that films can enact uniquely cinematic forms of philosophical reflection. Of course, in the case of Malick, this proposition is made all the more alluring by the great deal of mythologizing around the figure of 'Terrence Malick', and particularly his status as 'ex-philosopher', which I get to later on. (This is suggested by the treatment of other 'contemplative' filmmakers, the likes of Yasujiro Ozu, Andrei Tarkovsky, or Hou Hsiao-Hsien, who have not garnered the amount of attention from philosophers that Malick has.)

Seeing that the notion of 'contemplation' entails a diversity of possible subjective acts and procedures, I must assume a corresponding diversity of possible 'contemplative styles'. Consider the obvious stylistic differences, for example, between Malick's work and contemporary Slow Cinema, a type of cinema that is likewise associated with contemplative aspirations. The so-called 'slow films' of filmmakers like Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz and Lisandro Alonso exude a characteristic quietude that just as often prompts commentators to celebrate their 'contemplative' or 'meditative' qualities. Yet, although there are similarities between Malick's oeuvre and Slow Cinema (e.g. the importance of rural or natural settings), the differences between the two are substantial. Slow Cinema, roughly speaking, indulges in long takes, static shots and patient camera movements. It generally also avoids music, revels in silence and thereby draws attention to what would otherwise be unnoticed sounds in the diegetic background. Malick's work,

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<sup>234</sup> See Hannah Patterson's introduction to *The Cinema of Terrence Malick: Poetic Visions of America* (2007a) as a sample of this type of discourse of which she also provides an overview.

in contrast, is much more inclined to sequences of impressionistic imagery on the basis of rhythmic editing and roaming camera movements. Though Malick's narrative pacing may be slow, his films certainly do not play out in static scenes and compositions. Moreover, many of his extended and visually striking sequences are accompanied by voice-over narration – voices reciting thoughts rather than telling a story – which is often coupled with equally prominent music scores with, for instance, epiphanic orchestral music.

The notion of Malick's 'contemplative style' is used here in a consciously general way. Each of Malick's films exhibits singular qualities that cannot be covered by this blanket term. It may well be, therefore, that some of Malick's films have specific contemplative modalities that are absent in others<sup>235</sup>, which raises the question of whether there might be more than one contemplative style at work within Malick's oeuvre. But these concessions still do not rule out the feasibility of a more general conception of Malick's contemplative style. I recognize, as many commentators do, that Malick displays pronounced stylistic hallmarks that persist throughout his filmmaking career. Moreover, his work has evolved in a manner that increasingly highlights these hallmarks. The 'late Malick'<sup>236</sup> has increasingly pursued the kind of abstraction that exposes the features most essential to his style, for example, his sublime images of nature, the voice-over narration, prominent camera movements as well as music scores. He seems evermore intent on "distilling his appeal to its most rudimentary elements" which, according to one account, includes "whispery voiceover narration, roaming camerawork and an unending collage of lush images" (Kohn, 2015).<sup>237</sup> This increasing distillation of his style is so palpable that some critics have described Malick's more recent efforts – such as *To the Wonder* (2012) and *Knight of Cups* (2015) – as exercises in self-parody (e.g. Bradshaw, 2012; Kohn, 2015).

So to which stylistic elements, according to Malick's philosophical audience, do philosophers attribute the oft-cited contemplative-philosophical appeal of his films? Relevant literature presents us with a range of likely candidates; and any one philosophical reading of Malick usually addresses more than one of these elements at a time. I therefore find it useful to structure this survey on the basis of a basic distinction between *stylistic devices* (concrete filmic techniques) and *stylistic*

235 This is evident, for example, if we associate the contemplative effects of Malick's films with his use of voice-over, as is the case with philosophers that I discuss in Section 4.2. One could claim that reflections via voice-over grant any film a certain contemplative mode. Yet Malick applies this device in diverse ways that, most likely, yield diverging contemplative effects. Whereas the interior voices in Malick's first two films are *single, female* and speak in *past tense*, Malick's third feature features *multiple, male* voices that speak in *present tense* (Chion, 2004: 53). The former device thus raises more of a retrospective, nostalgic contemplative experience, whereas the latter offers a sense of rumination based in the "timeless present" (ibid.).

236 The 'late Malick', following critic Jon Baskin (2013), refers to the sequence of films that Malick released after his twenty year absence from filmmaking in 1998.

237 Such distillation also goes for Malick's treatment of narrative. In *Days of Heaven*, already, as noted by Morrison & Schur (2003: 124), Malick's translation of the script into the film involved rigorous compressions of the narrative. "The plot, even in most of its details, remains the same, but nearly every scene that remains in the film has been stripped down, rendered in a severely distilled form" (ibid.).

*effects* (kinds of experiences associated with a filmic technique). On the more concrete level of stylistic devices, firstly, commentators typically identify Malick's contemplative style by the following elements, roughly in order of salience:

- *Photography of landscape and nature*: Critchley (2005); Silberman (2007); Davies (2008b); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Rybin (2011: 14–18); Tucker (2011); Walden (2011: 206–209); Lehtimäki (2012); and Pippin (2013).
- *First person voice-over monologues*: Polan (2004: 273–274); Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 124–178); Davies (2008b: 57–62); Kendall (2011: 150); Rybin (2011); Pippin (2013); and Vividaki (2014).
- *Juxtapositions of image and sound*: Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 124–178); Chion (2004: 12–13); Polan (2004: 273–274); Davies (2008b: 57–62); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011: 149–152); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011) Walden (2011: 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014).
- *Discontinuous editing*: Chion (2004: 12–13); Polan (2004: 272); Davies (2008b: 573–574); Rybin (2011: 15); and Pippin (2013: 250, 269).
- *Repetition of devices*: Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 151–153); Macdonald (2008: 90–98); Kendall (2011: 161–162); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011d: 191–192).
- *Prominent music scores*: Clewis (2006: 29); Kendall (2011: 150, 163); Neer (2011); and Sinnerbrink (2011d: 187–192).
- *Camera movements*: Coplan (2008: 75–79); Rybin (2011: 17–18); and Virvidaki (2014: 30–31).
- *Episodic, elliptical narratives*: Martin (2006); Coplan (2008: 70–74); and Kendall (2011: 152).

Philosophers connect the above stylistic devices with a variety of less concrete stylistic effects. The connection is not always clear, since commentators are prone to conflate stylistic devices with the experiential effects that they attribute to them. But there is no getting away from the two distinct dimensions of style that are at stake in their evaluations: analysts propose different profiles of stylistic effects by deriving them from a particular selection and interpretation of stylistic devices. In fact, the general claim that Malick's style is 'contemplative' is itself a global, *higher-order effect* that commentators, in turn, derive from whatever intermediary stylistic effects they detect.

My rough rubric of possible stylistic effects ranges from local perceptual or cognitive effects to the overall aesthetic effects that analysts may detect. I shall not try to order or rank them here. When it comes to Malick, philosophers typically emphasize the following stylistic effects:

- 'Elliptical', 'fragmented' or 'impressionistic' aesthetic experiences: Coplan (2008: 70–74); Rybin (2011); and Antunes (2014).
- Experiences of 'incongruity', 'ambiguity' or 'disorientation': Bersani & Dutoit (2004); Polan (2004: 274); Coplan (2008: 71); Davies (2008b: 48–49, 59–60); Plantinga (2010); Kendall (2011); Neer (2011); Rybin (2011: 25, 37–38); Walden (2011: 197); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014: 27).
- 'Questioning' or 'interrogative' modes of presenting the world: Furstenau & MacAvoy (2007); and Pippin (2013: 269–272).
- Experiences of 'awe', 'wonder' or 'sublimity': Clewis (2006); Silberman (2007: 170–175); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Pippin (2013); and Virvidaki (2014: 29).
- Expressions of 'perspectives', 'points of view' or 'ways of seeing': Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 158–178); Yates (2006); Davies (2008b: 50–56); Macdonald (2008); Manning (2011); Sinnerbrink (2011d); Walden (2011); Pippin (2013: 273, 275); and Virvidaki (2014: 29–31).

To get to the crux of how philosophers interpret Malick's style – that is, to trace the philosophical and ethical value that they attach to it – is mostly a matter of discerning the *stylistic effects* that they identify. My reasoning is as follows: Firstly, it is mostly the perceived stylistic effects that show us what exactly the analyst understands by the 'contemplative' nature of the style. This notion is of course a highly pliable one: so the respective effects of being either 'impressionistic', raising 'ambiguity', or evoking 'wonder', for example, entail rather distinct notions of how the films are 'contemplative' and, thereby, of what philosophical use they are.

Secondly, diverse stylistic effects also imply distinct forms of contemplative engagement on the part of the viewer. The philosophers who approach Malick's films as philosophy constantly resort to the assumption that his contemplative style draws the viewer into a reciprocating posture of philosophical contemplation. In short: Malick's contemplative style is thought to do a certain *contemplative work*, meaning that it elicits from the viewer a related process of reflection or conscious experience. But, again, this work may be construed as having to deal with the 'impressionistic', the 'ambiguous', or the 'wonderful' – each of which implies a distinct contemplative procedure on the part of the viewer.

Thirdly and lastly, it is this contemplative work that is time and again suggested to also have ethically significant effects on the viewer. The various contemplative effects of Malick's style, as philosophers see it, can establish for viewers a *contemplative mode* of self-transformation; the supposed contemplative work of the style thus facilitates ethical work on the self. To be sure, Malick's expositors envision this contemplative posturing of the viewer in different ways, as they rely on diversely construed ensembles of stylistic devices and effects. Each such configuration therefore represents a distinct *contemplative method*, on the part of the film, whereby Malick's cinematic style is understood to enlist and guide the



viewer's contemplations to some end of personal transformation – whether an enhanced state of contemplation, concentration, or the like.<sup>238</sup> This entails that the contemplative work of this filmmaker's style amounts to ethical work on the self.

Now we begin to see why a contemplative style fosters just as much interest in transformational ethics. Although there is a natural affinity between contemplation and doing philosophy, the same can be said of contemplation and transformational ethics: performing contemplative techniques forms an integral part of many practices of transformation. The appeal that a contemplative style holds for the idea of film doing philosophy thus easily extends to and includes considerations of its ethical significance.

Expositions of 'the philosophical' and 'contemplative' in Malick's style invariably lead to value-laden interpretations, in which stylistic devices are tied to certain effects and, together, are made to fit certain ethical ends. Philosophical commentary cannot really avoid such interpretations of style. Yet the presuppositions that go into philosophical dealings with film style, and the ethical implications that follow them, often go unrecognized and deserve to be critically formulated. My meta-appraisal of Malick's contemplative style is an attempt at addressing this need. Before delving into the details, however, we first need to take two important detours.

### 3. Finding Transformational Ethics in Malick: Contributing Factors

Before getting to the role of style in philosophical readings Malick's work, I must first point out two additional – though quite fundamental – factors that boost the ethical-transformational tendencies which I will be tracing in those readings. These two factors feed the philosophical attractiveness of Malick's films as well as – and this is important to my analyses – the potential of attaching the theme of personal transformation to them. The first, obvious factor is that Malick's stylistic hallmarks cannot be separated from the ethically inflected narratives that he chooses to film. And the second is that Malick's narratives cannot be disentangled from 'Terrence Malick', a constructed 'authorial' figure, which just as much encourages ethical-transformational agendas with respect to his style. Let me briefly sketch how each of the factors has its say.

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238 A brief technical clarification: the question of what constitutes a contemplative 'technique' of transformation, in this context, can be approached in two ways. On the one hand, viewing films, much like reading or writing, can be practiced as a general technique of contemplation. But any (kind of) film can furthermore facilitate for the viewer a particular reflective process (e.g. reflection on a particular theme, a form of self-examination, a heightening of awareness, etc.) that warrants distinction as a *more specific* method or technique. In dealing with Malick's expositors, we therefore have to distinguish various such posited contemplative (sub-) techniques (for which I will reserve the term transformational 'methods') within film-viewing as the comprehensive contemplative technique.

### 3.1 Personal Transformation in Malick's Narratives

To say that Malick's films raise themes of deep-thinking appeal is to state the obvious. The recognition of the contemplative in his films, consequently, is as much a recognition of their thematic narrative preoccupations. Malick has an enduring interest in themes of the grand, philosophical kind that have almost descended into cliché – nature, human identity, the problem of evil and the meaning of life. As of late, Malick has also addressed questions of God, the spiritual and transcendence, as theologically inclined commentators are keen to point out.<sup>239</sup> The combination of his philosophical and theological inclinations is perhaps best captured by Malick's continual recourse to Christian mythological tropes. Creation, paradise, the fall of humankind, innocence and its loss have been central narrative motifs from the outset of his career.

I do not want to dwell here on the thematics of Malick's narratives as material for philosophical reflection. There is enough literature that makes a good job of this.<sup>240</sup> The point that I do wish to drive home, however, is the prominence that these narratives give to transformational ethics as their subject matter. Most of Malick's characteristic philosophical themes in fact concern issues of personal transformation. I offer a few salient examples, relevant to the analyses in this chapter:

- *On the themes of identity, meaning, transcendence:* Malick's central protagonists, as Hannah Patterson (2007a: 1) observes, are in a characteristic state of search – whether “for a different kind of life, a sense of self, a reason for being, or a spiritual presence in the world”. It would be wrong to label these characters out-and-out transformationalists. Yet quests for identity, meaning, or transcendence assume the shape of quests for personal transformation. Malick's searching characters foreground an ethical self-relation that, for better or worse, strives to adapt the self to the ends of acquiring sense, a sense of self, or a sense of the otherworldly. This endeavor develops through various expressions of the general contemplative mode of self-transformation. There is, for example, the naive self-dialogue and -rationalization of female characters (who serve as the narrators) in *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*; the existential self-questioning and interrogation of soldiers in *The Thin Red Line*; or Pocahontas's postures of wonderment and praise towards Nature in *The New World*.
- *On characters as transformationalist figures:* In some cases these implicit inclinations of Malick's characters are taken up by commentators in rather overt transformationalist terms. This is strikingly evident in the case of Private Witt (Jim Caviezel), a character who is pivotal in many philosophical readings

239 See Barnett (2013), Baskin (2013), Leithart (2013), Handley (2014), Young (2015), Barnett & Elliston (2016) Hamilton (2016), Robbins (2016), and Sinnerbrink (2016b).

240 See Morrison & Schur (2003), Patterson (2007b), Davies (2008a), Michaels (2009), Tucker & Kendall (2011), and Rybin (2012).

of *The Thin Red Line*. Witt is the epitome of Malick's 'searching characters' and offers much for us to construe him as an overt transformationalist: he enjoys a simple existence with an indigenous island tribe while on AWOL from his military company; he ruminates about life after death; he entertains meta-physical notions (like "I've seen another world") that conflicts with the pessimistic views of his First Sergeant (Sean Penn); and, in the end, he sacrifices himself to save the lives of his fellow troops. Yet we should note how commentators tailor each version of 'Witt as transformationalist' to their own philosophical needs. Simon Critchley (2005: 136), for example, speculates that the "essential solitude to Witt's character" (which was already evident in the original novel) must have appealed to Malick, who in the adaptation "transforms him into a much more angelic, self-questioning, philosophical figure". Witt's ascetic disposition thus seems to motivate Critchley's view of the character as "the questioner, the contemplator, the mystic, perhaps even the holy fool", who "views all things and persons with an impassive constancy, and sees beauty and goodness in all things" (2005: 141). With this impassive constancy, Critchley celebrates Witt as something of a Stoic icon, which fits nicely with his claim that 'calm' (which itself can be a transformational value) is the key to understanding this film. Let me contrast this with Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit (2004) who, as I will still show, seeks out in *The Thin Red Line* a transformation that diminishes individual subjectivity. In their case, interestingly, a very different picture of Witt's transformationalist aspirations emerges. For them, Witt is not a calmly withdrawn or detached figure. Instead, the character represents their commitment to the transformational values of openness and connectedness. For instance, Bersani & Dutoit suggests that Witt's fascination with the transcendent is a function of "the remarkable clarity and openness of his look" (2004: 151). The ascetic imperative, in their account, thus finds its appropriate application in relinquishing one's desire for detachment. They compare Witt's transformational posture with the misguided solitude of other characters: though Witt's look is 'wide open', other characters are thought to withdraw into individuality – they intentionally 'see less' and willfully try to protect their unconnectedness (2004: 147–151, 153–154).

- *On the theme of nature:* The role of nature in Malick's films is the best example of how close a philosophically relevant theme can be aligned with matters of transformational ethics. Again I make this general point with *The Thin Red Line* in mind, although it should hold equally well for his other films. The meanings that analysts attach to nature in *The Thin Red Line* always confirm the direction of their underlying ethical claims. Particular conceptions of nature therefore frame and support the ethical significance that analysts see in Malick's style, as I will show later on. These widely diverging conceptions of nature each attracts

a fitting ethical-transformational stance.<sup>241</sup> A *cruel* or merely *indifferent nature*, for example, implies the ethical need to foster appropriately human values (such as 'calm') both in response to, and despite of, nature (e.g. Critchley, 2005). A *Romantic, spiritual nature*, on the other hand, could promise self-actualization or transcendence through a life that is fundamentally aligned with the natural (cf. Peebles, 2007). Or, as a last example: nature conceived within a radically *materialist worldview* brings to attention our essential continuity with the material universe and, thereby, can motivate an ethic of liberating self-negation (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit, 2004; Macdonald, 2008). Competing interpretations of nature thus provide distinct rationales for the various ethical interests that analysts exhibit in dealing with Malick's style

- *On the theme of unity*: Some narrative themes, lastly, can be transposed more directly into issues of personal transformation. Malick's intimations of the theme of unity (whether with respect to family bonds, social community, military comradeship, shared humanity, etc.), for example, have been taken as grounds for considering how his films relate to the realization of *unity* as transformational value. Analysts thus register a narrative theme as the figurative incidence of a 'higher' transformational value that they take to be beckoning. Stacy Peebles (2007: 161) illustrates this maneuver by noting, in *The Thin Red Line*, that Malick translates the war film trope of the "grudging but productive comradeship" into "a more spiritual concern with universal unity". The film encourages this perspective with family metaphors in dialogue and with various audio-visual allusions to connection and oneness. I will elaborate on this at a later stage.

As these examples suggest, what seems to be prominent 'philosophical' themes in Malick's narratives have just as much ethical relevance when taken through the lens of personal transformation. Insofar as they are approached as philosophical themes, therefore, they provide a context that encourages ethical-transformational tendencies in philosophical evaluations of Malick's style.

### 3.2 Transformationalist Gestures in Malick's 'Authorial Image'

The generally acknowledged intellectual gravitas of Terrence Malick's films is not on account of his films alone. People's perceptions of the persona of 'Terrence Malick', as the contemplative creator behind the films, also play a considerable part in the attraction that philosophers feel toward his work. One major reason

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<sup>241</sup> Although he does not address the question of ethics, David Davies (2008: 572–574) – also in something of a meta-theoretical mode of dealing with Terrence Malick's work – helpfully sketches some typical interpretations of nature in Malick's films. In my analyses below I draw, in part, from his overall distinction between 'naturalistic' and 'Transcendentalist' conceptions of nature.

for this attraction – which has been noted to the point of tedium – is that Malick himself was a professional philosopher. He studied philosophy under Stanley Cavell at Harvard University, lectured at MIT and also translated into English Martin Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons*. This has prompted many to pursue existential-philosophical and phenomenological threads in his films. A great deal of Malick's 'authorial' image, therefore, is based on knowledge of the filmmaker's earlier philosophical activities.

But those who take seriously the idea of a genuinely cinematic form of philosophy like to concentrate more on the fact that Malick *left* professional philosophy for a career in filmmaking. This biographical detail indeed establishes a convenient narrative to support this line of thought. Richard Neer (2011), to mention an example, observes that Malick "threw it all over to become a filmmaker" and did so because, "to this director, film can do things that professional philosophy cannot". The assumption here is that Malick found in the cinematic image something that surpasses the abilities of philosophical discourse.<sup>242</sup> This perceived rejection of philosophy in favor of filmmaking has therefore been especially attractive to philosophers of the 'cinematic thinking' paradigm: for them, Malick's films exemplify a distinctly cinematic thinking that cannot be reduced to the conceptual and verbal means of reflection in traditional philosophy. The notion that Malick chose filmmaking as the 'more appropriate' vehicle for his intellectual pursuits, I should emphasize, is at best a crude speculation. But this impression no doubt develops in allegiance with the philosophical agenda of wanting to approach Malick's films as substantial cinematic contemplations.

Constructions of Malick's intellectual motivations are furthermore fueled by the filmmaker's legendary reticence. After the release of his *Days of Heaven*, Malick retreated into what has become a much publicized 'twenty year hiatus' during which he disappeared from the public radar. In 1998, Malick made a much anticipated return with the release of *The Thin Red Line*. Yet, since this comeback, Malick has persistently shunned any public exposure – be it press interviews, photographs or official appearances at events. Malick is particularly obstinate about not speaking about his films.<sup>243</sup> This silence, not surprisingly, has resulted in a great deal of mythologizing and gradually earned the enigmatic Malick the title of 'reclusive genius' (e.g. Furstenau & MacAvoy, 2007: 179). In their introduction to *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy*, Kendall & Tucker (2011: 3–4) gives a good indication of the kind of wonderment that the elusive Malick elicits:

"Terrence Malick is in fact among the most reticent of filmmakers. He has not given interviews or aided in the promotion of his films

242 Of course, this is not the only way in which Malick's turn to filmmaking has been construed. Heideggerian interpreters suggest, as an alternative, that Malick took to film as a medium that is highly suited to pursuing Heidegger's philosophy (e.g. Furstenau & MacAvoy, 2007).

243 Malick's taking part in an on-stage interview at the Rome Film Festival in 2007 was an extremely rare exception to his avoidance of official public appearances. Yet he agreed to do it on the condition that the event will only focus on his favorite Italian films and, as always, that his own films will not be discussed.

in any way since the release of his first film, *Badlands*, in the early 1970s. He does not permit photographs to be taken of him either on or off the set. He does not explain his films in writing or in any other form of commentary or documentation nor does he publish or release any other kind of writing—nothing, in short, that might offer his viewers a useful tool in approaching the films themselves. Aside from a brief public conversation at the Rome Film Festival in 2007, Malick's silence about his films and about film in general has been complete. In our interconnected, networked, and media saturated age, this kind of reticence is remarkable. It is all the more remarkable for the depth of consideration Malick both reportedly and obviously devotes to every aspect of his craft as a filmmaker. It is remarkable, in short, that such care has been left to speak for itself”.

What I would like to emphasize in all of this is the decidedly transformationalist ‘shape’ of Malick's authorial posture. An ‘authorial posture’ is always an interactive process whereby the author co-constitutes his image in tandem with various other mediating agents – be it critics, journalists, or even philosophers (Meizoz, 2010: 84–85). In Malick's case his refusal to have a public image itself greatly contributes to a very definite and influential image. And central to this image are basic *ascetic gestures*: to *withhold oneself*, to *keep silent*, to *withdraw* from the public attention that normally goes with a topflight filmmaking career. The media, in turn, did its part to embellish these gestures with the kind of tropes that sell magazines – the notions that ‘Malick rejects fame’, that ‘he disappeared for twenty years for some mysterious reason’, and, of course, that he is a privacy-hoarding ‘recluse’.<sup>244</sup>

These resultant ascetic features of Malick's posture are typically construed in ways that further endorse the contemplative aura of the filmmaker-persona and, by extension, his films. Ascetic gestures easily evoke various related conceptions of contemplative activity with deep roots in Western culture. The ascetic topos of seeking social solitude, for example, endows Malick with inherited Romantic notions of the reflective artistic genius who craves *seclusion* for living his calling. This is moreover couched in the much older association between a life of serious contemplation and the need to *retreat* from the ordinary every day – as we for instance find in the religious model of a monk or hermit. Such culturally embedded connections serve to further bolster the contemplative weight that we expect from the products that the ‘recluse’ releases to the public.

A side remark: It is not that such ascetic topoi only reinforce contemplative ones and not the other way around. The relation is reversed when Malick's established contemplative persona, for example, draws more attention to potential ascetic

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<sup>244</sup> The publicity surrounding his twenty year hiatus, especially, solidified the kind of hermetic mystique that surrounds Malick. I refer readers to an article by Michael Nordine (2013), who gives a refreshing take on the dynamics behind this publicity, and offers some much needed debunking of the most endearing myths about Malick.

motifs in his work. It has been noted of *The Thin Red Line*, for example, that there is a *restraint* to Malick's depiction of violence and the body: "the director avoids any overly explicit display of its effects on bodies, such as corpses, the impact of bullets, blood flowing or wounds" (Chion, 2004: 16). Stacey Peebles (2007) argues that what is essentially an ascetic *excision of the body* is crucial to how Malick's adaptation tailors this war narrative to his own purposes. James Jones' 1962 novel had originally strongly foregrounded the physical self through gruesome bodily damage and soldiers' sexual responses to war. Malick's adaptation, however, bluntly withdraws all these corporeal fixations from the story and reduces visual displays of bodily damage to a functional minimum. This drastically alters the thematic thrust of the film which now 'transcends' the war film genre and instead emphasizes the 'transcendental soul' (Peebles, 2007: 153, 156, 162). This ascetic operation that Malick is said to perform on the narrative is perfectly consistent with an age-old tradition, going back to Ancient Greece, that posits the body, desire and the senses as hindrances to the contemplative purposes of the soul. It is therefore to be expected that commentators will also pick up on such ascetic motifs that follow from Malick's perceived contemplative posture.

Malick's *silence* is perhaps the most influential element of his ascetic posturing. While Malick's twenty-year-hush is of the more extreme kind, it fits into the more generally established topos of the writer or artist who refuses to interpret his own work. This topos is typically taken as a measure of care, on the part of the artist, not to pre-empt or reduce the possible meanings of his art. It is moreover seen as motivated by the related belief that art is, and should be approached as, autonomous. This is indeed the sentiment behind what has become a ubiquitous Malick catchphrase, shared by fans and scholars alike: 'his films speak for themselves' (e.g. Tucker & Kendall, 2011: 4; Neer, 2011).

This absence of authorial clarification sits well with the implicit 'interpretative ascetics' of bold film-philosophical positions, as detailed in my discussion of preparatory ethics in the previous chapter. Recall Simon Critchley's (highly idealistic) cautioning against the use of philosophical 'meta' or 'pre-texts' when we deal with Malick's films (2005: 138–139). The filmmaker who ascetically *refrains from speaking* about his films thus presents himself as a model for the equivalent interpretative attitude that the film philosopher is often admonished to adopt: not to presumptively *speak to* or *on behalf of* the film, but to in a sense 'remain silent' and allow the film to speak (see Chapter 3, Section 4). Malick's ascetic gesture of silence also serves as an implicit endorsement of bold philosophical readings that look to pit the supposed feats of cinematic image against the deficiencies of the word, as will be discussed later on (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit, 2004: 124–177). According to this view Malick's films have philosophical value as cinematic reflections that are somehow liberated from the limitations of verbal (philosophical) discourse; and the intentional silence of the filmmaker stands in helpful support of this assumption. The difficulty with this, however, is that the verbal nevertheless abounds in and around Malick's films. His trademark use of inner-monologues via voice-over is perhaps the most consistent stylistic feature of his oeuvre. Likewise Malick's reported practice of prescribing weighty literary

works (of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Fitzgerald, among others), as reference points for his cast and crew members, also stands in interesting contrast to this view (see Ebiri, 2013).

With these brief remarks I hope to give a sense of how Malick's established authorial image – which prominently foregrounds both contemplative and ascetic postures – helps frame the observed reflective nature of his films and elicit the kind of philosophical issues that scholars take up with respect to it. However, I do not wish to create the impression that Malick has a single, consistent authorial image, nor that particular constructions of his authorship are valued uniformly. Regarding the latter, I can note that Malick-deriders rely on the selfsame contemplative posturing yet reach very different conclusions. Although Malick's status as 'recluse' might be generally accepted, the 'genius' part remains a polarizing point of contention. Malick's work is therefore just as much denounced as 'soporific' 'navel-gazing', or efforts at spiritualization which 'bypasses intelligence' and indulges in 'the sentimental' (e.g. Whalen, 1999; Murray, 2013).

Finally, these critical estimations of Malick touch upon another prominent image of the filmmaker. This involves not so much the 'philosopher' or 'thinker', but the closely related figure of the 'mystic' who essentially busies himself with "the ineffable through parabolic narratives and gorgeous shots of nature" (Neer, 2011). There is indeed only a 'thin red line' between what is regarded as Malick's philosophical and his mystical aims (Barnett, 2013: 22). Malick's meta-physical posturing – promoted by deriders and disciples alike – therefore comfortably fits in with the picture that I have sketched up to this point: it relates to the various poetic and spiritual impulses in Malick's work; it is generally consistent with his contemplative posture, insofar as contemplative activities are often thought to give a basis for mystical experiences; and mystical preoccupations are equally consonant with what people would expect from an ostensive ascetic loner. The mystical aspirations attached to Malick also make it especially apparent that his authorial image not only supports certain philosophical agendas, but that it can also prime ethical and transformational expectations that interpreters have of Malick's work. Hannah Patterson (2007a: 2) points out how the image of Malick as 'poetic visionary', for instance, yields one such connection: "through the very nature of his poetic vision Malick is ultimately an artist who reawakens and restores our sense of mystery and philosophical rumination".

How does Malick – as 'philosopher', 'poet' or 'mystic' – achieve such awakenings through his *films*? Let us now, at long last, turn to the question of Malick's contemplative style and the kind of philosophical- and ethical effects that his interpreters believe it achieves.



## 4. Getting from Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation: Three Cases

In order to streamline my meta-analysis of Malick's style, I single out the three stylistic elements that are most prominent in philosophical writing on the filmmaker. They are (a) Malick's cinematic depictions of nature, (b) his uses of voice-over and (c) the effects of switching perspectives. Each of these elements is made to tell its own story of how Malick's style is contemplative. Yet these distinct elements overlap and interact in obvious ways, as my analysis will show. My analysis of one inevitably builds upon the other.

My aim is to sketch how analysts frame the three elements in terms of their relations to other stylistic features, the philosophical-contemplative work that they do and, most of all, the transformational effects that they afford. I resort to my meta-analytical framework, introduced in Chapter 2, to distill and develop the transformational ethics that philosophers adopt in dealing with Malick's style. Their ethical positions call for dissection in terms of pertinently recurring parameters: the supposed *method* whereby the films elicit a *contemplative mode* of transformation; the personal *domain* upon which transformation is said to be exercised (e.g. thoughts, attention, affects, perceptions or 'ways of seeing') and the transformational *value* (or *state*) that is thereby realized (e.g. attention, openness or connection).

For practical reasons I limit my inquiry in this section to what may be called Malick's two 'mid-career films': *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *The New World* (2005). This label, I believe, is warranted by the two distinct sets of films that bookend the mid-career pair. Prior to them are Malick's first two releases in the 1970's – *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978) – representing his early work, before his so-called twenty year hiatus. After these two films we have what is increasingly regarded as a cohesive 'spiritual-quest trilogy' (Young, 2015), featuring a turn to what is generally thought of as more explicit Christian-theological themes. As the kind of films with "a rich afterlife amongst professors of philosophy" (Baskin, 2010), then, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* have by far attracted the most explicitly philosophical commentary and analysis – thus making them ideally suited to my purposes. Moreover, by this mid-stage in his career, Malick has fully matured into the key stylistic traits that are of concern here.

### 4.1 Cinematographic Presentations of Nature & Landscape

It comes as no surprise that Malick's photography of nature and landscape is frequently singled out as essential to his philosophical appeal. Many, if not most, accounts of Malick's style coalesce around the filmmaker's enduring fascination with nature. It certainly is true that he draws our visual attention to nature. This is not only by virtue of its photographed beauty or richness, but also its often cited disjunctive composition through editing – what the uninitiated may experience

as a 'slide show'-effect.<sup>245</sup> A common refrain among commentators is that Malick's punctuating cutaways to nature are unmotivated by plot and only loosely connected to character and established diegesis (e.g. Davies, 2009: 573–574; Rybin, 2011: 15; Pippin, 2013: 250, 269; Polan, 2004: 272). Because of this striking and free-floating salience, "images of nature seem to provide an additional semantic level that plays against both the narrative and the other semantic elements" (Davies, 2009: 574). Considered from this angle, Malick's contemplative cinema becomes a *meditation on nature*. I present readings by Simon Critchley, Robert Silberman and Robert Pippin as instructive instances of this approach to Malick's style.

### Simon Critchley: Calm in the Presence of Nature

Critchley's (2005 [2002]) well-known reading of *The Thin Red Line* – an early and influential exemplar of film-philosophy – is a good place to start. He argues that the metaphysical issues raised in the film are framed and answered by a pervasive 'experience of calm', which he sees as the key to Malick's art. This, clearly, is an interpreted stylistic effect. And Critchley largely bases this effect on stylistic devices that put *nature* on display.<sup>246</sup> He notes, for example, the 'beautiful indifference' of nature imagery that repeatedly punctuates human drama and suffering. At the moment of private Witt's death, for instance, the film abruptly cuts to soaring trees that remain unaffected by the tragedy below. In Malick's visual presentation, Critchley (2005: 147) describes, "one has the sense of things simply being looked at, just being what they are – trees, water, birds, dogs, crocodiles or whatever. Things simply are, and are not molded to a human purpose". But the apparent philosophical appeal of this calm, impassive nature is as much a transformational one: Critchley finds that the film's calmness becomes also the viewer's calmness. As he puts it, "There is a calm at the heart of Malick's art, a calmness to his cinematic eye, a calmness that is also communicated by his films, that *becomes the mood of his audience*: after watching *The Thin Red Line* we feel calm" (2005: 147 [emphasis added]).

In this way, Critchley poses a transformational relevance for nature-related devices: they exercise a transformation within the *domains* of affect and emotion, as the 'experience of calm', their supposed effect, prefigures the state of calmness that the viewer attains. Yet this claimed affective state seems to suggest a deeper ethical terminal: the normative ideal, or *value*, in question here is a transformation toward *openness* (cf. Sinnerbrink, 2006: 33–34). This is in the sense that the 'neverthelessness' of nature, as rendered by the film, is understood to prompt an ethical posture of *acceptance* and *letting things be*. Although Critchley (2005: 138–139) takes issue with reading Malick through established philosophical 'pre-texts', Sinnerbrink (2006: 33) rightly notes Critchley's struggle to get away

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245 "If I wanted to watch a slide show, I would have just watched my cable box's screen saver. It was Boring to the last moment, and you never really know what was really happening" (*Amazon Review of To the Wonder* by 'Klebrchelp', 23 November 2013).

246 In addition to Malick's cinematographic presentations of nature, Critchley also cites the near constant presence of natural sounds like wind, water, and birdsong (2005: 137, 146).

from Heidegger in his ethical conclusions. Critchley's account boils down to a Heideggerian ethic of 'releasement', even if he does not call it by the name.

Critchley's reading of Malick announces two important issues for the rest of my analysis. The first is that nature, as theme, is a constant and significant reference point for the ethical-transformational potential that philosophers find in Malick's films. Assumptions about 'the nature of nature' are especially relevant when philosophers address a nature-related device in Malick's style. Such diverse assumptions govern the kinds of effects as well as the ethical importance that such a device is said to have. Critchley's account assumes that *The Thin Red Line* puts on display an *indifferent, unenchanted* nature in which *things simply are*. This follows from what he takes to be Malick's own "naturalistic conception of nature" (2005: 146). In this view, the film adopts the contemplative method of leading the viewer to see human drama and suffering relative to the backdrop of this (version of) nature. The implied ethics of transformation here hinges, as we will repeatedly see, on how the film can align the viewer with a certain *awareness of nature*. This, again, shows the film's 'experience of calm' to be a secondary matter. We may read Critchley as saying that calm is the only proper response to an indifferent nature (see Davies, 2009: 5). But surely the primary claim is this: that Malick's style first brings us to *recognize* a 'neverthelessness' to nature, thereby allowing for our experience of calm.

All of this ties in with a second, wider issue that emerges in Critchley's essay: assumptions about what makes films (do) philosophy play a decisive role in how philosophers evaluate Malick's style. When it comes to Malick, philosophers are *not* typically inspired by a motive of Knowledge<sup>247</sup>, as I described it in Chapter 1. Barring the rare exception – like the claim that Malick "presents a dialectical analysis with his camera" (Manning, 2011: 172) – philosophers do not see his films as offering us forms of knowledge, such as illustrations, arguments or thought experiments.<sup>248</sup> It appears that Malick's exuberance of style and his narrative abstraction much rather encourage a motive of Subjectivity: many philosophers, that is, locate Malick's philosophical worth with the movements of thought or experience that his films set off, be it acts of wonder, questioning or simply an experience of calm.

247 A popular view is that Malick himself shuns discursive forms of philosophical knowledge (which is no doubt related to his 'silent' authorial posture discussed in Section 3.2 above). The likes of Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 140) find fodder for this claim by observing a "renunciation of verbal argument" in Malick's dialogue and voice-overs. This, however, stands in stark contrast to someone like Russell Manning (2011), who claims that *The Thin Red Line* stages a dialectical argument. Malick's "cinematic philosophy", as he sees it, comprises both verbalized views and extra-verbal devices: "The weaving together of viewpoints and attitude, the juxtaposing of images and counterpoints allows us to think through the scene as an argument that contains multiple sides, perspectives, and inputs" (ibid.: 172).

248 Critchley, in fact, raises this very point, explicitly opposing forms of Knowledge as condition for film-philosophy (see Chapter 1, Section 4.3.1.). In Critchley's words: "a consideration of Malick's art demands that we take seriously the idea that film is less an illustration of philosophical ideas and theories – let's call that a philoso-fugal reading – and more a form of philosophizing, of reflection, reasoning and argument" (2005: 139).

However, Critchley, we have seen, resorts also to the option of Nature, another motive that features strongly in film-philosophical discourse on Malick, often in combination with that of Subjectivity. To claim Nature as a condition for film-philosophy is to ascribe the philosophical achievement of a film to it having some ontological connection with reality: films can disclose the world, they can make things present, they can convey the nature of things. For Critchley, the philosophical value of Malick's presentations of nature is precisely that – it *makes nature present*. We should, of course, not confuse the three separate matters that are at stake here: Nature as condition for films to do philosophy; visual depictions of nature as a stylistic device; and nature as a prominent theme. Yet Critchley's case makes it evident how these notions inform one another. The position that film-philosophy involves 'making nature present' obviously prioritizes, for him and others like him, elements of style that explicitly relate to the natural environment. (Philosophers who pose a Subjectivity motive, in contrast, give more attention to the role of subjectively inflected devices, like voice-over.) And the Nature motive in film-philosophy will inevitably involve certain interpretations of nature as a philosophical theme: the irony in the seeming neutrality of saying *The Thin Red Line* presents things 'just being the way they are' is that Critchley still makes decided assumptions about the 'indifferent nature' that is said to be on display.

### **Robert Silberman: Nature as a Challenge to Imagination**

Robert Silberman (2007), unlike Critchley, detects a great deal more *enchantment* in the nature of Malick's nature. It is perhaps because of this that Silberman envisages another domain for the device's transformative work – not that of affective response, but, interestingly, the viewer's *imagination*.

Silberman argues that representations of nature and landscape in *The Thin Red Line* form the main device through which Malick expresses his views. He likens it to a "philosophical proving ground" for testing the ideas that the film's characters express (2007: 170). Here it is noteworthy that Silberman, like many others, sides with the perspective of Private Witt, whom he takes to represent the film's spiritual point of view. (As we shall see, the supposed priority of Witt's perspective remains a point of contention among commentators.) Even though his ideas are made explicit through voice-over and dialogue, they are ultimately couched in a broader visual outlook: Silberman claims that the film's final monologue, for instance, is backed up by "luminous visuals" that "provide an unmediated, nonverbal argument for the radiant splendour of the world and the victory of a faith in spirit" (ibid. 2007: 174). So while Private Witt challenges our sensibilities by saying that there exists 'another world' in the midst of war and death, it is actually Malick's extravagantly rich depictions of nature that drives this point home. The ethical upshot of this, for Silberman, is that the film "poses a challenge to our powers of imagination" (ibid.:173). Yet this conclusion only follows, in this case, from the sort of *spiritual sublimity* as the *effect* that he sees in Malick's treatment of nature. In Silberman's account, therefore, the film's contemplative method consists of bringing the viewer to "a spiritual version of landscape": it uses verbal devices

to name the issue of “another world”, but employs visuals of landscape to give us a sense of what this may actually be (2007: 173). Its transformational work consists of *cultivating our artistic imagination*, thus enabling a vision of the world that is open to possibilities of renewal and redemption.

### Robert Pippin: Interrogative Attention

Robert Pippin (2013), in turn, examines *The Thin Red Line* in terms of what he designates as the film’s ‘interrogative mode’. He sees this as a particular contemplative effect, channeled through two devices: the moving pictures of nature in combination with the voice-over monologues. The former express an ‘aesthetic interrogation’, which is in counterpoint to the ‘discursive interrogation’ of the latter. On the basis of their overlapping functions Pippin is able to discern ‘meditative’ qualities in each of these devices (e.g. *ibid.*: 249–250, 269). Yet, as far as transformational effect goes, Pippin is mostly interested in Malick’s almost ‘devout’ concentration on the natural world. He explains it as such:

“[B]oth the presence of the non-plot-driven photographs and the seriousness, even solemnity of the attention to such objects (often heightened by the musical score) create a general expectation of a different kind of attention from the viewer, and the seriousness of the tone suggests much more than mere atmospherics. The effect of the sort of framing, attentiveness, and lingering over the living things is to alter what we are actually to be attending to. It is not merely the objects we see when framed this way but rather, given the lingering attention of the camera, if one can put it this way, the objects in the light of such attention, photographed as if seen in a mode of interrogative attention that, by its very intensity and independence from the plot, detaches the objects from any normal intercourse with viewers and allows some other dimension of meaningfulness (or some different sort of question about life) to emerge visually, and so requires some other stance or attitude to be possible with regard to such a presence. To a large extent that suggested stance is similar in tone to the voice-overs: intensely interrogative and unresolved” (Pippin, 2013: 269).

From this it is clear that Pippin detects in Malick’s images of nature a freedom and intensity that prompts in viewers a modification of their *attention*. He thus illustrates how something like attention – or awareness, in more typical transformationalist parlance – can double up as both the *domain* and *value* of an ethic of transformation: Malick’s treatment of nature both has *an effect on* our attention and helps create an *ideal mode* of ‘interrogative’ attention, as supposedly modeled by the film’s own attentiveness.

Yet one may still ask of this attentive mode, ‘attention *to what?*’ Presumably, there must be an overseeing value or ideal that qualifies the nature of this focused

attention, but this remains ineffable. The most that Pippin divulges is to describe it as a “sense of ontological attention” that can disclose for us an intuitive and pre-discursive dimension of meaning in things (ibid.: 270–271). Yet he adds that this dimension of meaning “also somehow announces its own unavailability for any determinate thinking, as if something is also being withheld or hidden from such discursive intelligibility” (ibid.: 271). His inability to formulate what we actually get from the film suggests that Pippin also follows a Nature-led approach to film-philosophy: this motive typically emphasizes that film can present language-transcending traces of the ‘real’ that runs up against the insufficiency of discursive knowledge (and philosophy of the like) to come to terms with it. Pippin’s commitment to this position also shows in his claim that our transformed ‘ontological attention’ entails an attention to ontological questions of ‘Being’, in a grander philosophical sense: “we see not the mere beings”, he says, “but see them in the light of the question of what it is for them to be at all” (Pippin, 2013: 270).

The quote above also points to an interesting contemplative *method* that Pippin attributes to Malick’s style. He may be rather fuzzy about actual *ends* of transformation, but is quite explicit on how the film establishes a *mode* of potential transformation. Pippin identifies a range of devices that negate meaning-making. And while he does not call it by this name, he attributes to them *effects of ambiguity*: “the viewer has to struggle to find some point of orientation”, he says, and experiences a “sense of being lost” (ibid.: 249). Various elements in *The Thin Red Line* are said to contribute to this kind of effect: (a) its de-emphasis of narrative meaning<sup>249</sup>; (b) how it initially raises genre expectations only to frustrate them<sup>250</sup>; (c) contrasting, complex relations between images and voice-over<sup>251</sup>; and (d) the ‘independence’ of nature imagery from the plot.<sup>252</sup> The point, for Pippin, is the contemplative work that the resultant ambiguity performs: it *forces our attention* on the film’s two main interrogative devices, nature photography and voice-overs (2013: 265, 267, 269). The inherent method here is one of ‘withholding’ certain features, thereby creating ambiguity, in order to amplify the effect of others:

“In the way negative theology is held to be itself a mode of knowledge about God, Malick’s negation of narrative and character conventions and patterns of intelligibility, we might say, forces us to

249 This de-emphasis consists of not allowing “the narrative line or even character conflict to carry the primary meaning or the primary significance of what we are seeing” and, furthermore, inverting and ironizing our narrative expectations (Pippin, 2013: 267).

250 Pippin explains that *The Thin Red Line* invokes genre conventions of the ‘Hollywood World War II movie’. Yet these “create expectations and suggest explanations that are then undermined, refused, left open, made to seem irrelevant, made mysterious, or even ironized” (2013: 249).

251 “Malick often composes his movies with contrasting and interlocking visualizations of, or visual embodiments of, or allegorical allusions to, or even visual contrasts with voiced reflective meditations” (Pippin, 2013: 249–250).

252 Pippin (2013: 269) notes, for example, that “there is no internal plot-related reason for editing in, at various points, shots of such organic life and sunlight”. Moreover “we do not see establishing shots for any point of view”; and we do not see characters “looking at what the camera is looking at” (ibid.).

see things about dramatic events and the characters and the visual images in a distinct way, in a kind of fresh strangeness, a strangeness echoed in the photography of nature” (Pippin, 2013: 265).

It is thus by subtraction – an implicit *ascetic method*, if you like, which withholds certainty of meaning from the viewer – that Malick is said to pave the way for the film’s contemplative mode of transformation. As is often the case, however, the link between this contemplative *mode* (*drawing* our attention) and the expected transformational *effect* (*transforming* our attention) remains tenuous. Our attention drawn to images of nature does not entail that all of us will necessarily see them in the ‘fresh strangeness’ that Pippin hopes for. Nevertheless, Pippin’s hope does underscore the typical ethical-transformational interests that accompany interpretations of nature in Malick’s films.

## 4.2 Voice-Over

I now turn to what is certainly Malick’s most recognizable stylistic device, the case of his extended voice-over monologues. In an era in which the use of voice-overs has become increasingly rare, Malick is known for using the voice-over in a very specific way. It is easy enough to see how this use of the device makes critics speak of a contemplative cinema: Malick’s voice-overs give voice to characters’ inner contemplations. Malick refuses to spoon-feed his audience through dialogue, opting instead to verbalize the meditative free association through which his characters try to make sense of the world. These reflections also provide an obvious resource for philosophical interpretations of his films. In his matured work, especially, voice-overs are of an increasingly interrogative nature that articulates meta-physical issues like death, transcendence, and the meaning of life. The voice-over adds a separate “contentful element”, as Davies (2008: 575–576) puts it, that brings a philosophical focus to depicted events that would otherwise not have been there.

Malick’s meditative voice-overs, to be sure, attract just as many connections with transformational ethics as it does with contemplation *per se*. This is not only a matter of what is said, but also how the voice-over is deployed within particular narratives. If a voice-over monologue belongs to a character portrayed in the film, it creates a sense of an ethical self that reflectively engages with its own life and experiences. The retrospective voice-overs of Malick’s first two films, for example, convey someone who is distanced from her life as she evaluates it from some future state. In the present tense monologues of Malick’s later work, characters increasingly address and interrogate themselves.<sup>253</sup> These later voice-overs, moreover, tend to play out in contexts where they also typify inner prayers or

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253 Here are two samples of such self-interrogation in *The New World*. Pocahontas: “Mother, why can I not feel as I should... Must? Once false, I must not be again. Take out the thorn”. John Smith: “If only I could go down that river. To love her in the wild... Forget the name of Smith. I should tell her. Tell her what? It was just a dream... I am now awake”.

confessions. As a result, commentators such as Furstenau & MacAvoy (2007: 187) find it easy to equate Malick's use of voice-over with the 'inwardness' of characters' reflections. Yet it is not only about what happens but also how it happens: the typical Malick voice-over has a quietly reciting, 'whispery' quality that adds to its sense of private introspection, sometimes amid scurrying activity and other people talking. The impression of the voice's distant, removed interiority is sometimes further enhanced by muted diegetic sound. So, since people commonly perform such forms of self-reflection, or self-dialogue, as a *technique* of personal transformation, Malick's voice-overs can be taken as staging for us precisely that. This connotation of self-transformation is evident, for instance, in the observation that Malick's voice-overs "suggest a striving for self-understanding" (Rybin, 2011: 28).

Malick's use of voice-overs is of importance to philosophers who locate the potential of film to do philosophy within a general condition of Subjectivity – this device, after all, "represent[s] the subjectivity" of characters and "provide[s] a psychological thickness that would otherwise be lacking" (Davies, 2008: 577). The simplest claim, in this regard, would be to say that the represented thoughts of characters stimulate and guide the viewers' philosophical self-reflections. This, however, assumes a simple, unexplained complicity between the voice-over and what the viewer thinks.<sup>254</sup>

Instead, most commentators who express an interest in the voice-over locate its contemplative-philosophical appeal in its interplay with other stylistic devices and the combined effects that they yield. A recurring claim is that Malick's voice-overs (telling) stand in stark contrast to events on screen (showing):<sup>255</sup> at best the relationship between the two is allusive or ironic; at worst the connection remains entirely enigmatic.<sup>256</sup> The disparity between the devices of showing and telling is interpreted as a deliberate attempt at creating *effects of incongruity* and *ambiguity*, which is taken to spur the viewer to heightened meaning-making and reflection.<sup>257</sup> Carl Plantinga (2010), for example, narrows the contemplative pull of such incongruity-effects down to the domain of *affect*. He argues that *The Thin Red Line* does not develop a unified structure of feeling, as is conventionally the case, but one marked by affective counterpoint – the film constantly juxtaposes

254 Critchley's brief mention of voice-over suggests something of this approach: "The technique of the voiceover allows the character to assume a distance from the cinematic action and a complicity with the audience, an intimate distance that is meditative, ruminative, at times speculative. It is like watching a movie with someone whispering into your ear" (2005:137).

255 See, for example, Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 134–135, 143), Davies (2008: 58–61), Kendall (2011: 150), Neer (2011), Pippin (2013: 249–250), Rybin (2011: 28), Virvidaki (2014: 26) and Walden (2011: 197).

256 The theoretical dichotomy of showing versus telling is of course well entrenched in film studies and beyond. For a well-known overview of theories of film narration in terms of the dichotomy, see David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985: 3–26).

257 Yet this ambiguity is not necessarily the most edifying of experiences when, again, it comes to some online reviewers. One such reviewer notes of *To the Wonder*: "It was very confusing, disconcerting, to try and figure what was being said to who and in what language. The subtitles were on-screen, but it was difficult to decide: were they thinking? Speaking? Huh? It was sort of like watching a silent movie with the wrong subtitles" (*Amazon Review* by "Reeves", 5 December 2013).



“differently valenced, affect-laden representations” that result in “affective incongruity” (ibid.: 98). And since there are cognitive implications to emotions and affects, as Plantinga reminds us, such mismatches invite speculation about their meaning. Our experience of affective disunity therefore cues emotions like wonder and curiosity, as well as the acts of rumination that accompany them (ibid.: 93, 95). The implied transformational value of this stylistic design is what Plantinga labels as encouraging “a contemplative mode of film viewing” (ibid.: 93).

Plantinga’s analysis poses a transformation of *heightened* reflection – *contemplation itself*, quite simply, becomes the transformational *value*. Other philosophers, who roughly follow the same line of thought, detail more specific outcomes. Steven Rybin and David Davies both see Malick’s voice-overs as helping realize a value of *enhanced awareness*.

### Steven Rybin: Self-Reflection & Voicing Meaning

Steven Rybin (2011), to begin with, locates the philosophical functions of Malick’s films in the general disparity that he finds between the voice and the visual world. He sees Malick’s characters as striving,<sup>258</sup> heroically, to voice meaning over and against the ‘sensually dispersive’ and ‘inexhaustible’ film worlds that they are subject to.<sup>259</sup>

This requires some unraveling. Rybin’s claim of a ‘sensually dispersive design’ is his version of what is often cited as the ‘*impressionistic*’, ‘*elliptical*’ or ‘*fragmented*’ effect of Malick’s style. And he derives this effect from how Malick depicts his ‘film world’, which again comes down to Malick’s free-floating *depictions of nature*. As is the case with earlier mentioned commentators, Rybin refers to a “dispersive array of natural imagery” which he characterizes as “discontinuous”, “non-causal” and “unmotivated within the diegesis” (ibid.: 15). Rybin therefore sees in Malick’s voice-overs a striving to give meaning (telling) and hold together these disparate impressions (showing) of an ultimately inexhaustible nature (cf. ibid.: 30). He explains:

“These characters are not, strictly speaking, philosophers, but in their struggle to shape meaning out of the shards of light, sound, movement, and beauty to which they are subject, they, no less than the viewer, voice their own creative interpretations of Malick’s fictional worlds” (Rybin, 2011: 13).

258 Rybin adopts Heidegger’s notion of ‘striving’ as employed in his famous *Origin of the Work of Art* (1971) essay.

259 Rybin furthermore accepts a ‘complicity’, as mentioned earlier, between the character’s and viewer’s thoughts. He claims that Malick’s films function as a “companion to thought” by virtue of the characters being “the experiential site of our [the viewer’s] film-philosophy” (2012: xv; 2011: 14). Engaging with a Malick character, Rybin explains, involves “a process of accompanying characters as they creatively imagine and shape meaning and identity” (2012: xii).

Viewers, as this quote suggests, are just as much confronted by the 'sensually dispersive' effect of Malick's film worlds. They are thereby drawn into a similar process of meaning-making, alongside the meanings voiced by the filmmaker's characters.<sup>260</sup> With this Rybin, too, looks at effects of *ambiguity* as the *method* whereby Malick's style draws viewers into a contemplative mode: this is because viewers have to contend with visual impressions of a world that is not readily intelligible and impressions which remain inconclusive; and, moreover, they have to evaluate these visuals in light of the meanings articulated through the voice-over. This process culminates in a particular *value* of *awareness*: it may instill in us a greater awareness of what Rybin describes as the 'phenomenological fact' of our own striving for meaning (ibid.: 30, 38). Part of this awareness is the ethically significant recognition of the limitations inherent to our interpretations of the world.<sup>261</sup>

As is often the case with Subjectivity-inspired approaches, this instance of film-philosophy thus becomes for the viewer an exercise in *self-reflection*. Rybin basically says that Malick's style fosters a greater awareness of our *own experience* (of striving for meaning). We may see this as acquiring *knowledge of the self* – we gain insight into our own condition as meaning-making subjects, who "can never reach a point where nature's mystery is foreclosed [...] by human experience" (2011: 30). And this self-awareness can extend to improving *insight into our existing knowledge*, seeing that Malick's film worlds "challenge viewers to reflect upon the ideas brought to, and inspired by, each viewing" (ibid.: 28). Rybin says of Malick's characters that their introspective voice-overs suggest an attempt at "self-understanding" (ibid.). This notion, it turns out, captures much of the transformational value that he imagines for the viewer.

The motive of Subjectivity that Rybin entertains also incorporates into itself a motive of Nature. The philosophical crux of Malick's style, for Rybin, lies in how a subjectivizing device – first person voice-over – runs up against the bewildering visual presence of the film world. He details the latter, for instance, as "an autonomous presence that opens up an interpretive question for both the character and the viewer" (2011: 16). This again raises the by now familiar theme that film can present a world that eclipses our experience and refuses to succumb to any final knowledge thereof. Yet Rybin, to his credit, still hangs on to the philosophical

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260 Here Rybin, of course, gives equal recognition to the role of voice-over: the verbalized views of characters not only encourage the viewer's own meaning-making activity but moreover inflect it. This entails that the thoughtful viewer, as he puts it, makes meaning "alongside" the characters (2011: 13–14). But, again, the straightforward complicity Rybin assumes between character and viewer is troublesome – and he does little to account for it. The closest that he comes is to note that the cinematic encounter is inherently relational (2012: xiii); and to claim, only in passing, that "Malick's cinema insists upon a degree of empathetic commitment to the fictional lives dramatized" (2012: xvii).

261 On this point Rybin explicitly calls on Heidegger. He explains the issue in the following way: "Malick's characters do not hold together or settle the meaning of imagery or efface its ongoing sensuous presence in our own experience [...] In this respect, Malick's narrators embody the quality of striving that Heidegger discusses in the artwork essay [...] They exist not to settle questions of Being for us, but to open up those questions, and to dynamically set in motion an interplay between the sensuous material of the cinema and its potential philosophical significance" (2011: 25).

relevance of Subjectivity in Malick's films – and thus affirms voice-over as the device that carries it. It is worth noting that Rybin accords equal significance to voice-overs – in an irremovable, inconclusive tension with presentations of nature – and treats them as raising genuine subjective responses to the world, worthy of consideration. In contrast, analysts led by a Nature-motive can be rather dismissive of Malick's voice-overs and effectively judge them to be beside the point, as we shall see. These analysts, it will become clear, are interested in personal transformation that aligns our awareness with the world 'outside' ourselves. In Rybin's account, however, we find the exact opposite: our experience of Malick's film worlds leads us right back to an awareness of the meaning-seeking self.

### David Davies: Self-reflection & Embodied Agency

I now turn to David Davies (2008c), who extracts from Malick's style an overall disparity involving the voice-over. He argues that *The Thin Red Line* uses voice-over to the effect of creating a contrast between the characters' reflective thinking and their depicted actions – the latter of which he accepts to be of an essentially embodied nature, seeing that Malick's opaque characters respond to the world in a "less deliberately mediated way" (ibid.: 55). Davies' commitment to Subjectivity as a condition for film-philosophy is clear: the philosophical possibilities of Malick's cinema reside in how it presents different "inflections of our cognitive engagement with the world" (ibid.: 50). And Davies' emphasis on modes of embodied experience indicates that he, too, attends to a motive of Nature, albeit with a different accent: it concerns not nature, as 'world,' which stands over and against the reflective subject, but nature as an inherent part of the sensing subject.<sup>262</sup>

Davies' account sets the device of voice-over monologues against images that convey the tactile, visceral qualities of the characters' embodied engagement with nature; hence he does not focus on images of nature *per se*. He bases the supposed haptic effects of the imagery on a few related features: depictions of actual hands and touching; photography that accentuates the textures and tangible qualities of things; and a moving camera that visibly brushes against its natural surroundings (ibid.: 56). For Davies, these are all gestures of the spontaneous, embodied manner in which the characters respond to the world.

Davies, however, recognizes that Malick's voice-over reflections, even though standing apart from the characters' actions, represent a mode of human engagement in its own right. As Davies sees it, Malick's style thus urges the viewer to contemplation by staging two separate modes of human agency, side by side. The discursive thoughts in the voice-over do not motivate a character's actions, nor do they explain a character's motivations for acting. But they do show how the characters reflect on their embodied engagements with the world (ibid.: 60).<sup>263</sup> Again, the claimed philosophical payoff of such a juxtaposition coincides

<sup>262</sup> In terms of approaches to film-philosophy, Davies' specific emphasis on embodied experience puts him in the company Vivian Sobchack, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

<sup>263</sup> Russell Manning, who focusses on philosophical dialectics in *The Thin Red Line*, comes to similar conclusions.

with a transformative exploration of the self: Davies argues that this stylistic arrangement makes viewers more aware of the distinctness of *human* embodied agency as it is standing apart from the rest of the natural world. Like Rybin, Davies poses a certain *awareness*, as transformational value, which is directed at (*our own*) *experience*. By pairing the characters' visceral actions with voiced thoughts, *The Thin Red Line* thus affords a *self-reflective insight* regarding the richness and complexity of this experience, which Davies describes as delicately poised on a balance between our embodied agency and our rational response (ibid.: 61).

### 4.3 Perspective-Effects

In my third and final case, I consider a perhaps more elusive feature of Malick's cinema, although it is a feature that is often invoked. Here the focus is directed not at any stylistic device, strictly, but at a more broadly perceived *effect* – what I roughly group together as the postulated 'perspective-effects' of Malick's style. Philosophers are keen to explain Malick's approach to film, not only in terms of '*perspectives*' (e.g. Macdonald, 2008: 91–93; Manning, 2011: 172; Sinnerbrink, 2011d: 180–182), but also by using related notions such as '*points of view*' (e.g. Yates, 2003; Coplan, 2008: 72; VIVIDAKI, 2014: 29, 31); '*ways of seeing*' (e.g. Bersani & Dutoit, 2004:158–160; Davies, 2008: 50–53; 61–62; Pippin, 2013: 273, 275); and '*worldviews*' or '*ways of knowing*' (e.g. Walden, 2011: 197–198). It has to be said that these terms are not used with great clarity. They are often applied interchangeably, with a casual disregard for the difference between their literal and figurative meanings or, for that matter, whether they refer to subjective perception or knowledge. As a result, the highly accommodating concept of 'perspective' can be related to just about any stylistic device conceivable: analysts single out, for example, Malick's cinematographic presentations of nature and voice-over, as we have seen, but also dialogues, juxtaposed elements, point of view shots, close-ups, notable camera movements and prominent music scores: a variety of devices is taken to express 'perspective'.

Besides this, the narratives of *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*, alone, provide ample material for adducing this effect. *The Thin Red Line*, for instance, explicitly raises the question of diverse perspectives as one of its central themes.<sup>264</sup> This is especially evident in the confrontation between the spiritual worldview of Private Witt ("I've seen another world") and the sober materialist outlook of Sergeant Welsh ("there ain't no world but this one"), backed up by a cinematography which highlights the 'upwards' orientation of the one and the 'downwards' orientation of

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Like Davies, he identifies a tension between what characters are doing and what they are thinking: "They act so brutally and so instinctively for self-preservation and victory. But inside they are pondering much deeper and darker questions" (2011: 166).

<sup>264</sup> The theme is articulated, among other things, in voice-over reflections such as the following: "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain... Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory, feels something smiling through it".

the other (see Plantinga, 2010: 94–97; Rybin, 2011: 28–29). Opposing perspectives therefore reflexively interpret and interrogate one another.

From this angle, then, the thoughtful aura of Malick's style comes from the strong sense of perspective – and, indeed, the *competing* perspectives and *shifts in* perspective – that he is said to establish. As one should expect, the ethical value of this stylistic effect is typically connected to the transformational domain of the viewer's own 'perspective'. Critic Jon Baskin's (2010) reflections on this connection are paradigmatic. He proceeds from the understanding that Malick's cinema foregrounds "perspective" and "problems of seeing" and therefore finds that it puts the transformational demand on viewers "to see in a new way". He pinpoints a "visual ethic" in what he calls Malick's "education" of our perceptions: namely, for us to take on Malick's overarching cinematic perspective that can reconcile opposing realities by showing us their common root (ibid.).

### Whose Perspective?

This, however, raises the question of who or what exemplifies the ideal, 'higher' perspective of Malick's films. There are, after all, many perspectives at play – not only those of characters, but the meta-physical perspectives of 'Spirit' or nature, that of the filmmaker, and that of the contentious entity that Baskin and others call 'the camera'.

When it comes to character perspectives, the assessments of Private Witt in *The Thin Red Line* is particularly instructive. It is fairly obvious that this "more angelic, self-questioning, philosophical figure" stands out from the crowd (Critchley, 2005: 136). Yet analysts (Baskin among them) take this as a reason to accept that Witt's is the privileged and indeed the model perspective of the film. Another analyst, Stacey Peebles (2007: 157), notes that "though Malick enters the consciousness of other characters in the film, he always returns to Witt, and the film's images are invariably framed the way that Witt would see them – quiet, calm and untainted".<sup>265</sup> A recurring claim, therefore, is that Witt sees the world as 'Malick's camera' shows it – and thus personifies (embodies, if you will) the educating, larger perspective of the film (and, by implication, the filmmaker).

But the supposed priority of Witt's perspective is by no means a settled issue. Furstenuau & MacAvoy (2007: 189), quite on the contrary, finds that the film does not endorse any perspective. Pippin (2013: 167–168, 273), likewise, observes that no point of view trumps another and, rightly, warns against making a character's view representative of the film or its maker. And Iain Macdonald (2011: 108n20) goes entirely against the stream by singling out Welsh's materialism as a 'correction' of Witt's perspective. These interpretative divergences give some much needed food for thought: why should Witt's 'ethic', whichever way you want to understand it, be *the* means to deal with the hardships of war? Welsh's view that one survives by making

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<sup>265</sup> Also see, for further examples, Bersani & Dutoit (2004: 158–160, 163–164), Silberman (2007: 173–174), Davies (2008: 51–54, 61–62) and Platinga (2010: 95–97).

oneself a 'rock' can be equally legitimate, if not more tenable. For this opposing camp, therefore, Private Witt's way of seeing things is simply one among many.

The refusal to privilege any character's perspective has a notable implication: it endorses the idea that Malick achieves some *larger* perspective that is taken to educate the viewer. One option is to see a higher perspective in the concurrence of conflicting perspectives, whereby the viewer can holistically consider different sides at once. Russell Manning (2011: 170–175) argues that this form of 'dialectic argument' in Malick's cinematic philosophy privileges the viewer's point of view to acquire a 'higher unity of thought'.<sup>266</sup> Alternatively, one can attribute a perspective-transcending perspective to the visual exploits of 'Malick's camera', as Steven Rybin for instance does. "Because Malick's camera sees the world from a different perspective", he says, "it always remains at one remove from the meanings its characters ascribe to their experiences" (2011: 37). And through this autonomy of the camera, cinema becomes a different way of seeing, relative to human perception (ibid.: 18). Yet another option is to define Malick's overarching perspective as one of a meta-physical, spiritual realm. Katarina Virvidaki (2014) points to ambivalent applications of voice-over and camerawork in *The Thin Red Line* which, she says, create the feel of a dynamic, de-personalized perspective. This ethereal effect of a "point of view that transcends the limits of empirical, naturalistic understanding" is said to carry affective meaning, rendering for the viewer an experience of wonder (ibid.: 28–29).<sup>267</sup>

However, if one wishes to pose a source for a 'higher' perspective in Malick's cinema, there is a much more palpable candidate: the vast presence of *nature*. In what follows, I will consider three philosophical readings of Malick which focus on perspective-effects relating to the theme of nature – that of Robert Sinnerbrink, Iain Macdonald and the widely cited analysis by Bersani & Dutoit. My purpose is to bring my meta-analyses full circle, as we have already seen how nature prominently features in analyses of Malick's work.

### **Robert Sinnerbrink: The Perspective of Nature**

Robert Sinnerbrink (2011d) describes the philosophical ambition of *The New World* as an attempt at letting us experience an 'impossible' point of view. With this, Sinnerbrink attributes to the film a particularly elusive instance of what I call

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<sup>266</sup> Manning elaborates the philosophical and practical value of this encounter as such: "We can begin to understand how thinking itself is not a binary process of right/wrong or good/bad. The subtleties and nuances of these scenes display the fundamental problem with thinking itself. Conclusions are difficult to universalize. Truth is slippery. It has to be worked at. Malick brings these concerns onto the screen as revelation" (2011: 172).

<sup>267</sup> In addition to Malick's autonomously roaming camera, Virvidaki explains how voice-over is used to destabilize point of view. As mentioned earlier, voice-over in *The Thin Red Line* is not only ubiquitous, with multiple voices blending into one another, but is often uttered by an indeterminate character that simultaneously encapsulates the other points of view (2014: 29, 31–33). In this way the voice-overs construct a "enveloping soul" that merges individual subjectivities (ibid.: 35); and an "idiosyncratic mode of thinking able to transcend its private origin" (ibid.: 32).

a perspective-effect, one that he connects to a few related perspectives – historical, mythical, and metaphysical. To begin with, Sinnerbrink argues that the film relates the imagined experience of the foundation of colonial America – a meeting of colonists and natives, the Old World and The New – which involves the “intensively subjective reflection” of two contrasting points of view (ibid.: 181). Then, Malick knowingly looks upon this encounter, says Sinnerbrink, with the ‘romantic naivety’ of poetic myth, not historical fact. But a further significant component of the film’s ‘impossible point of view’, Sinnerbrink continues, is that the film seeks to present a metaphysical perspective in which nature itself becomes something of an acting subject. As an observation on Malick’s style, Sinnerbrink does not dwell here on particular devices and concentrates more on experiential effects like *awe* and *wonder* (ibid.: 182).<sup>268</sup> Yet it is worth noting that this sublimity of nature’s perspective, as Sinnerbrink interprets it, consists of nature being “elemental”, acting as “that which underlies and supports any form of historical human community” (ibid.: 192).

The ‘mesmerizing philosophical meditation’ that Sinnerbrink attributes to Malick – the contemplative method, as I see it – hinges on the putting together of this ‘impossible’ melting pot of perspectives: it encompasses historical cultures, myths, and nature. Yet it is clear that, for Sinnerbrink, nature provides the decisive point of view, breaking the impasse of perspectives, so to speak. Nature is revealed as a participant in and among opposing historical perspectives, showing itself as that which they have in common. For this reason, Sinnerbrink argues, *The New World* is a poetic retrieval of both the possibility of reconciling cultures and “the possibility of a ‘New World’ in which human dependence upon nature is acknowledged as the basis of any enduring intercultural or historical reconciliation” (ibid.: 183).

So what ethical value does this particular perspective-effect hold for the viewer? Sinnerbrink, as we have seen in earlier chapters, associates film-philosophy with an inherent power to transform. *The New World*, as affective experience, thus affords the same kind of provocations to thought that Sinnerbrink claims of other films. But he finds in its poetic disclosure of nature’s ‘perspective’ also more particular value: it can reveal to viewers *new ways of relating to nature*. Most notable is Sinnerbrink’s claim that it brings us to an acknowledgement (read: awareness) of our deeper *unity* with nature; a unity that underlies and can overcome our cultural-historical oppositions (ibid.: 190, 192).

Sinnerbrink thus implicitly conceives an interlocking chain of transformational values: he poses that the film encourages *awareness*, an awareness of *nature*, the

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<sup>268</sup> In addition to what he calls the ‘visual symphony’ of nature imagery, Sinnerbrink does single out Malick’s repeated application of Wagner’s *Das Rheingold* overture. For example, he describes how, in the closing sequence of the film, the rising crescendo of Wagner’s prelude suggests “nothing less than the self-expression of nature that is here momentarily allowed to ‘sing’” (ibid.: 191). It is also telling that Sinnerbrink explicitly relates the function of the overture to matters of ‘transformation’: by marking three significant thresholds in the narrative it also, as he explains, bespeaks the transformations that the principal characters undergo (see ibid.: 187–192).

content of which is our essential *unity with* nature. I take the value of unity to be crucial here: it not only bridges this reading and those presented below, but also registers as a theme across different levels of the film, as Sinnerbrink's allegorical interpretation indeed also has it. This line of interpretation is roughly as follows. On one level, the film thematizes a reconciliation of cultures, a union, of which the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe becomes a metonymic symbol. Then there is the reconciliation with nature – also referred to as a 'discovery' and 'recollection' – which Sinnerbrink suggests is the condition for 'marrying' the perspectives of these two worlds, the Old and the New. This reconciliation is precisely the experience of transformation that Pocahontas undergoes at the end of the film: her awareness is restored and she spiritually reconnects to ('Mother') nature. Different instances of 'coming together' (of individuals, of worlds) therefore resonate with 'unity' as transformational value – which characterizes Pocahontas' transformation, and which Sinnerbrink, finally, extends to the viewer's own awareness of nature.

Whereas Sinnerbrink seems set on retaining a *spiritual* dimension to nature's 'perspective', Iain Macdonald as well as Bersani & Dutoit proceed from forthright *materialist* commitments – the former a self-confessed Nietzschean, the latter patently Deleuzian. Yet their shared interest in perspective-effects, which all of them relate to nature, brings them to similar if not the same ethical conclusions.

### **Iain Macdonald: A Deconstruction of Perspectives**

Macdonald (2008), like Sinnerbrink, addresses matters of perspective in *The New World*. He sees the essential philosophical act of *The New World* as one of 'deconstructing' the dichotomy of cultural perspectives that the film puts forward. I should add that this 'deconstruction' relies on affirming nature (and a materialist conception thereof at that) as the absolute perspective that holds the film together. This view itself could in fact do with some deconstruction, yet Macdonald's Nietzschean presuppositions preclude him from doing so.<sup>269</sup> He simply announces that Malick's central philosophical concern is his interest in nature (and, more specifically, the nature of human nature) and points to a couple of devices that evidently lead viewers to this deeper ground. He notes, for example, that Malick draws out similar features in the *voice-over reflections* of Pocahontas and John Smith (Macdonald, 2008: 93). Although they have radically different cultural vantage points, they nevertheless repeat the same basic questions:

“What they are asking themselves is what makes them human and how they should understand themselves as creatures with natural drives and passions [...] [T]he point here is to explore the

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<sup>269</sup> Macdonald raises doubts as to whether Malick remains faithful to his original interest in Heidegger and argues that *The New World* evidences “a kind of naturalism that can be articulated beyond strictly Heideggerian concerns” (2008: 89). For this reason, he designates Malick's metaphysics as a “materialism”, which he describes as “roughly Nietzschean in character, that denies not only cultural essentialism, but also any meaningful distinction between reason and nature” (2009: 94).



deeper question of what binds them together in nature [...] At this level, love and cultural difference are relegated to the status of epiphenomena or manifestations of natural processes" (ibid.: 92).

Malick not only foregrounds similarities in Pocahontas and Smith's reflections, but also reiterates a deeper commonality between their worlds by repeatedly deploying parallel imagery, according to Macdonald. He identifies resemblances in depictions of natural elements and human creations like interior spaces, windows and doorways, all of which serve to bridge, *visually*, what the narrative presents as two different cultures. Because of this, Macdonald argues, "Malick insists that their difference is purely perspectival and that at root they share a common logic, a common reason that engenders their respective worlds and defines their relation to nature" (ibid.: 93).

The ethical benefit that Macdonald considers to be implied in this deconstruction is by now a familiar one: it "incites the viewer to undertake a change of perspective" (2008: 100). This new perspective is, quite simply, that of nature. *The New World* thus encourages us to see Pocahontas' story as 'the story of nature', to look upon what occurs in the narrative as 'nature itself' (2008: 98–99). Again, this is understood as a bringing to awareness of the essential *unity* that the perspective of nature entails: Macdonald speaks of bringing the viewer to the "indifference and unity of nature that is at the root of what presents itself initially as its opposite" (2008: 100). Macdonald also notes the potential difficulties of this manner of seeing with regard to our viewing habits and cultural expectations – a remark that is typical of transformationalist discourse (see ibid.: 99). Hence, he speaks of the viewer having to 'awaken' to the 'deeper process' of nature, as communicated by the film (2009: 105–106).

Let me note, as an aside, the markedly different *methods* whereby Macdonald and Sinnerbrink take the 'higher' perspective of nature to emerge. Whereas, for Sinnerbrink, poetic evocation and myth are crucial means by which Malick achieves this effect, Macdonald sees the film's contemplative work as a process of undermining its own clichéd romanticism. Macdonald does make a compelling argument that Malick deliberately resorts to telling the stereotyped love story of Pocahontas, as is made famous by the Disney animated film *Pocahontas* (1995, Mike Gabriel & Eric Goldberg).<sup>270</sup> Yet Macdonald is overly hopeful, I believe, about the effect that he supposes Malick's strategy may have. Macdonald takes for granted that the clichéd romantic content of *The New World* has an estranging effect on viewers (it 'disrupts our habits and expectations'). This, he argues, puts the triteness of the narrative out of play (which includes its opposing cultural perspectives) and thus brings our attention to nature's perspective as the true subject of the film (2008: 104–105). So, as far as Malick's romanticism goes,

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<sup>270</sup> Apart from the film's obvious recourse to the American foundational myth, Macdonald highlights various ways in which *The New World* recalls its Disney counterpart: it duplicates certain scenes from the Disney film; there are numerous compositional allusions to the animated film; and Malick opted to cast two actors (Christian Bale and Irene Bedard) who were voice actors in *Pocahontas* (see Macdonald, 2008: 104–105).

Sinnerbrink and Macdonald attribute two distinctly contemplative methods to *The New World*. For Sinnerbrink, Malick's 'naïve' style helps elicit a mode of contemplation qualified by *endurance* (what I have called a 'contemplative endurance') and it adds to the ambiguity and difficulty of the 'impossible point of view' that the viewer has to contend with (see Sinnerbrink, 2011d: 179–183). For Macdonald, Malick's romantic clichés establish a mode of contemplation that relies on a supposed *ascetic negation* (thus a 'contemplative asceticism') – it undermines its own narrative content so that the viewer can instead pay attention to the film's 'deeper' subject. Yet, interestingly, both paths still lead to the same ethical outcome: the viewer gains an awareness of nature.

### **Bersani & Dutoit: An Erasure of Perspective**

This brings me, lastly, to Leo Bersani & Ulysse Dutoit's (2004: 124–177) substantive and often quoted essay on *The Thin Red Line*. They provide a fitting synthesis of my meta-survey's findings with regard to Malick's style. In addition to being widely acknowledged, Bersani & Dutoit's path-breaking essay also touches upon many of the topics and issues that have emerged from my analyses thus far. It must be said from the outset that Bersani & Dutoit's position is decidedly anti-subjectivist – and more so than any other account considered here. While they do not flaunt Deleuze's voice, their approach has all the hallmarks that one would expect from Deleuzians. Accordingly, as we will see, they embrace a bold motive of Nature, which takes their ethical interests in *unity*, or *connection*, to an immanentist extreme.

Bersani & Dutoit locates the main philosophical thrust of *The Thin Red Line* in a particular effect of perspective: they call this 'a certain kind of look', one that is 'wholly open', as enacted by the emblematic character Private Witt. The film launches its 'visual argument', they say, by making us see in and through Witt's eyes (ibid.: 2, 151, 158). This 'look' therefore relates to two stylistic devices. *Cinematographic presentations of nature*, on the one hand, let us see *through* Witt's eyes. Here Bersani & Dutoit recalls the same understanding of nature that Critchley advances – "images of calm beauty [...] that] represent the vast, non-human setting of *The Thin Red Line* as a mostly immobile, indifferent witness to the human agitations within it" (ibid.: 159). But this is complemented by *close-ups of the face*, which moreover let us see *in* Witt's eyes (ibid.: 143–146). This device, says Bersani & Dutoit, reveals the character's perspective by showing us how his face registers the world. It is not a subjective perspective, involving psychological expression, but a perspective on the world, one which we see inscribed on the face of the looking subject.<sup>271</sup>

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271 To briefly elaborate: Bersani & Dutoit notes Deleuze's description of the close-up as "psychologically non-expressive" and find Malick's use of the device to generally confirm this (2004: 143–144). They say we encounter in Malick's presentation of the face "a certain mode of registering the world", which they liken to their understanding of the camera's own subjectivizing activity. Malick's characters are therefore individuated, not on the basis of personality or inner-experience, but "as perspectives on the world" by virtue of "the different worlds we see them registering" (2004: 145–146).

Note, here, that Bersani & Dutoit deliberately downplays the voice-over as a potential source of subjective perspective in the film. This fits into their overall adherence to a motive of Nature, which impels them to privilege *visual presence* over the voice and its discursive content, or more simply: *showing* over telling. They constantly look to trivialize the role of the voice-over in favor of their affirmation of the film's visual arguments. They emphasize, for instance, that the close-up is often unaccompanied by speech (ibid.: 145); and that private Witt's "remarkable presence" has "little to do with his very general and abstract questions" (ibid.: 134). We are also told that the content of the voice-overs has "very little intellectual weight" (ibid.: 132), and that it "fails to be adequate to the film's vision" (ibid.: 171). This stands in stark contrast to analysts who are led by a Subjectivity motive and the definitive value that they find in Malick's voice-overs. For them, to downplay the significance of the voice-over would be to deny the film the philosophical capacity to fully relate individual human experience – a sphere which Bersani & Dutoit, as will become clear, is quite set on getting away from.

Bersani & Dutoit does, of course, recognize the *interaction* of voice-over and image as the film's principle stylistic maneuver: the film raises verbal questions that are responded to visually, by different ways of looking at the world. But this juxtaposition, they make clear, is "not equal in value" inasmuch as "the film enacts the image's superior inclusiveness over the word" (2004: 143). With this normative evaluation they of course choose not to consider the inverse possibilities of the verbal-visual interaction or combination: that the verbal content, on the contrary, responds to the visual content and thereby defines what we see (see MacCabe, 1999). Leaving this aside, Bersani & Dutoit nevertheless recognizes that the interplay with the voice-over produces effects of *incongruity* and *ambiguity*, which is also of interest to many other commentators, as we have seen. They note, for example, how the film ends with the voice of the deceased Witt, who seems to speak for all the men, addressing an unspecified 'you' that suggests a presence both inside and outside of him (2004: 134–135). These complex moments, they say, reiterate the overall ethical work of the film: which is "the reworking of the individual within a new relational ethic" (ibid.: 135).

This new relational ethic brings us back to the matter of Private Witt's 'look', seeing that the philosophical stakes of this look, for Bersani & Dutoit, are inherently ethical. Witt's look, they say, defines an ethic identical to 'total absorption': it is devoid of subjectivity; it simply connects to the world and locates him within it (e.g. ibid.: 160–161, 164–165, 176–177). Two things deserve our attention here. First, I have already raised the difficult issue of who (and what) gets to be the privileged perspective of the film. On this point, Bersani & Dutoit wholeheartedly accepts that Witt's 'look' sets the norm by which we should measure both the characters and the overall perspective that the film aspires to. Second, Bersani & Dutoit construes Witt's perspective as one of fundamental involvement with the world – which means that, in essence, we are again under the instruction of a 'perspective of nature'.

Bersani & Dutoit characterizes Witt's ethical attitude with a range of time-honored transformational *values*, sometimes adorned in evocative metaphors. And each of these values concerns a deeply embracing stance towards the world. Most evident are the following:

- *Openness*. The metaphor of Witt's 'absorption' suggests the intrinsic openness that Bersani & Dutoit attributes to the character. This is especially true for his look, which is said to have a "remarkable clarity and openness" (2004: 151). Bersani & Dutoit even takes to photographic metaphors, likening characters to 'cameras': whereas the squinting Sergeant Welsh tries to see less, they say that Witt has an "aperture" that is "wide open" (2004: 149).
- *Receptivity*. Bersani & Dutoit sees an "all-inclusive receptiveness" in Witt's look that refuses to impose anything on the world (2004: 169). And again comes the camera metaphor: Witt, say the writers, "indiscriminately registers the world" in what amounts to a "mode of filming" (ibid.). They go as far as to suggest that Malick's craft imitates Witt's posture of receptive "filming": we see this in the filmmaker's "attempt to avoid projecting a moral or aesthetic identity on the world he films, to allow his camera be as mildly but thoroughly invaded by objects as Witt's eyes are" (2004:163).
- *Emptiness*. Bersani & Dutoit explains that such pure receptivity requires "a subject divested of subjectivity" (2004: 164). Witt's look, they say, illustrates a subject who owns nothing and has no claims on the world: "Witt approaches the limit of subject without selfhood, ideally an anonymous subject" (2004: 165). While they never call it by this name, they hereby attribute to Witt a classic transformational notion: an *emptying* or *voiding* of the self. They do have many other labels for it – among which is a 'dispersal', 'dissolving' or 'shattering' of individual identity (e.g. 8, 169–170, 177).
- *Unity with nature*. The values above pave the way for 'connection' as the vital virtue in Witt's demeanor. The implicit agenda here is the negation of individuality. Witt's inherently relational ethic, as Bersani & Dutoit has it, supplants individuality in favor of a basic *continuity* and *oneness* with the world. Other characters, they say, strive for individuality, with "a willful non-connectedness that violates the continuities of being" (ibid.: 154). Witt, however, excels at just the opposite. For Bersani & Dutoit, his look constitutes a *unity* with the community of all being – hence all the talk of his 'connectedness' and 'participation' that essentially locates him within the very world that he 'absorbs' (ibid.: 159, 175–176).

But how does Bersani & Dutoit relate these ethical exemplifications to the viewer? The contemplative *method* that they propose in this regard takes a lot for granted: quite simply, Witt's 'look' is a stylistic effect that intrinsically involves the viewer.

Since Witt is often, in effect, looking *at us*, Bersani & Dutoit concludes that we, the implicated viewers, are called to collaborate with this look. They explain it as such:

“Malick encourages us to collaborate with Witt’s look. We see the objects and the people Witt looks at, but in the close-ups what we see is Witt looking at us [...] Witt’s look [...] receives us in the same way it receives the rest of the world. We are, as a result, tacitly summoned to be the world as Witt sees it, and since that world is inseparable from Witt’s look, we are also being called upon to share Witt’s looking, to adopt his subjectivity in looking at the world. The immense yet beneficent demand being made on us is that we both be the world as Witt, looking at us, receives it, and that we imitate that receptivity [...] when we leave the film and turn again to the world outside it” (ibid.: 163–164).

The merit of this particular argument is not my immediate concern here. More important is the transformational work that the authors attach to this perspective-effect: it prompts us to emulate the same values of *openness* and *connection* that Witt in their view exhibits. On the one hand this asks of us simply “to let the world be” (ibid.: 164) – an ethical lesson, I have argued, that philosophers who lean towards a Nature motive typically infer. But the strong Deleuzian streak in Bersani & Dutoit simultaneously stresses our having to acknowledge the “inescapable connectedness” through which “*I am only in the world*” (ibid.: 169). So, while the general *domain* of transformation that they propose is that of *subjectivity*, they make the rather grand claim that this is a process by which the individual subject *undoes its own subjectivity*<sup>272</sup> – it loses itself in connection to the world and by disseminating into it.<sup>273</sup>

In this way Bersani & Dutoit’s long and often poetical treatment of *The Thin Red Line* leads us back to what has become a familiar place: the notion that Malick’s style helps bring home our essential unity or ‘connection’ to *nature*.<sup>274</sup> It is by staging and inviting an absolute abandonment to *the world* that it encourages the viewer to become a “subject divested of subjectivity” (ibid.: 164), and thus gain the perspective that is “an erasure of perspective itself” (ibid.: 146).

272 This claim, clearly, makes the normative assumption that subjectivity, and the experience of individuality at that, is something that is to be evaded (despite the obvious contradiction that this ‘flight’, by its very definition, is conditioned by subjectivity). Moreover, Bersani & Dutoit’s implicitly Deleuzian ethics supposes an overcoming of transcendentals like the subject, individuality, and the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ – but the subject’s dispersal into immanence still amounts (if not in principle, at least in practice) to aspiring towards a higher, ‘transcending’ plane of existence (owing, ironically, to the extremity of its immanence). These are all issues relating to Deleuzian immanence that I have already taken up in Chapter 3.

273 Elsewhere in their book, Bersani & Dutoit refers to this as a “lessness that allows us to reoccur, differently, everywhere” (2004: 9). And even more to the point is the statement: “Lessness is the condition of allness” (ibid.: 165).

274 In Bersani & Dutoit’s Deleuzian inspired reading, this is of course ‘nature’ understood in light of an ‘ontology of radical immanence’: it refers to the community of all being, human and non-human, in which the opposition between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ is a by-product of the illusory notion of individually (see ibid.: 169–171).

## 5. Some Things About Film-Philosophy: Method, Value & Assumption

With this meta-critical excursion, I have undertaken what easily fits under the banner of 'meta-hermeneutics' (Korthals Altes, 2013, 37–39) – an examination of the interpretative paths that interpreters resort to, which in this case are the paths along which philosophers make sense of Terrence Malick's film style. I have shown that the philosophers take the same overall interpretative route, which is the notion of a contemplative style; but also that this route consists of many individual paths, each relying on a distinct configuration of stylistic devices and effects, as each philosopher sees fit.

The second movement of my analysis was to demonstrate how these diverse interpretative 'paths,' as to the ethics that they imply, lead to much the same 'destination.' The philosophical intentions of the above cases are undoubtedly diverse. But their ethical overtones ring in clear harmony: all the cases converge around a general concern with personal transformation. According to this picture, Malick's cinema affords not only a *contemplative* encounter, but moreover an inherently edifying one. This ethical message is most evident in philosophers ascribing to stylistic features the potential to achieve what I call 'transformational effects.' Such effects, we have seen, involve suggested *methods* by which Malick's contemplative style is said to work on some *domain* within the viewer, in accordance with an ethically significant *value* that is thereby actualized.

By all means, one could go into a discussion on the validity of these claims about Malick's work and its effects – but it is not my aim to do so here. My own meta-agenda, rather, is to ask what philosophers' conclusions about Malick, as a local case, suggest about the procedures and presuppositions that go into the general project of film-philosophy.

To start with, the case of Malick affords an opportunity to play devil's advocate around the implicit *methods* of film philosophers. For example: if readers hope to get from these philosophers an exact explanation of *how* the elements of Malick's style link up with particular transformational effects, they will be left disappointed. The connections drawn between elements of style and transformational effects remain speculative and suggestive, even evocative. True, the philosophers in question are not explicitly arguing for such transformational effects. But if you take away from their readings the connections nevertheless implied, little worth saying would remain. We should therefore ask whether their suggested connections between style and effect are in fact tenable. One response to that question could be that these claims are hopelessly idealistic. Can elements of style – say, 'random images of rocks and trees' – *really* achieve the valued effects that philosophers say they can? The implied contemplative methods that are thought to connect style to such effects often take much for granted – if the questions are even posed, which is not often the case. Or, another response: perhaps these effects have little to do with Malick's style, and instead come down to the adequacy of the philosopher-viewer's (contemplative, ethical) mindset? In this case, as critically discussed in

the previous chapter, the main initiative would come from the preparatory ethics practiced by the viewer – and not Malick's style.

There are also deeper questions to be raised about the whole business of 'drawing connections', before all else. Surely, as I have shown, the sheer range of connections made with various stylistic devices, and the sometimes contradicting interpretations of their effects, testify to the inherent ambivalence of these connections on which philosophers nevertheless base their readings. So do philosophers not slip into a baseless exercise in essentialization, in which favored stylistic devices get tied to (and, ultimately, reduced to) to seemingly appropriate effects?

Yet for me to demand from film philosophers to give greater empirical grounding to the style-effect connections that they pose – *à la* the devil's advocate above – would seem to violate the spirit of the film-philosophical paradigm and the readings considered here. These philosophers are after all busying themselves with interpretations, acts of meaning-making in which suggestion and evocation, perhaps even exaggeration, has a creative role to play alongside argumentation.

I thus wish to pursue a more productive and relevant appraisal: to see the transformational effects that philosophers connect to Malick style as acts of *value-attribution*, in accordance with the field's broader impulse to value films-as-philosophy for purposes of personal transformation. As I have said earlier, I cannot pretend this transformational impulse is purely a desideratum of the philosophers. The films in question have to play their part. So, much as film philosophers are committed to this ethical interest, we have in Malick films a special set of factors – the attribution of a thoughtful filmmaker persona with existential narrative obsessions; and most of all, it seems, the perceived effects of an evocative contemplative style – that markedly enhance their existing impulse unto transformational ethics.

But why is it that ethics of transformation, specifically, weigh in so strongly on the *kind* of value that philosophers see in films that do philosophy? One factor, as noted in the introduction, is the obvious affinity that exist between philosophy and aims of self-transformation. Another factor has to do with a growing uneasiness about interpreting the philosophical 'meaning' of films, which is thought to 'impose' philosophy on film. As I see it, the current intellectual milieu dedicated to considerations of ontology, materiality, performativity, embodiment, and affect, leads philosophers to rather affirm what films-as-philosophy *do*; and, more so, what such films *do to* and *for* us (cf. Rodowick, 2007: 73; Rybin, 2012: xvi). Hence we find, with regard to Malick and beyond, that philosophers now pay more attention to concrete details of style, attendant experiences, and the ethically significant transformations that these may evoke.

The hesitancy that I have about the cases considered here, however, is that the philosophical 'reflections', 'readings' and 'descriptions' of style-and-effect do not sufficiently own up to still being *interpretations* (not of narrative meaning, but of what stylistic devices do), and invested, value-laden interpretations at that. Of course we should not – and, in fact, cannot – do away with acts of interpretation

and value-attribution. The problem, rather, is the inattention of film philosophers to their own interpretative strategies and interests, and the way these guide their evaluations, and indeed *valuations*, of film style. Particularly telling instances of this problem are to be found where the ideals of personal transformation get allied with a variety of normative assumptions of what it is (for films) to do philosophy. Such preconceptions of film-philosophy predispose these analysts to particular judgments of stylistic elements: the kind of transformational value that they find in Malick's style can be traced back to their guiding beliefs about what, in essence, constitutes film as philosophy. We therefore have a particular pre-interpretative interest, pertaining to what film-philosophy should be, that commits philosophers to a specific set of ethical interests, all of which govern the sort of transformational effect that they look for in a film's style.

These implications are well demonstrated by two prominent streams of philosophical interpretation of Malick's cinema that emerged from my analysis. These streams mark two essentially diverse paths along which analysts explain the contemplativeness, and philosophical significance, of Malick's style: one is led by a motive of Subjectivity, emphasizing how his style embodies and elicits reflective thinking (e.g. Rybin, Davies); and the other is led by a motive of Nature, giving priority to the world to which his style gives presence (e.g. Critchley, Bersani & Dutoit). Both groups approach Malick's cinema from two fundamentally different commitments – what may be roughly called a commitment to the 'inside' versus a commitment to the 'outside'.

A range of issues follow from this. To begin with, the respective commitments of the two interpretative streams prompt different prioritizations of stylistic features. Both approaches, for instance, recognize the prominent place of nature in Malick's cinema. However, they differ markedly in their evaluations of the voice-over: whereas the likes of Rybin and Davies give ample attention to the voice-over, and posit a tension between it and Malick's presentations of nature, Bersani & Dutoit, in contrast, either neglects or even explicitly trivializes the role of voice-overs in favor of what is achieved by visual displays (see Bersani & Dutoit 2004, 132, 170–171).

More importantly, such preempted interpretations of style correspond with ethical imperatives that, likewise, cater to the basic philosophical commitments of each approach. Consider, again, Malick's visual motif of nature, a reference point in relation to which each stream formulates its own direction of transformation. The first stream has an overall ethical orientation that *affirms subjectivity*. The second, quite the opposite, hopes for a *negation* or *loss of individual subjectivity*. This means that one approach will hold dear certain transformational *values* that the other does not cherish. Nature-led approaches to film-philosophy are undoubtedly drawn to the value of *unity* (with nature), as it typifies the ideal of a dispersed subject who escapes the self through its connectedness to the world. Film-philosophers dedicated to a Subjectivity motive instead uphold the distinctness and separation of human experience, which seeks meaning *vis-à-vis* nature. Though this position is not labeled as such, it suggests an esteem for precisely the opposite value – a certain *disunity*, which asserts the individual subject. At times, the two camps also



happen to treat the same value in fundamentally dissimilar ways. Both streams of interpretation express an interest in the transformational value of *awareness*. But for one group, it is an awareness turned *inwards* – a heightened experience of self – whereas for the other, it is an *outwards* awareness, aimed at reconciling the self's detachment from the world to which it belongs.

# Conclusion

## On Detective Work & on Wearing Different Hats

### 1. Meta-Theoretical Detective Notes

If I have achieved what I set out to do with this study, then there is little need for a conclusion here. As much as I hate to end my thesis with a scholarly cliché, this one does strike me as particularly pertinent. Its pertinence derives from the often demonstrative nature of the meta-theoretical endeavor that I took on. I had to demonstrate the transformational ethics that I claim to be implicit to the project of film-philosophy. And, to achieve this, I had to do the painstaking work of showing readers – from one case to another – clues, traces, and guises of the motive of personal transformation at work within philosophers' conceptions of film as philosophy. Like a Sherlock Holmes, in conversation with his Watson, my mission was to guide the reader through the evidence, and consequent ethical 'deductions', that I have gathered about film-philosophy. In this sense, a 'conclusion' was reached *every time* I was able to make my readers see some piece of the cinemakeover as I discern it, in all its multifaceted glory, within film-philosophy.

That said, a meta-theoretical detective is of course bound to pick up further, deeper insights as part of the process of working through 'evidence'. Sharing my notes on *those* insights – some deeply confirmative, some ancillary but intriguing, and some quite surprising – is what I take *this* conclusion to be for.

### The Scene of the Investigation (Chapter 1)

Before I was able to proceed with the ethical investigations of this thesis, the detective in me first needed to map the proverbial 'scene of the crime': the project of film-philosophy. A first set of insights, emerging from Chapter 1, thus concerns the benefits that the kind of meta-theoretical appraisal that I offer there holds for film-philosophy as a debate – even apart from any considerations of transformational ethics, for which this chapter was meant to pave the way.

As any detective would, I approached my job in Chapter 1 as one of drawing connections: I set out to construct meta-analytical perspectives that help correlate and interrelate different conceptions or theories of film as philosophy. Yet the main insight gained, quite to the contrary, is that 'going meta' on film-philosophy mostly brings to light fundamental *disconnections* that prohibit productive engagement between philosophers. These disconnections stem from essentially different assumptions about the nature of philosophy, assumptions

which, in turn, dictate different conditions that films must meet for them to be said to do philosophy. For instance, whereas some philosophers assume film as ‘philosophy’ to be a *noun* (i.e. film as an argument or thought experiment), others take it to be a *verb* (film as enacting/eliciting a form of reflection). Or, whereas the likes of Stephen Mulhall see films as engaging *in* philosophy, the likes of Robert Sinnerbrink rather see films as engaging *with* (confronting, challenging) philosophy. Such differences in assumption render meaningful exchanges of ideas on how films may do philosophy difficult, if not near impossible. Dedicated meta-theoretical vantage points, along the lines I proposed in Chapter 1, need to be developed for philosophers in the debate to gain greater insight into *where*, and *why*, these disconnections come up.

However, meta-theoretical analysis can also play a role in alleviating those disconnections that it brings into view. Not that disconnections necessarily need ‘fixing’. One might conclude that disconnections, mismatches and contradictions are the lifeblood that keeps a theoretical project such as film-philosophy alive. Yet, I have learned, meta-theory can do the work of placing differing conceptions within a more cohesive whole that consolidates possibilities for constructive dialogue and debate. I arrived at such a more cohesive whole by relating the differences in conceptions of film-philosophy to the basic motives of Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power, and Nature. Although my intention with these motives was to magnify the essential differences that I detect between various conceptions of film-philosophy (and this they certainly did), the fundamental ontological contexts invoked by the motives are nevertheless intertwined to such an extent that they invite many potential connections to be drawn between them – and, as a result, connections also to be drawn between the distinct conceptions of film-philosophy that they undergird. ‘Drawing connections’ is thus still the name of the meta-theoretical detective game – except at this point it involves higher-order connections, drawn at the further abstracted level of guiding motives, which help consolidate the diversity of assumptions and approaches that characterize the project of film-philosophy.

Who would have thought, then, given the diversity and disconnections at stake: that my appraisal of film-philosophy from the meta-perspective of its most basic motives enables a degree of *unification* between diverse approaches. Admittedly, the question of unifying motives was the major lead which put this entire ‘meta’ investigation in motion. And, indeed, if there is one motive around which the diverse approaches to film-philosophy truly converge, then it is the motive of personal transformation.

### **My Forensic Tools: A Multipurpose Set (Chapter 2)**

No Sherlock Holmes (let alone the one envisioned by Benedict Cumberbatch) can get away from having to put a good deal of thinking into the forensic tools at the detective’s disposal today. A number of insights in this study emerged from the process of having had to devise a framework carefully calibrated to the meta-

theoretical investigation at hand. Decisive to this endeavor was the good fortune of my earlier acquaintance with Johann Visagie's theory of transformational ethics.

Visagie's trans-historical approach to practices of self-transformation initially offered me a conceptual framework for a theory-informed reflection on the somewhat elusive ethical image that the project of film-philosophy had led me to pursue: the image of the 'cinemakeover'. The notion of the cinemakeover, as I used it in this thesis, is shorthand for the idea of transforming oneself by watching films – a clearly hypothetical practice that may be guided by various (and equally hypothetical) forms of transformational ethics of film. People accept many everyday activities as potential practices of self-transformation: reading, writing, exercising, making art. But self-transformation through watching films? I am certainly not aware of any group (say, a cinephile gang of philosophers, or a cinema-worshipping cult) who explicitly preaches and practices the cinemakeover – perhaps, that might still happen. (Cult film fans do not belong to a literal 'cult', of course; but they do perhaps come the closest to what I am imagining here. Or better even festival-goers, who make a self-transformational investment by attending a politically or otherwise themed film festival.) Nevertheless, I still see a great need for defining and scrutinizing the cinemakeover, even if only as a hypothetical idea. For as something that is implied, suggested, even consciously toyed with you run into this idea around practically every film theoretical corner. This I have come to realize: the idea is already out there, and prevalently so.

Of course, I first ran into the cinemakeover around the film-theoretical corner called 'film as philosophy'. Again, no philosopher in this sphere explicitly entertains the notion that one could practice self-transformation by watching films. However, in busying themselves with the question of how films may do philosophy, the ostensible matter at the front of their minds, they nevertheless conjure up various countenances of this hypothetical practice that I call the cinemakeover. Like an ethical kind of a metal detector, the concept of the cinemakeover allowed me to scan for this ethical motive that lights up all over the field: the valuing of film as a means to self-transformation. The very notion of film as philosophy, as I have argued, entails intrinsic acts of value-attribution. And as far as explicitly ethical value-attribution goes, there is really only one clear suspect: the value of personal transformation.

Yet to build this into a proper case, I had to bring in Visagie, whose theory presented in Chapter 2 provided me with the basic analytical tools that I could adapt for my ethical investigations of film-philosophy. In the chapter I also maintained some necessary contact with a much better-known figure in these particular ethical circles: Foucault – and one of *his* associates, Hadot. Visagie has never used his own theory for meta-theoretical analysis, nor for analysis pertaining to film or art; but I found that it can be repurposed, very productively, for both these ends. The resultant framework enabled me to do the work of articulating, elaborating, and in a sense concretizing what was in the debate up to that point only a general and often implicit ethical motive of personal transformation. That is to say, it offered me the tools for doing the work of *critical imagination* – to give the ethical

motive a face; to put together a profile, a picture, a mosaic, of what this practice of self-transformation hinted at by various conceptions of film-philosophy might actually look like. Some of the findings of my critical imaginings I get to in my discussion of 'profiles and patterns' below.

However, film-philosophy is but one field in which one can find clues pointing towards the idea of a cinemakeover. Given the broad cultural-historical reach that transformational ethics obviously exercises, there is really no chance for this ethical motive to be restricted only to the theoretical sphere of film-philosophy. It therefore quickly dawned on me that this same ethical framework may prove just as incisive to other meta-theoretical detectives working on cases other than film-philosophy. Meta-critical inquiries into transformational ethics of film – imaginings of the cinemakeover on the basis of extant theory – can no doubt be launched from an entire range of film-theoretical projects, with each promising a unique set of results. In fact: my stumbling upon the idea of the cinemakeover within the field of film-philosophy should not be taken to mean that film-philosophy is the only place to start looking for such a makeover. Philosophy of film simply happened to be my own disciplinary home.

Presumably, I would have had an equally good chance of running into the cinemakeover as a film theorist (for lack of a better term), posing similar kinds of ethical questions, which prove to be at the heart of classical film theory too. During my work on this project, it dawned on me that the question of 'the good' of film, much as it takes center stage in the notion of film as philosophy, have always been present in numerous ways in the history of film theory. And inevitably, so it seems, that question of 'the good' of film will in one way or another link up with the perennial value of personal transformation, plus the thought that the cinema holds some special key to it. For example, on more than one occasion I have noted that the revelationists, as Malcolm Turvey (2008) names them – epitomized by the likes of Epstein and Vertov, who stress the cinema's capacity for enhancing human perception of the world – would represent a perfect tradition to delve into for exemplars of transformational ethics in early film theory. (Such an analysis could also be a much-needed intervention, since Turvey's critical assessments deal with revelationist claims only in roughly ontological terms, and not the ethical, value-related terms that would give the tradition a much fairer hearing.) Yet even the theories of revelationists do not need to explicitly thematize ethics for them to nevertheless hold ethical relevance. Any film theory has a potential capacity to deliver some vision of the cinemakeover, even if only a glimpse. Hence, as I have done with contemporary film philosophers, one can read and indeed re-read also the Eisensteins and the Bazins lined up in the history of film theory through the prism of their implicit investments in personal transformation as the good of film, and draw on the same framework to reconstruct the transformational ethics that those investments suggest.

### Profiles & Patterns (Chapter 3)

The cinemakeover is a slippery suspect to track down. As a perfume that smells different on every person, it can take on radically different forms from one case to the next. Within the project of film-philosophy alone, as I have detailed, the motive of personal transformation finds expression in a range of sometimes starkly different transformational ethics. One can therefore at best piece together a mosaic of the different guises of the motive, and different resultant visions of the cinemakeover, as they emerge from various conceptions of film-philosophy.

This is why I needed to devote so much attention to devising my tools of analysis. They allow for a meta-analytical perspective that probes deep enough to see that you are in fact constantly dealing with the same, usual suspect – the motive of personal transformation – yet a perspective also mutable enough to be able to account for the multitude of guises that the suspect will adopt. The purpose of Chapter 3 was exactly such an exercise in profiling: to pursue this motive that is running through distinctly different conceptions of film-philosophy; and to profile – in terms of implied transformational modes, values, domains, etc. – the distinct types of transformational ethics that crystalize around the motive in each case.

Yet this profiling exercise very much confirmed one of my detective's intuitions: as different as visions of the cinemakeover may be from one conception of film-philosophy to the next, the eventual form that the cinemakeover will assume in any given case is *not* all that unpredictable. There is always one clear lead: to have an idea of what the cinemakeover will look like in given case, look at the assumptions guiding that particular conception of film-philosophy. This brings us back to the keystones of Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power, and Nature – except at this point I was able to confirm that, in addition to motivating essentially distinct approaches to film-philosophy, these motives in many respects anticipate also distinct types of transformational ethics, aligned with each of those approaches. If a conception of film-philosophy is based on a motive of Knowledge, for example, there is a good chance that the ethic will be an ethic of self-concentration, aimed at somehow finding the self, aimed typically at values of (self-)awareness. Alternatively, if a conception of film-philosophy is based on Power or Nature, you can count on the ethic being an ethic of self-expansion, emphasizing loss of self, guided by value of unity (typically unity with nature). These patterns were confirmed in Chapter 4, in which the same motives yielded similar ethical results.

As a meta-theoretical detective, I take note of these recurrent accents and slants that bind the overall image together; for they potentially reveal some of the biases (and blind spots) that the project film-philosophy, specifically, imposes on the idea(l) of a cinemakeover. Preferably, in order to better assess such patterns, one would have to consider the mosaic emerging from film-philosophy in light of a similarly global mosaic gathered from another theoretical field. And my meta-framework may offer a tool for a comparative analysis, as a means to systematically scan and highlight corresponding areas of interest. At this point, I can only limit

## Conclusion

myself to one or two speculations in this regard, with some references to the field of Film and Religion below.

As to the most obvious biases in film-philosophy's overall image of the cinemakeover: striking is the extent to which most of its transformational ethics converge around *contemplation* as a *mode* of transformation (and often even as a *domain* and *value* of transformation too). Considering that we are dealing with philosophers, this is perhaps an unsurprising bias. Of course philosophers are going to be interested in how films may elicit and enhance contemplation (the very activity at the heart of their own work), and moreover how film-induced contemplations may change viewers for the better. Predictably, then, they tend to feel less drawn to film's capacity to elicit mysticism, asceticism, or the rest of the modes that I distinguish.

Yet at this point, one should also ask: what kind of contemplation? From this perspective, too, there are clear biases to be detected *within* the transformational mode of contemplation so frequently invoked by the philosophers in my investigation. From what we have seen, the project of film-philosophy undoubtedly skews towards the idea of film eliciting a difficult and challenging kind of contemplation, in order for viewer-transformation to occur through a mode of contemplative *endurance*. For this reason, I notice, the project of film-philosophy exhibits an affinity for suitably 'challenging' films, meaning films that are perceived as suitably complex or ambiguous or unsettlingly affective – or all of this at once. I am thinking, for instance, of the affinities that Robert Sinnerbrink sees between cinematic thinking (his notion) and the cinemas of Lynch, Von Trier, and Malick. Interestingly, the philosophers covered in my analyses hardly consider, for instance, pleasurable modalities of contemplative transformation – possible transformation through what I would call contemplative *pleasure*. And this might in turn link up with the idea of the cinemakeover as a cultivation of the *imagination*, another theme (and a specific transformational domain) that hardly comes up in film-philosophy, which is inclined to reduce the viewer's transformational experience to some or other form of 'thinking'.

Yet apart from the challenging, 'endurational' inflection of contemplation as transformational mode it seems to me that a few things in film-philosophy's mosaic of the cinemakeover also goes lost in terms of the audience and viewing conditions that one may hypothesize for the transformational contemplation posed by film-philosophy.

Firstly, the implied viewer of film-philosophy's cinemakeover is a solitary viewer in a (mainly) contemplative self-transformation under the guidance of a given film. (Or I should say: there is little suggested by philosophers considered here to conclude otherwise.) One motive conspicuous in its absence in the project of film-philosophy, alongside the motives of Knowledge, Subjectivity, Power, and Nature, is a motive of Society – to conceptualize film-philosophy on the basis of philosophy understood also as an inescapably social, intersubjective practice. Consequently, a major blind spot in film-philosophy's overall image of the cinemakeover is its lack of emphasis on communal (collective, shared, interactive, dialogical) aspects

of both film-philosophy and self-transformation on the basis of it. Philosophy (and self-transformation), I take it, cannot be achieved in absolute isolation; and nor can a solitary viewer fully disclose for herself film-philosophy and whatever transformational affordances it holds. Before and after a film, in and around the cinema as place, and with other viewers, there are many happenings and practices that presumably have a part to play in anyone's aspirations for self-transformation. The image of the cinemakeover gathered here can certainly be developed in terms of the role that audiences and communities – be it a physical immediate audience present in a cinema, a distanced but felt audience, or an imagined audience community – have to play in the cinemakeover. The example of Sobchack's described 'Sense Your Senses' ethic may be instructive here. As Sobchack's own explanation of the *Blue*-exercise (referring to Jarman's film) makes clear, there is far more at stake in this transformational ethic than a mere meeting of the individual's body with the film's 'body'. The transformational exercise features a collectivity of bodies, situated in a class room, and hence a pedagogical context, to which practices of self-transformation are ministered by Sobchack as the teacher. Various social dynamics abound in this example – as, I accept, they would have to in most other instances of the cinemakeover too. For the sake of comparison one can here consider the field of Film and Religion, and specifically what I like to think of as a 'sister-project' of film as philosophy, the theoretical project 'film as religion' (see Lyden, 2003; Kickasola et al., 2013). Like film-philosophy, most conceptions of film-religion similarly coalesce into their own particular mosaic of the cinemakeover. And this mosaic, particularly when it comes to notions such as the notion of 'film as ritual' (e.g. Plate, 2017) greatly emphasizes potential communal aspects of the cinemakeover, and in this way offers something of a corrective to the project of film-philosophy.

Secondly, film-philosophy hardly hypothesizes the role of various potential viewing situations within its overall impression of the cinemakeover. Film philosophers tend to focus only on the film *event*, the encounter between a hypothetical solitary viewer and the film work, with whatever experience that it gives the viewer. Yet there is a variety of further factors to take into consideration. For example, what are the particular transformational affordances of the (big) screen typical of the cinema; how does it play on emotions, steer the narrative, and appeal to the masses? Or, a related matter: how may the collective audience experience characteristic of the cinema specifically enhance (or perhaps detract from) the potential of self-transformation through films (see Hanich, 2014; 2017).

Thirdly, film-philosophy's mosaic of the cinemakeover leaves obvious gaps relating to possible temporal dimensions of contemplative transformation. One temporal dimension concerns the length of time that the contemplative mode elicited by film may be active in the viewer. Put simply: when exactly are the hypothesized transformational ethical effects induced in the viewers? And, then: how long do they last? Moreover, does the transformation occur immediately? The general and admittedly incomplete image derived from film-philosophy is that the cinemakeover as an envisioned practice coincides with viewing a film, with transformation occurring more or less *while* viewing. Yet a more developed



account of the cinemakeover would have to take into account also the reflections and memories of viewers within an ongoing post-viewing experience. Surely, in the potentially long ‘afterlife’ of the viewer’s encounter with a film ‘afterimages’ of the film can in various ways continue to prompt contemplative self-work in the viewer. To his credit, Rupert Read (2015: 90) speaks in this regard of the need for ‘gradualness’, passing time, in order for the viewer’s cinemakeover-journey to happen.

A related temporal dimension concerns also the frequency of viewing. Here lies the question of the need for second viewings, or rather repeated viewings, for substantive contemplative practices of self-transformation through film to occur. To cultivate certain competencies and skills within oneself not only takes time, as all learning, but also repetition. Should one therefore construe the cinemakeover along the lines of especially such self-cultivation, then repeated viewings of films (or at least the viewing of repeated motifs within a film, or within a television series more likely) will prove indispensable to attaining personal transformation. To again cite an example from the project of film as religion, the conception of ‘film as ritual’ (be it ritual enacted by structures of repetition within films, or ritual enacted by structures of repeated viewing) at least brings to the fore this important aspect of repetition for the sake of self-formation and transformation.

However, for all the blind spots that it may have, the one aspect where the project of film-philosophy makes a massive contribution to thinking the cinemakeover is the prominence that it accords to preparatory ethics. The pivotal presence of a preparatory ethics of film-philosophy was perhaps the most surprising discovery in my investigations, simply because I was by no means on the lookout for anything along these lines. This repeatedly stressed category of transformational techniques by which viewers must *prepare* themselves for the ‘rebound’ transformational effects of films, as I pointed out at the close of Chapter 3, seems decisive to the entire idea of the cinemakeover and needs to be central to future theorizing on the subject.

As one should expect, the picture of preparatory ethics emerging from film-philosophy has its own set of biases and blind spots. The general self-work required from viewers in the discussion is once more fixated on a mode of contemplation; although, in this case, on a contemplative *asceticism*: to prepare themselves, viewers must rid themselves from their philosophical arguments, pre-conceptions, and beliefs, in order to not block the philosophical and transformational work that films can/might do. Apart from there being a number of problems and contradictions inherent to these requirements already discussed in Chapter 3 (I will not repeat them here), such a contemplative asceticism ultimately provides a very decided – and one-sided – model of what preparatory ethics in the cinemakeover might involve. For instance, one might object that rather than giving up one’s beliefs, the preparatory stance of the viewer might just as well be to hold on to her beliefs and use the film experience to critically affirm them. Or, in a preparatory mode of contemplative endurance, the viewer may set out to put her beliefs to the test, to see if they can stand up to a given film or film experience.

Regardless of the particular slanting of preparatory ethics as it emerges here, its prominence within film-philosophy divulges a great deal about the motivations that drive the project of film-philosophy itself too. I believe that its prominence testifies to how film-philosophy legitimizes its own theoretical endeavor: as a project it endeavors to show that films can do philosophy and thereby transform, yes – but more importantly, that such transformations require the theoretical practice of film-philosophy as a form of preparatory cultivation of spectatorship that help ensure this transformation possible through film. That is, film-philosophy as project offers itself to readers, and viewers-to-be, as a means of practicing self-transformation in preparation for the effects of a transformational encounter with films doing philosophy. The collective practice of theorizing film as philosophy thus inadvertently constitutes what one may think of as a preparatory culture in the sense that it fosters appropriate or ideal viewing attitudes to films. In this instance, therefore, film-philosophy bespeaks less ‘the good’ of film than it does the ‘good’ of *film theory*, especially film theory with the sort of ethical implications that it proffers as a project.

### **The Curious Case of Terrence Malick (Chapter 4)**

In the final stage of my investigation, I turned to the curious case of Terrence Malick and the sense that philosophers try to make of his style. Yet why call it ‘curious’?

To begin with, philosophers have a curious fascination with the filmmaker. I unraveled this fascination in terms of the unique style that he presents philosophers with. Yet, even before any concrete considerations of his style, the filmmaker persona of the ‘mysterious Malick’, as he is usually spoken of, already offers significant insights on certain motivations of the film philosophers concerned. As noted in Chapter 4, the particular authorial image of the famously ‘reclusive’ director (who is an ex-philosopher on top of that) is marked by all sorts of ascetic gestures, the most notable of which is his avoidance of public appearances and refusal to speak about his own films. These ascetic gestures, it appears, boost the sentiment on the part of film philosophers that Malick’s films should be seen as somehow speaking for themselves – which then gives them all the more encouragement to carefully listen to what, philosophy-wise, his films have to ‘say’.

Yet for all this talk about films-speaking-for-themselves, one cannot quite shake off the impression that these philosophers are still looking to the large-looming figure of Malick to subtly whisper profundities *through* his films. Because, for all the talk about films doing philosophy, the project of film-philosophy does display a surprisingly strong degree of auteurist leanings. Philosophers show a propensity to delve for possibilities of film-philosophy in the works of proper ‘authors’, captivating personalities, artists with enigmatic agendas that as a viewer you feel that you need to be let in on. Consequently, they set up their encounters with films as dialogues with filmmakers, and set up topics in question as the filmmaker saying something or doing something – in a way that comes close to conventional author theory, even though it goes virtually unquestioned. The case of Malick

makes this very clear – and one would no doubt find that the same holds for other philosophically attractive personas such as a ‘Lars von Trier’, a ‘Chantal Akerman’, or a ‘David Lynch’. Yet what the Malick-case furthermore underlines is the extent to which a motive of personal transformation seems to encourage such a valorization of auteurs. Perhaps owing to the importance of individual subjectivity to transformational ethics, the motive seems to prompt a need to identify with a model ethical subject – the ‘author’ – who offers the philosopher-viewer the guidance, dialogue, or even induction necessary for self-transformation. The filmmaker is thus summoned as an aide to transformation, thereby establishing a mode of ministering to the viewer, even though the subject thus summoned is largely the viewer’s own interpretative heuristic. Such an author-heuristic is of course important to many different acts of interpretation. But the point in this case is that the heuristic, which essentially assigns a transformation-intending subject to the filmmaker, is fashioned after the motive for having an ethical-transformational encounter with the film.

Another reason for referring to the case of Malick as ‘curious’ concerns the undeniable philosophical curiosity piqued by Malick’s unique and free floating filmmaking style. Most of my investigation in Chapter 4 went into establishing those elements of his style – his ‘contemplative’ style – that elicit the most film-philosophical interest, yet doing so to primarily demonstrate the value-laden, ethical nature of that interest. Basically, this was another effort at tracking down potential manifestations of the cinemakeover, except this time in the somewhat more concrete context of how philosophers evaluate stylistic devices and effects.

A shift in emphasis was thus required in my detective work: from meta-theorizing film-philosophy to doing meta-hermeneutics thereof. Of course the two kinds of investigation go hand in hand. My meta-hermeneutics is guided by the meta-theoretical conceptions that I established; yet my meta-theoretical conceptions are deepened and developed by my meta-hermeneutic explorations. Indeed, the meta-hermeneutics does produce a distinct set of insights: it elucidates the actual interpretative strategies and procedures – ‘pathways’ – by which philosophers arrive at images of the cinemakeover with reference to particular films. Not surprisingly, tracing these pathways led me to a great variety of stylistic devices in which philosophers find the kind of value that is indicative of the cinemakeover. More surprisingly, however, was the diverse and even incompatible ways in which stand-out devices, like Malick’s use of the voice-over, are appraised for both their philosophical significance and, consequently, their transformational value. This finding prompted me to return to the important leads offered by the basic motives at work within conceptions of film-philosophy – in particular the way in which philosophical appraisals of Malick are split between the often conflicting motives of Subjectivity versus Nature. From a meta-hermeneutic perspective, these basic motives emerge as pre-interpretative interests – each allied also to the motive of personal transformation, yet inflecting it in distinct ways – that predispose philosophers to certain evaluations of Malick’s style over others. So what does this tell me? I cannot deny that Malick poses unique reasons for philosophers to want to reflect on the philosophical (and ultimately ethical) significance of his film

style. But their conflicting interpretations of the same stylistic features – driven by incompatible assumptions – led me to conclude that the value-laden, pre-interpretative interests of philosophers have most of the say in which evaluations they eventually arrive at.

So it is perhaps worth asking, in conclusion, whether I would have come the same conclusion had I not focused on Malick but on one of the other ‘usual suspects’ of film-philosophy – to again invoke the likes of Lynch, Akerman, and Von Trier. As with Malick, I believe, the initial reasons for film philosophers to look into such other filmmakers may in every case turn out to be quite unique. But, judging by the persistent motives and assumptions that dominated my analyses in this study, the ethical-transformational evaluations and interpretations that philosophers will arrive at should look rather familiar.

This might perhaps be the most curious part of the case of Malick: that the striking dissimilarities in ethical evaluations of his film style do make considerable sense in light of the assumptions and ambitions that, I argue, drive the project of film-philosophy.

## 2. Looking Ahead: Taking off the Meta-Hat

On the topic of transformational ethics, it only feels right to end proceedings on a more introspective note. So let me take the opportunity to do some much-needed self-examination on role of wearing the meta-theoretical detective hat, a role that no doubt has its limitations, even risks, and also – the biggest struggle that I had to contend with – its discontents.

The space of meta-theory and analysis is not marked out by ‘welcome’ signs on white picket fences. It is certainly no safe, clearly delimited zone that allows one to step into a smugly objective God’s-eye-view on other people’s theories and ideas. No meta-position is a truly distanced, neutral one; it remains haunted by its own set of values and interests. In reflecting on my meta-approach to the implicit ethics of film-philosophy, I therefore cannot but recognize definite values underlying my own analyses of the ethics, exhibited in particular in moments of intervention and criticism. When I note the danger of exclusivism in film-philosophy’s transformational ethics, for instance, I am of course expressing a value position of my own: that the ideal of the cinemakeover, and personal transformation in general, should be as ‘democratic’ as possible; that it should be an option for every person on the street. And this, I have to admit, is indicative of the same kind of wishful thinking that I have criticized in other ‘idealistic’ versions of the cinemakeover. Or, to mention another example: when from my meta-position I propose transformational ethics as a unifying perspective that can help bring together various theories of film-philosophy, I obviously betray my own privileging of values such as unity, synthesis, connection, cooperation, and dialogue.

However, the biggest value – and perhaps biggest irony – underlying my meta-approach is ultimately that of personal transformation itself. There is a certain logic of value-attribution at work in my own case too: when you devote an entire

thesis to the theme of transformational ethics, even if your every intention is to do so from a ‘detached’ perspective, then you are still under the sway of the motive of personal transformation. I am reminded of Yves Citton’s observation that attention and valorization always goes hand in hand (Citton, 2017: 67). People give attention to the things they value, but also value things that they give attention to. My wanting to unleash this meta-theoretical spotlight called ‘transformational ethics’ ultimately says a lot about what I value. For me to chase after the motive of personal transformation in film-philosophy, to want to give the cinemakeover a face, expresses a clear commitment to the motive. Like a detective whose identity is paradoxically shaped by chasing after a career-defining suspect (say, a ‘Professor Moriarty’), my seemingly distanced stance as meta-theorist is *just as* inspired by that very motive of personal transformation which I seek out in conceptions of film-philosophy.

Of course, right from the outset of the thesis, I have professed the complicated relationship that I have with the cinemakeover. Yes, this detective is certainly deeply intrigued by the possibility of the cinemakeover, so much so that his meta-theoretical detective-identity is essentially tied up with it. However, as I also noted before, I nevertheless have nagging doubts about the viability of achieving genuine self-transformation, or at least certain radical forms thereof, and moreover achieving this by means of film. To my regret, I cannot say that the cases examined here have allayed these doubts.

However, while my personal doubts over transformational ethics have remained unresolved, I can confess that I have at least undergone something of a ‘conversion’ experience regarding its analytical merit. Perhaps the greatest insight that I gained from this journey is that my framework for transformational ethics of film promises a multitude of uses *beyond* the sphere of the meta-theory and analysis that I demarcated for this study. This however entails that I need to take off my meta-hat.

### **On Film-Ethical Interpretations (& Hat-Switching with Malick)**

The theme of transformational ethics – far from being limited to the turf of film-philosophy and its meta-analysis – proliferates across a number of possible fields of film analysis. I have three obvious fields in mind. My analytical framework can firstly speak directly to a *film as work*, to how the film may thematize and give formal expression to its own ethical-transformational interests – as in the case of *Fight Club* – apart from what philosophers and theorists make of it, that is. Secondly, the framework may interpret various levels and spheres of *film reception* alongside its capacity to interpret theoretical interpretations, such as the concrete transformational uses of film that may take effect within a particular fan community. And, thirdly, the framework can address transformational ethics that may transpire in the sphere of *filmmaking* – which may include issues such as a filmmaker’s personal investments in self-transformation, filmmaking practices that resemble and even amount to practices of transformation, or ethical-transformational notions that may define a filmmaker’s image and appeal. This

recurrence of transformational ethics gives my framework a foothold in each such field, footholds that enable its analytical concepts to travel and translate between them, and so establish a productive set of ethical connections that bridge their obvious divides.

What is basically at stake in these various footholds is my framework's capacity for good old-fashioned *ethical interpretation*. It can speak incisively to ethical-transformational elements in films, practices of filmmaking, or acts of film reception at a 'direct', first-order level of analysis. For the non-meta interpreter or critic it can therefore enrich ethical interpretations of films and filmmakers, and generally deepen reflections on film and ethics in terms of their transformational implications.

However, since I had committed myself to a strictly meta-critical agenda, I had to set aside my own impulse to engage in such ethical interpretations. Talk of asceticism! I had to keep in check the constantly overwhelming temptation to simply *interpret* the transformational ethics of films and filmmakers that inevitably came up in my meta-analytical discussions. (And, alas, I failed in my resolve: there were moments, notably in Chapter 2, when I could not but let the non-meta interpreter in me have his way.) So in view of this uphill ascetic battle that I had to endure, allow me to briefly reopen the case of Terrence Malick, in order to give an idea of how I would proceed when future research gives me the opportunity for wearing other – non-meta – analytical hats.

As an analyst and interpreter of the transformational ethics implied by the 'contemplative' cinema of Terrence Malick, I would mainly be interested in the kinds of contemplative *techniques* that his films typically stage. As we have seen, one might immediately cite Malick's use of voice-over monologues, which can be said to express contemplative techniques like self-dialogue or self-examination.

However, wearing my 'critic' hat, I would instead want to call attention to acts of *walking* as a prominent, though strangely neglected stylistic motif in Malick's oeuvre. Owing to his affinity for narrative ellipses, Malick's films typically explore the 'in-between' moments, before and after dramatic events occur. And it is in the progressive growth of these moments that Malick's cinema has grown into a cinema of walking. It seems to me that, as a general rule, Malick's in-between moments involve characters taking a walk – and always in tandem with a 'walking' camera, strolling, wandering, pensively moving in circles. Anyone familiar with his films – one only needs to think of the sauntering characters in the wheat fields of *Days of Heaven*; the roaming figures of Pocahontas and John Smith in *The New World*; or the many pondering strolls that permeate *To the Wonder* – cannot but affirm the ubiquity and persistence of walking, wandering characters in Malick's work. Yet evident as this motif may be (and though the topic of walking has

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attracted scholarly attention recently<sup>275</sup> – also in film studies<sup>276</sup>), I know of not a single commentary explicitly dedicated to walking in Malick's oeuvre,<sup>277</sup> or an ethical interpretation thereof.

The point of singling out the motif of walking would be that walking enjoys widespread recognition as a potent contemplative technique, commonly practiced by people to stimulate reflection, to gain awareness, or to bond with nature. In his eloquent treatise, *A Philosophy of Walking* (2014a), Frédéric Gros's for example details the long tradition of contemplative walking within philosophy (a tradition that one would no doubt be able to appraise in terms of the framework for transformational ethics developed in this thesis). Therefore, if it is true that walking "renders us more receptive to thought" (Gros, 2014b), then my proposal would be that one finds in Malick's visual obsessions with walking a special instance of the contemplative work that his style can achieve. Malick's cinema of walking mobilizes and gives form to a recognized contemplative practice; and, on the basis of both personal experience and cultural association, viewers become more receptive to the contemplative experience that people expect from the actual practice of walking. My suggestion would indeed be that, through the prominence of walking in his films, Malick has an effective means of taking his viewers from 'wander' to 'wonder'.

This is but the briefest of indications of where such an ethical-transformational analysis and interpretation of Malick's cinema could go. A next possible step could be to address the transformational ethics of walking in Malick with a 'phenomenologist' hat on: to say that the walking enacted by Malick's cinema elicits a mode of contemplation in viewers requires an adequate description of how his films in fact achieve a suitable experience of 'walking-with'. In this regard, I would explore Malick's continual reliance on Steadicam following-shots of walking figures, shots which may be said to involve viewers in the *motion* of walking; additionally, I would explore his strict avoidance of long takes in favor of cadenced montage, which seems to draw viewers into a reflective *rhythm* of walking.

And then there is still the entire of question of transformational ethics in Malick's (in)famously improvisational approach to *filmmaking*, as often reported by his collaborators in the mainstream press. This requires wearing a hat dedicated to the analysis of filmmaking practices, and an informal 'ethnography' done via second-hand reports, to explore these practices as resembling, approximating,

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275 Walking has as of late been drawing a steady incline of interest across the Humanities – whether from the perspective of anthropology (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008; Ingold, 2010), history (Solnit, 2001; Amato, 2004), art (O'Rourke, 2013) or, as is mostly the case, some interdisciplinary mixture in-between (e.g. Nicholson, 2008; Coverley, 2012).

276 Recent publications on walking in the context of film studies include Antunes (2012), Finnane (2016), Walon (2016), Schonig (2018), and Özgen-Tuncer (2018).

277 In this regard, I eagerly await Thomas Deane Tucker's forthcoming *The Peripatetic Frame: Images of Walking in Cinema* (2019). Seeing that he has previously published on Malick in the context of film-philosophy (see Tucker & Kendall, 2011), I anticipate that he might have views similar to my own on the contemplative (or, perhaps even, philosophical) function of walking in Malick's films.

or even overlapping with practices of self-transformation. Malick is known for instituting various measures on-set that are meant to close off any recourse to routine and convention. One such measure, for example, is to have a highly mobile crew that has to be constantly moving about (read: *walking*, once more) (see Ebiri, 2013). What interests me here is how Malick's measures seems to be geared towards fostering in himself and his collaborators an *openness* and *receptivity* to the unplanned spontaneous moments that he seems to consider integral to his cinematic aesthetic.

Not incidentally, the same transformational values of openness and receptivity that I sense in Malick's filmmaking practice were identified in Chapter 4 in the philosophical appraisals of Malick's films; this underlines the value that meta-analysis can bring to transformational ethics as an interpretative program. And it underlines the ideal of constant hat-switching – to and fro, from using the framework as a meta-theoretical tool to using it as an ethical-interpretive tool in non-theoretical spheres – when playing the multi-perspectival game of analyzing transformational ethics of film.

### **On Film-Ethical Theorizing (& the Many Futures of the Cinemakeover)**

Apart from its potential for ethical interpretation, it seems to me that my framework has heuristic usefulness also for theorizing film ethics proper. Following George Ritzer (2001: 18), one could think of my meta-theory in this thesis as a 'prelude' to theory development, in the sense that my framework ultimately encourages new first-order theorizing in film ethics. After all, what would the point be of my piecing together a picture of the cinemakeover here – apart from simply making ethical sense of film-philosophy and its motives – if not to ultimately develop a better theoretical understanding of the cinemakeover itself. The ethical plane that I opened up in the project film-philosophy by default marks out a distinctly transformationalist notion of film ethics; i.e. an ethics that concerns itself with film-viewing as a potential act of self-transformation. And such ethics of self-transformation, though implicitly prevalent in a range of film-theoretical conceptions, as we have seen, is yet to be explicitly theorized as a film ethical paradigm in its own right.

Alongside film ethics, which is a recognized field of enquiry in both film theory and philosophy of film, many further scholarly fields and themes could act as stations from which to theorize and develop distinct notions of the cinemakeover on the basis of transformational ethics. They include reception studies, fan studies, studies of cinephilia, contemplative and 'slow' cinemas, psychology of film, film and pedagogy, and, as mentioned before, film and religion. I can also envisage a potentially fruitful cooperation between theorists (including meta-thinkers) and empirical psychologists and cognitive scientists within a broader program of transformational ethics of film. True to its subject matter, the cinemakeover seems capable of innumerable transformations in reaction to different fields of film scholarship.



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These and similar options represent a range of possible research ventures for trading the hat of the meta-analytical 'detective' for that of a theoretical 'perpetrator' – who simply gets on with the business of directly *doing* transformational ethics of film. For my detective-analogy to suggest that first-order theorizing is a sort 'crime' is of course somewhat rash. Yet contrary to what a Benedict Cumberbatch-like Sherlock Holmes figure would make you believe, playing the elevated, nit-picking detective is not always the most satisfying job to do. For one thing, you always remain one step behind the creative masterminds whom you are trying to catch up with. When you are the one committing the 'crimes' (though you might eventually be caught, of course) you can at least taste the thrill of breaking rules as well as breaking new grounds. Hence, in the future, I will make every effort to wear also my 'criminal' theorist hat whenever the opportunity presents itself.

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# Dutch Summary

## *Transformationele Ethiek van Film-Filosofie*

Wat is het 'goede' van de filmervaring? En hoe beantwoordt de heersende theoretische opvatting dat film een vorm van filosofie kan zijn deze vraag over de ethische waarde ervan? Dit proefschrift voegt een nieuwe, ethische dimensie toe aan het groeiende debat over 'film als filosofie' en aan de bredere discipline van film-filosofie meer in het algemeen. De centrale stelling van dit proefschrift is dat filosofen film-als-filosofie vaak niet alleen waarderen om hun bijdrage aan de filosofie op zichzelf, maar zich deze ook voorstellen als een middel tot persoonlijke verandering. Dit wil zeggen dat als filosofen beweren dat films 'filosoferen', of op een filmische manier 'denken', zij bovendien suggereren dat films een praktische, transformationele waarde hebben voor kijkers. Films zouden ons tot denken aanzetten, mogelijk ook onze waarneming aanscherpen of zelfs ons wereldbeeld doen kantelen.

Dit proefschrift stelt dat de theorievorming binnen de film-filosofie *meer* omvat dan slechts kennis van het filosofische potentieel van film. In haar praktijk getuigt de film-filosofie ook van een – vaak onuitgesproken – ethisch motief, namelijk het verlangen om in film ook een middel tot persoonlijke transformatie te zien. Gedreven door dit motief van persoonlijke verandering, stellen een aantal filosofen het kijken van films voor als een wijze van zelf-transformatie die vergelijkbaar is met andere, meer conventionele vormen van zelf-verandering door meditatie, lezen, of schrijven. Dit onderzoek onderkent de onderhavige ethische agenda van de film-filosofie en onderzoekt deze in termen van een 'transformationele ethiek van de film'.

Dit onderzoek behelst een analyse van de uiteenlopende opvattingen van filosofen aangaande de zelf-transformatie van de kijker als een potentieel effect van film. Omdat dergelijke opvattingen vaak slechts impliciet gegeven zijn, wordt in dit onderzoek een meta-theoretisch kader voorgesteld voor de kritische uiteenzetting en analyse van de verscheidene vormen van transformationele ethiek die de film-filosofie heeft voortgebracht. Het doel van dergelijke analyses is de interpretatieve keuzes bloot te leggen die film-filosofen maken, alsmede hun ethische vooronderstellingen en impliciete waardeoordelen. Dit voorwerk maakt de weg vrij voor een proactieve, meta-kritische reflectie op het streven van filosofen om film als een vorm van filosofie te zien.

Uiteindelijk maakt dit proefschrift ook de voordelen van een dergelijke meta-hermeneutische en ethische benadering zichtbaar. Ook maakt dit onderzoek inzichtelijk hoe een ogenschijnlijk neutraal en abstract filosofisch debat over film-als-filosofie niet waardevrij is, maar een filosofisch pleidooi behelst voor de

ethische waarde van het kijken naar film. Dat wil zeggen dat de film-filosofie ons als het ware het materiaal aanreikt voor het beeld van een persoonlijke transformatie *door film*, van een innerlijke *makeover* door cinema – van een *cinemakeover*, zoals de titel van dit proefschrift stelt.

Hoofdstuk 1, *‘Going Meta’ on Film-Philosophy: Opening up the Field*, laat de overkoepelende vragen aangaande zelf-transformatie in eerste instantie buiten beschouwing om het onderzoeksveld van dit proefschrift in kaart te kunnen brengen en af te bakenen, te weten: het debat over ‘film als filosofie’ zoals het gevoerd wordt binnen de bredere discipline van de film-filosofie. De opeenvolgende filosofen, alsmede hun respectievelijke theoretische posities, komen in de rest van dit proefschrift steeds terug. De filosofen die aan bod komen zijn: Stephen Mulhall, Robert Sinnerbrink, Thomas Wartenberg, Noël Carroll, Daniel Frampton, John Mullarkey, Simon Critchley, Bruce Russell, Berys Gaut, Dan Flory, Christopher Grau, en Chris Falzon, maar ook de baanbrekende filosofen Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, en Vivian Sobchack.

Om tot een meta-analyse van de belangrijkste hypothesen en vraagstukken in dit debat te komen zijn in dit hoofdstuk twee assen te onderscheiden: (a) de veronderstelde *mate* waarin films aan filosofie doen; en (b) de veronderstelde *voorwaarden* waaronder een dergelijke filosofische werking van films tot stand kan komen. De meeste beschouwingen van het ‘film als filosofie’ debat richten zich tot dusver vooral op de eerste as en onderscheiden een ‘zwakke’, ‘matige’ of ‘sterke’ mate van betrokkenheid van film bij de filosofie. Deze waarderingen of categoriseringën zeggen echter nog niets over de *condities* waaronder films ‘filosofisch’ zouden kunnen zijn. Daarom gaat dit hoofdstuk nader in op de door filosofen veronderstelde condities en bespreekt film als een vorm van filosofische *illustratie*; film als een argument; film een *gedachte-experiment*; en film als een (filosofische dan wel karakteristiek filmische) *manier van denken*.

Het hoofdstuk sluit af met de veronderstelling dat het bestaan van de filosofische werking van film *au fond* herleid kan worden tot meer fundamentele categorieën: als een vorm van Kennis; als het oproepen of belichamen van een zekere vorm van Subjectiviteit; als een bron van creatieve Macht; en als een openbaring of presentie van de Natuur. In dit hoofdstuk wordt ten slotte betoogd dat de herleiding tot de basismotieven van Kennis, Subjectiviteit, Macht, en Natuur bijdraagt aan een alomvattend meta-perspectief op de te onderscheiden theoretische benaderingen die zijn ontwikkeld in het gebied van de film-filosofie.

Hoofdstuk 2, *When Philosophers Join Fight Club: A Framework for Transformational Ethics and Film*, is een hoofdstuk dat geheel in het teken staat van de ontwikkeling van een denkkader waarbinnen de transformationele ethiek geanalyseerd kan worden die *impliciet* is in het ‘film als filosofie’-debat en in de bredere discipline van de film-filosofie. Het voorgestelde kader steunt voornamelijk op de theorie van ‘transformationele ethiek’ van de Zuid-Afrikaanse filosoof Johann Visagie. In de eerste helft van het hoofdstuk wordt Visagies benadering van de ethiek gepresenteerd. Hij onderscheidt vijf dimensies van de transformationele praktijk, te weten (a) de modus, (b) de techniek, (c) het domein, (d) de waarde, en (e) het

paradigma van transformatie. Verder wijst het eerste deel van dit hoofdstuk op de raakvlakken die bestaan tussen de theorie van Visagie en de invloedrijke ethiek van Michel Foucault. Tevens wordt besproken hoe het werk van Visagie op een aantal punten de ethiek van Foucault verdiept en aanvult.

In het tweede gedeelte van het hoofdstuk wordt de theorie van Visagie aangescherpt ten behoeve van dit proefschrift. Dit proefschrift veronderstelt namelijk dat niet alleen het analyseren van de transformationele ethiek van film, maar ook de *meta-analyse* van de op de persoonlijke transformatie gerichte film-filosofische theorie van belang is. Het hoofdstuk laat zien dat Visagies concepten en onderscheidingen een heuristiek bieden waarmee de afzonderlijke elementen van een transformationele ethiek van de film kunnen worden onderscheiden – de elementen van een *cinemakeover*.

In de beschouwing van de verschillende aspecten van de transformationele ethiek wordt steeds verwezen naar (delen van) David Finchers cult-klassieker *Fight Club*. Deze film bevat namelijk exemplarische voorbeelden van zelf-transformationele praktijken. Daarnaast biedt een aanvullende analyse van de (kritische) receptie van deze film ook een hulpmiddel om de uiteenlopende ethisch-transformationele vooronderstellingen van de besprekers inzichtelijk te maken. Het debat wordt namelijk gekenmerkt door zulke vooronderstellingen; ze zijn ingebed in de pleidooien van filosofen aangaande de filosofische waarde van film. Dit hoofdstuk eindigt met een kort uitstapje: het laat zien hoe het thema van de zelf-transformatie uit *Fight Club* doorwerkt in de reacties op de film – van, uiteenlopend, film-filosofen tot de copy-cats die *Fight Club* naspelen in het echt.

Hoofdstuk 3, *How Films are Thought to Do More Than ‘Think’: Film-Philosophy’s Slogans for Self-Transformation*, presenteert een reeks analyses van het motief van de persoonlijke transformatie zoals het aanwezig is in de representatieve posities in het debat die in hoofdstuk 1 al zijn blootgelegd. Hoofdstuk 3 behandelt deze verscheidenheid aan visies op *zelf-transformatie* door film door ze van elkaar te onderscheiden met behulp van een reeks emblematische slogans. Allereerst wordt de film-filosofische ethiek van zelf-concentratie besproken. Deze stelt het kijken naar film voor als een vorm van ‘Ken Uzelf’ (Wartenberg, Falzon), ‘Herinner Uw Zelf’ (Carroll), of ‘Ervaar Uw Zintuigen’ (Sobchack).

Vervolgens wordt in dit hoofdstuk ook aandacht besteed aan een aantal meer uitgesproken vormen, waaronder die van de *zelf-expansie*. Deze ethiek beziet film als een vorm van het ‘Verruim Uw Geest’ (Mulhall), ‘Verander Uw Geest’ (‘Blow Your Mind’ - Sinnerbrink, Frampton), maar ook ‘Verlies Uw Zelf’ (Deleuze). In dit hoofdstuk is ook een wat langer intermezzo opgenomen waarin de transformationele ethiek van Stanley Cavell wordt besproken aan de hand van een aantal emblematische slogans. Hoe verschillend deze emblemata ook moge zijn, ze ontspruiten toch allemaal aan het ethische motief van de persoonlijke transformatie dat de verbindende factor vormt tussen de te onderscheiden benaderingen tot de ‘film als filosofie’ die hier worden besproken. Door al deze emblemata hier bij elkaar te plaatsen poogt dit hoofdstuk ook te laten zien hoe de alomvattende idee van een *cinemakeover* eruitziet in de film-filosofie.

Hoofdstuk 4, *There's Something About Malick: From Contemplative Style to Ethics of Transformation*, gaat in op het oeuvre van Terrence Malick. In deze *case study* staat de analyse centraal van de ethisch-filosofische aantrekkingskracht van zijn oeuvre op film-filosofen en is de vraag hoe zij hierop reageren. Bijna alle filosofen die zich 'film als filosofie' voorstellen vinden in Malick een Muze (enkele uitzonderingen daargelaten). Hoofdstuk 4 begint daarom met de vraag: hoe de opmerkelijke chemie tussen Malick en de film-filosofie te verklaren? De bespreking van een mogelijk antwoord - dat Malicks veelbeschreven contemplatieve stijl als katalysator dient voor diens aantrekkingskracht op filosofen - is de eerste stap in het hoofdstuk.

In een gedetailleerde bespreking van de diverse stilistische middelen en effecten wordt getoond welke, voor filosofen, indicatief zijn voor de contemplatieve aantrekkingskracht van Malicks films. Daarna richt de beschouwing zich op de verondersteld sterke ethische inslag van Malicks filmstijl en effecten, en op de repetatieve, narratieve elementen die een belangrijke rol spelen in Malicks films en die in zekere zin zijn imago als 'auteur' bepalen. De aandacht ligt in dit hoofdstuk uitdrukkelijk op de manier waarop Malicks stijl het motief van persoonlijke transformatie *zoals begrepen binnen de film-filosofie* reflecteert en vergroot.

Volgens de besproken filosofen resulteren de filosofische verworvenheden van Malicks stijl altijd in transformationele effecten op de kijker en zetten zij deze niet alleen aan tot contemplatie, maar mogelijk ook tot meer bewustwording, openheid, bezieling en verbinding. Dat deze interpretaties feitelijk gebaseerd zijn op waardeoordelen wordt aangetoond met een gedetailleerde meta-analyse van de besprekingen van drie stilistische elementen die in de meeste filosofische besprekingen van Malick films terugkeren, te weten (a) de visuele representatie van de natuur, (b) het gebruik van voice-overs en (c) de 'perspectief-effecten' die men hem toeschrijft.

Een synthese van de belangrijkste resultaten van de gemaakte meta-theoretische analyses wordt gepresenteerd in de conclusie van dit proefschrift. Van belang zijn hier verder twee zaken: de *zelf*-kritische reflecties op de beperkingen van het doen van meta-analyses zoals de onderhavige; en een tentatieve beschouwing van wat er kan gebeuren als dit meta-niveau verruild zou worden voor een meer primair, eerste-orde niveau van analyse. De mogelijkheid van een dergelijke analyse vormt, ten slotte, de grondslag voor enkele korte, afsluitende overwegingen over en suggesties voor vervolgonderzoek naar de idee van de *cinemakeover*.

(Translation: Jakob Boer)



# Biography

Martin P. Rossouw is Head of the Department Art History and Image Studies – University of the Free State, South Africa – where he lectures in the Programme in Film and Visual Media. He specializes in film philosophy and film ethics, which were the central themes of his recently completed Erasmus Mundus supported PhD project at the University of Groningen (2014–18). His latest publications appear in *Short Film Studies*, *Image & Text*, and *New Review of Film and Television Studies*. He also has two fortuitous screenwriting credits to his name: an Afrikaans short film (*Die Beleefnis*, 2013) and television episode both produced and aired nationally in South Africa. He is a proud husband and father of three. Sometimes he still daydreams of becoming a famous filmmaker.