

"DIALOGUE ON FILM"

A Screen Treatment

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Little is known about the author or the provenance of the present work. Even its dating is uncertain, scholarly conjectures ranging from the period of Free Cinema (1954-1957?) up to 1990. Internal evidence is difficult to use because of the work's wide range of reference. The lead speaker, Socrates, in no way resembles what we know of the historical person or of the character of the same name in Plato's works. We cannot therefore with assurance identify the 'Hugo Munsterberg' who appears with the real Harvard philosopher of that name. The scholarly notes we have appended to the text attempt to identify some of the allusions it contains. Others, however, remain unidentified, making it impossible to settle the matter of whether a later editor or reviser may have been at work. Some scholars believe the work belongs to academic philosophy, and was written in film-script form for what we might term formal purposes of literary art. From what we know of screenwriting at that time, had it been intended for the screen, it almost certainly would be the work of several hands. We must not expect that these questions will be decisively settled in the near future.

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1. EXT. DAY FOR NIGHT. MOVIE THEATRE¹ STEPS. STAN SPOTS SOCRATES DESCENDING STEPS AND WAYLAYS HIM. OLD ACQUAINTANCES, THEIR BANTER IS CORDIAL.

Stan

Socrates! Fancy meeting you at a place like this.

Socrates

You're a long way from New England yourself, Stan.

MS AS THEY SHAKE HANDS

Stan

Well at least I'm in the right century and my usual clothes.

Socrates

Ever tried a toga and sandals in London in November, Stan?

Stan

Can't say I have. But what film have you just seen?

Socrates

You'll never guess.

Stan

Cruising?²

MCS SOCRATES

Socrates

(Refusing to be drawn). Stan there's a bitchy side to you that doesn't come through in your writings, even though they celebrate seduction and voyeurism. Now be serious.

¹A variant draft identifies them as "the NFT steps". Diligent research in telephone directories and gazeteers reveals this as a normal abbreviation for the "National Film Theatre", a building for the purpose of viewing films stored on celluloid, once located on the South Bank of the river Thames, possibly erected in 1950 and, at that time, part of a large complex of 'cultural' buildings on the site now shared by the London People's Bureau and the Welsh Embassy.

²A play on words, possibly. The film Cruising (1980) has survived in digital storage and deals with a police investigation of murders in the homosexual subculture. Socrates' interlocuter would appear to be teasing him about homosexual urges. For extensive discussion see Kenneth Dover, Greek Homosexuality, Cambridge (Mass.) 1978.

Stan

Well, give me a clue. Was it modern or classic, generic or auteurist?

Socrates

Hard to answer, since you muddled up all the categories, no? At my age, all films are modern. But let me put it this way, it poses an epistemological problem.

Stan

(Pausing for thought). Citizen Kane?³

Socrates

Nearly, Actually, it was Rashomon.⁴

Stan

Ah, yes. Not one of my Hollywood favourites, but a fascinating case of the world viewed.

Socrates

Through a kaleidoscope. Really, Mr. Kurosawa poses very well the problem of appearance and reality--as it has come to be known; also that of selective perception; of knowledge and human interests; and truth.

MS AS THEY BEGIN STROLLING ALONG THE EMBANKMENT

Stan

Do you go to movies for philosophy, Socrates? I rather thought you would get enough of that in your peregrinations.

Socrates

(Responding to a slight sarcasm in Stan's question)
At least I didn't write a book about movies!

Stan

If you imply I did you are confusing me with someone else, and I understand the author of this dialogue would rather you didn't.

Socrates

Easy to confuse different people at my age and, like you, I have no wish to discomfit the authorial person who is giving me a new lease on life.

³ Citizen Kane (1940) is a film that offers several different estimates of a man (Kane) and explanations of his behaviour.

⁴ Rashomon (1950) is a Japanese film in which four people narrate four different accounts of what was (presumably) one chain of events.

Stan

Anyway, you claim not to have written a book on movies. This is no great claim, coming from you. You didn't write a book about anything!

Socrates

True, it has come to my notice there is some dissatisfaction about that. But, not to be distracted. The book with whose author I confused you, do you consider it philosophy?

Stan

I acknowledge having read it, and would simply say it does not look to movies for philosophical enlightenment but rather offers some philosophical enlightenment about movies.

Socrates

A useful distinction, to which we might return. But why not seek philosophical enlightenment at the movies? Mr. Shaw, Signor Pirandello, Herr Brecht, M. Sartre and M. Camus, to cite only a few in your century, used the stage and the story as vehicles for their philosophy. Perhaps Mr. Kurosawa and Mr. Bergman are doing the same.

Stan

(Bitingly)

If they are, its rather popular philosophising.

TRUCKING CAMERA MOVEMENT STOPS AS SOCRATES TURNS ON STAN.

Socrates

As the world's first popular philosopher I shall stoutly defend such production. Some of Mr. Kurosawa's works are about personal and social responsibility. I recall The Bad Sleep Well and High and Low. You would not, I imagine, dissent?

⁵Internal evidence, such as the phrase, 'The world viewed', suggests the speakers allude here to The World Viewed, Reflections on the Ontology of Film, published in New York by the Viking Press in 1971. Its author, Stanley Cavell, was then Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University. When the book was reprinted in 1979, with new prefatory and appended material, as a 'Revised Edition', its provenance shifted to Harvard University Press. One must resist inferring, on the basis of this, that film studies gained respectability in the nineteen-seventies, inducing the press of the senior American university to re-issue such a volume. Other explanations, such as an interest in sales, or an increase in the prestige of the author's name seem unworthy of discussion. Responsible scholarship must withhold its judgement when evidence is insufficient.

Stan

I cannot acquiesce in examples. I have not seen, Socrates.

Socrates

(Slyly)

An important but overlooked point in film studies. Rashomon, then. I said it was about the problem of truth, or, to be more precise, about the absence of criteria for recognising the truth. Why else are we shown several versions of what we might uncritically be tempted to refer to as 'the same events' if it is not to suggest a philosophical point?

Stan

The point that there is no truth?⁶

Socrates

No, despite the fact that some espouse that 'reading' as the current jargon has it, I reject it. Is it a truth to say 'there is no truth'?

Stan

A metatruth, perhaps?

Socrates

Yes, yes. But you get my point. Such a philosophy is scarcely coherent. Why foist it on the film unless no other, more coherent reading will fit?

Stan

I suspect you have one in mind, O Socrates.

Socrates

You have fathomed me well, Stan. Rashomon could be read as illustrating the idea that the truth is hard to find.

Stan

If true, then trite.

⁶Cp. "But few of us believe truth is available in this way to even the heroic or Quixotic searcher", J. Dudley Andrew, Concepts in Film Theory, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 12. Andrew was Head of the Division of Broadcasting and Film at the University of Iowa. In writing of "us", he refers to those engaged with the "current trend" in film theory that his volume gists. His alternative to seeking the truth is "thinking through, elaborating, and critiquing [sic] the key metaphors by which we seek to understand (and control) the cinema complex." Unfortunately he does not explain what, in the absence of truth, "learning" to do this consists in, or from what prior state (viz, ignorance) such a learning would be a movement away from.

Socrates

Beware of the mirage of depth, Stan! You above all. The trite has to be rediscovered by each generation for itself, illustrated with its own materials. This is one function of the popular philosopher. Another is, obviously, to communicate new philosophical ideas.

Stan

Rather like a popularizer of science?

Socrates

Exactly. You don't popularize, do you, Stan?

Stan

Well, writing is hard enough. Just to respond to the promptings so that you say only what you want to, neither more nor less, is very difficult.

Socrates

Why difficult? You should try to say what you mean but needn't struggle to mean what you say.

CU AS THEY EXCHANGE MEANINGFUL LOOKS

Socrates

But there I go. Having never committed my thoughts to papyrus I have foregone the entire experience. That expression of yours about promptings reminds me of an exchange over a film book between two philosophers: S. Cavell and A. Sesonske. Do you know what I am referring to?

Stan

I know their work very well--I might even say intimately. You are referring, of course, to Cavell's book The World Viewed and his exchange about it with Sesonske published in The Georgia Review?

Socrates

That's right. It's an odd book. Cavell seems to have a lot of difficulty saying what he means, which is the same, I suppose, as having difficulty meaning what he says. What he writes is so murky and personal the question of whether he means what he says hardly arises.

⁷ Despite the earlier admonishment, at this point Socrates appears to be once more connecting 'Stan' to S. Cavell. This becomes apparent when one recalls that Cavell's fame amongst philosophers of his time was originally gained by his vigorous defence of Oxford ordinary language philosophy in a paper gnomically entitled "Must We Mean What We Say?"

(Footnote Continued)

Stan

Is that fair? As I recall, in the enlarged edition of the book he says that the obscurity may arise from the subject matter, not from the inadequacy of his articulations. Maybe the ontology of movies is a murky matter.

Socrates

Maybe it is, although I am suspicious of Cavell's way of talking so expressionistically about writing. He says the book expresses obscure promptings. My view is that promptings are always obscure. Also mixed, confused, hesitant, etc. For that reason a writer has no business foisting his promptings on the public. What a writer does is to transform those promptings into clarity, orderliness and intelligibility, or else he puts the manuscript on the shelf for later revision. Still, it is an intriguing book that says much about demotic⁸ movies and nothing about Rashomon.

Stan

You are a populist in philosophy but not in movies, Socrates?

Socrates

Not at all. It is just that so many authors treat the movies as art with a capital alpha that I get confused by the way others, with equal seriousness, discuss unabashedly popular movies. As long as popular movies do not pretend to be otherwise I enjoy them. But Mr. Kurosawa is clearly attempting something more.

Stan

Cavell says movies are a series of automatic world projections, an idea that seems indifferent to whether they are demotic or arty. He is intrigued by the capacity of machinery to throw a simulated world onto a screen, a world which we can in a sense enter, but one which we cannot affect. It is present to us but we are not present to it.

Socrates

Perhaps Mr. Cavell overlooked Rashomon precisely because it is a counter-example to his definition of the essence of film.

(Footnote Continued)

That Cavell did mean what he said is attested by his use of the title for the selection of essays he published in 1975.

⁸Movies are described as a "demotic art" in "Basic Film Aesthetics", by Francis Sparshott, Journal of Aesthetic Education, vol. 5, 1971, pp. 11-34.

Stan

A counter-example? I don't see that, Socrates.

Socrates

Well, Mr. Cavell uses the phrase, 'a succession of automatic world projections', does he not?

Stan

He does.

Socrates

Mr. Kurosawa, in Rashomon, shows us a world projected, I suppose.

Stan

Yes.

Socrates

Also, Mr. Kurosawa shows us the same episode of robbery, sex and death from four points of view. Is that not so?

Stan

It is.

Socrates

Does not then Mr. Kurosawa project four worlds, that of the bandit, of the wife, of the husband, and of a woodcutter?

Stan

He does.

Socrates

And does he not present them in such a way that we cannot resolve the conflicts?

Stan

Well, we know certain things.

Socrates

Such as?

Stan

It was hot. The man and woman were married. They were robbed. She had sex with the bandit. Her husband is dead.

Socrates

What do we not know?

Stan

We don't know whether she enticed the bandit, or whether she, the bandit, the onlooker, or perhaps even the man himself took his life.

Socrates

Does Mr. Kurosawa suggest this is a mystery to which we do not have enough clues, as in Mr. Hitchcock's films or the novels of Mr. Chandler?

Stan

You certainly have kept up, Socrates. To answer your question, I think Kurosawa is hinting that there may not be so simple a thing as the truth of the matter.

Socrates

Exactly. So far from automatically projecting a world, Mr. Kurosawa allows us to construct several possible worlds and confronts us with their ambiguity. We construct from what he shows us a world on film.

Stan

How does this bear on Cavell?

Socrates

No succession; not automatic; not world projections but multiple world constructions. The world of films is not on film, nor is it in the creator's imagination, it is in our imagination. We it is who make it.

CU OF STAN, WHO WANTS TO BREAK IN

Socrates

And there is more.

Stan

What?

Socrates

Well, Mr. Cavell, like you, made a book, as he would say, that did not look to movies for philosophical enlightenment but rather offered some philosophical enlightenment about movies.

Stan

Yes.

Socrates

Yes. Well, I've been trying to show that Mr. Kurosawa offers us some philosophical enlightenment and I have

⁹Sir Alfred Hitchcock, maker of over 50 films, subject of countless books, is philosophised about in Hitchcock by Eric Röhmer and Claude Chabrol (Paris 1957, New York 1979) and William Rothman, Hitchcock: The Murderous Gaze, Harvard University Press 1982. Raymond Chandler was an American novelist of the mid-twentieth century.

found it necessary to enlighten you about movies to get at that.

Stan

So you are saying that philosophical enlightenment about movies could result in us taking philosophical enlightenment from movies?

Socrates

Exactly. And I suppose you say it is popular or even trite?

Stan

Yeah.

DURING THIS SEQUENCE THEY HAVE BEEN STROLLING ALONG, HAVE MOUNTED SOME STEPS AND ARE CROSSING THE RIVER ON A BRIDGE. ONE OR TWO OF THE SHOTS SHOULD TRACK IN FRONT OF THEM AS THEY STROLL, AFFORDING US A GLIMPSE OF ANOTHER TOGA-CLAD FIGURE COMING UP BEHIND THEM. HIS FOOTSTEPS ALERT SOCRATES, WHO GLANCES BACK.

2. EXT. DAY FOR NIGHT. BRIDGE OVER THE THAMES. SOCRATES AND STAN ARE OVERTAKEN BY PLATO.

Socrates

Well! Coming along Hungerford Bridge behind us I see a young student of mine who has strong views on this. Let us accost him.

SOCRATES TURNS

Socrates

(Sharply)
Plato!

Plato

Yes, master.

Socrates

(Slightly irritated.)
Twentieth century! Twentieth century!

Plato

Oh! Sorry. What is it, er, Socrates?

PLATO MOVES CLOSER BUT STAYS SLIGHTLY BEHIND AND BETWEEN STAN AND SOCRATES.

Socrates

Didn't you tell me that you had been studying the ideas of Mr. Bergman?

Plato

I have.

Socrates

Tell us what you have discovered.

Plato

There is a professor, Mr. Kalin,¹⁰ who argues that Mr. Bergman is a legitimate philosopher who solves as well as dramatizes a philosophical problem, namely, how shall we act towards others? The answer, according to his reading of some of Mr. Bergman's films is, with love. In such films as Wild Strawberries, The Silence and Persona, Mr. Bergman looks at people who seem cold and distant but whose lives have come to crisis. In all cases the solution is a turning towards rather than a turning away from other people. Mr. Kalin claims that a very characteristic shot in Mr. Bergman's films, a close two-shot in which one person faces the camera while another half covers them in profile, that this shot dramatises the dilemma of which way to turn.

Stan

I remember this shot.¹¹ It is parodied in Woody Allen's film Love and Death.

Socrates

I am glad you have seen Mr. Allen's lampoon of some of us, Stan, since it is an antidote to complacency. But do you not forget that Mr. Allen also used the shot, or something similar, without parodic intent in his serious film Interiors?

Stan

Yes? I don't recall . . .

Socrates

That at least is my memory of it, and my memory is the memory I have.

¹⁰This reference must be to Jesse Kalin, "Ingmar Bergman's Contribution to Moral Philosophy", International Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 17, 1977, pp. 85-100. Bergman was a much-honoured Swedish film maker.

¹¹Woody Allen, a comic film maker, is known today mainly because of his philosophy (cp. Plato). His early work Love and Death (1975) immediately preceded the almost unbroken string of masterworks that began with Annie Hall (1977). Note that his Zelig (1983) is referred to at the end of the Dialogue.

Plato

The discussion here is of films, not your memory, Mas. . - er, Socrates.

Socrates

(Not taking offense.) My point about Mr. Allen is that his practice is not unlike one philosopher quoting approvingly another. Do you see that?

Stan

A little far-fetched.

REACTION SHOT OF SOCRATES. WHILE ALWAYS SHOWN AS EARNESTLY INTERESTED IN WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING, THERE IS A DIGNITY TO HIM THAT HE SUSTAINS. STAN'S SOMEWHAT ABRUPT PRONUNCIAMENTOS ARE LESS DEFERENTIAL THAN, PERHAPS, SOCRATES FEELS THEY SHOULD BE.

Stan

But I'll grant you it for the argument.

SOCRATES' PUTS A TRACE OF IRONY IN VOICE AND FACE

Plato

Thank you. So what I was leading towards was this. Mr. Bergman may be engaged in dramatising, that is, entertaining us with, a philosophical point about life crises and the choice of turning towards others or away from them. Something of an existentialist point, not dialectically made, but made nevertheless.

Stan

I'm no opponent of existentialism, Plato.

Plato

I know that. Mr. Bergman's efforts, and perhaps Mr. Allen's, could be compared to the "philosophical" content of the works of my fellow-citizens Sophocles, Euripides and Aritophanes. I doubt if Mr. Bergman is quite in their league, indeed I doubt whether anyone who has worked in the moveies is in their league; but in respect of legitimising the treatment of philosophy in dramatic form they set the precedent.

Socrates

Thank you, Plato. How odd that you speak at such length. Not unlike the way you have the character named after me in your dialogues go on and on.

PAUSES FOR A LAUGH. NONE IS FORTHCOMING. PLATO BLUSHES.

Socrates

But I musn't poke fun. Would you like to sum up for us the philosophical problem you think Mr. Bergman has addressed?

Plato

Yes. Well. One is that of how we should behave in a life crisis.

Socrates

Is this a philosophical problem?

Plato

Doubtless there are contemporary philosophers who would not recognise it as such. But certainly I would, although I said little about it in my works. And so too would Herr Kant and he wrote a good deal about it.

Socrates

Yes, and in so far as philosophy is said to be footnotes to each of you I suppose that settles the issue.

Stan

I'd probably go along too, but I think perhaps we need a stronger case if we are to convince the contemporary sceptics.

Socrates

What sort of a case, Stan?

Stan

Well, what I have in mind, Socrates, is whether Plato here or someone else can show that philosophy deals with other philosophical problems, such as those of ontology.

Socrates

I've shown you epistemology, Stan, and Plato here has got you to agree on morality. But now you want reassurance on ontology. A hobby-horse of your Doppelganger Cavell.

Stan

(Not being drawn)
Can you do it?

Socrates

I think so. But, better yet, in that Wimpy bar (nods) I see two latter-day students of the Dialectic, Saul and Jorge, who we might be able to join.

3. INT. NIGHT. THROUGH THE MISTY WINDOW OF A WIMPY BAR (LOCATION) WE SEE TWO MEN ENGAGED IN EARNEST CONVERSATION. SOCRATES LEADS STAN AND PLATO THROUGH THE ENTRANCE AS WE SHOOT OVER THE UNAWARE COUPLE TOWARDS THE ADVANCING THREESOME.

Socrates

Hello there.

MCU SAUL AND JORGE WHO LOOK PLEASED BUT A TRIFLE INTIMIDATED BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE OTHERS.

Saul

Won't you join us in a Wimpy Cheeseburger, oh supreme practitioner of the interlocuter's art?

Socrates

Just what we were fishing for.

LS CAMERA MOVES BACK AS THE NEW ARRIVALS SIT DOWN

Socrates

Can you make enough room in this booth? Plato, you know, of course. This is Stan, with whom I have been talking about the philosophy of movies. We have been trying to establish that some movie makers are serious philosophers in the sense that they confront genuine philosophical problems in their films, admittedly not dialectically, but much like dramatists and novelists have. After considering the problem of appearance and reality as presented in Mr. Kurosawa's film Rashomon, and after Plato revealed to us the human moral dilemma in Mr. Bergman's work, Stan holds out for some consideration of ontology.

Saul

Quite right too.

Socrates

And I have told him that I thought you two fellows might be able to satisfy him.

Saul

(Rushing in)

Certainly. Film is a model of our being-in-the-world. It reminds us of and confronts us with the fundamental realities of existence, death and God.

Socrates

Now slow down a little. Mr. Quine says somewhere that the problem of ontology can be stated in three simple English words, what is there?¹² You say that what there is includes these basic realities?

¹²The somewhat arch reference is to W.V.O. Quine, for long the Charles Sanders Pierce Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University whose paper on ontology, 'On What There Is', a mere 19 pp long, opens as follows: "A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monesyllables: 'What is There?' It can be answered, moreover, in a word--'Everything'--and everyone will accept this answer as true." See his From a Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press 1953. Quine espoused a parsimonious
(Footnote Continued)

Saul

No. I say these realities are all there is. Appearance and illusion may bamboozle us otherwise, but of existence and of God we can be sure.

Socrates

By some sort of God-cannot-be-a-deceiver argument of the kind used by M. Descartes?

Saul

Something like that.

Socrates

But did not Mr. - er (hesitates)- Earl Russell say that no inference was possible from 'I think' to 'I am' and hence still less 'I could not be deceived'.¹³

Saul

Russell missed the point.

Socrates

Well, let us not side-track here.

MCU SHOT-REVERSE SHOT PATTERN

Jorge

Yeah, Socrates. Let's focus in on the movies.

Socrates

Go ahead, Jorge.

Jorge

Well, what Saul has said is OK, but you haven't given him a chance to show how movies, with their presence/absence, reality/illusion duality¹⁴ bring us against the limits of human-being-in-the-world.

(Footnote Continued)

ontology which did not multiply entities beyond necessity. It remains mysterious at this remove how he coexisted in the same department with S. Cavell whose ontology, to say the least, is more luxurious.

¹³Bertrand Russell is a name familiar enough to us as an influence on the great Popper. In one work,

¹⁴The phrasing brings to mind a rather muddled volume entitled Reflections on the Screen by George Linden, San Francisco 1970. Linden's attachment was to a school known as 'phenomenology', now almost lost without trace, as with pythagoreanism.

Socrates
Explain that to me, Jorge.

Jorge
OK. Think of a film like this -

Socrates
What film? Rashomon?

Jorge
Rashomon, let's say, since you were talking of that. That film appears to take place in the past, a past that is recouped through the memories of four characters--a man, his wife, a bandit and a woodcutter.

Socrates
Yes.

Jorge
Yet in addition there is a medium, a trial and three men sheltering from the rain and discussing the incident and the trial.

Socrates
You are right.

Jorge
And furthermore, there is the viewpoint of us, the viewers watching all these people and events.

Socrates
Correct.

Jorge
But wait a moment. Although the murder, the trial, and the discussion supposedly take place in the past, when they really take place is now, in the 90 minutes the film takes to unroll.

Socrates
What is the force of this phrase, quote really take place unquote?

MS. AL. FULL-FACE. TURNING INTO CAMERA

Al
Perhaps what he means is that the events depicted and disputed never ever took place. They are entirely constructed from fragments of film shot by Mr. Kurosawa in the studio and on location in Japan in 1949.

4. INT. NIGHT WIMPY BAR LOCATION
THE CAMERA NOW SHOWS US AL, THEN ALSO ^{ART}~~AL~~ AND FRANKIE, SITTING WITH THEIR BACKS TO THE GROUP AROUND SOCRATES, TURNING INTO THE CAMERA AS

X

SOCRATES RECOGNISES THEM. SOME REORGANIZATION OF SEATING AND GROUPING TAKES PLACE TO EXPAND THE CIRCLE. SOCRATES' TWINKLE IS OBVIOUS IN HIS NEXT SPEECH.

Socrates

Well hello, Al. I didn't see you sitting so quietly in the next booth there. And with Frankie too. My, London junk food spots are becoming a gathering spot for my North American disciples.

Jorge

(refusing to be moved)

No, that is not what I meant, Al. What I meant is that film in its presence before us, and in our curiosity where it dwells, presents us with events that are present to us. To play and replay the videotape of the shooting of Mr. Reagan in March 1981 is to confront us again and again with an event. We can reflect on that event and study it but film does not invite us to do that the way a novel does. A novel is a recollection, it cannot give us an event.

Socrates

I am intrigued.

Jorge

So viewing a film is more like being-in-the-world, the world of events, than it is like that of reflection or memory.

Frankie

Or dreams for that matter.

Socrates

What you seem to be saying sounds a bit like some of the things Herr Husserl said. To study the world we live in scientifically we have in some way to stand back from it, put it in brackets. Film, for you, is a world in brackets that we can then study.¹⁵

Stan

The brackets are odd, though. For example, a painting is a world and doesn't continue beyond its frame; same for a play, its proscenium, wings and curtains. But photographs are slices of the world, they do go beyond the frame.

¹⁵Socrates is alluding to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) modern prophet of phenomenology.

Al

I don't believe it. Documentary photographs, maybe, but not composed ones. Out of frame of a movie is forty to one hundred technicians.

Stan

That is not how it seems.

Al

Cartoons, then. Beyond the frame of Snow White is there a Disneyland landscape?¹⁶

Stan

Are cartoons movies?

Al

Aw, come on!

Socrates

Gentlemen. Let us get back on track. Stan, you seem now to agree that there is philosophy on film and even that viewing film is a philosophical activity that raises the problem of ontology, of being-in-the-world.

Stan

You're right, I guess.

Socrates

But I am not satisfied for I want to know if the other main problem of philosophy, the problem of knowledge, is on film or involved in the viewing process. Any takers?

Plato

Master, you are flirting a bit. Here you have emerged from Rashomon. Will you not tell us if you think that raises epistemological problems?

Socrates

Reluctant as I am to participate I also must not be coy. The problem of knowledge is often formulated as 'what can we know?' And Rashomon teases us by ending in a way that leaves us thinking that we can know only what people say about what they remember: that the incidents of rape and death are not givens subject to interpretation but abstractions constituted from innumerable interpretations.

¹⁶The objection from cartoons was launched by Alexander Sesonske against Cavell's The World Viewed in Georgia Review, vol. 28, 1974, pp. 561-70.

Plato

You are saying, then, that it is interpretations, people's accounts of what happened, that are concrete and it is what we call 'events' or 'reality' which is abstract?

Socrates

That is so.

Plato

Forgive me, master, but I am not so sure.

Socrates

By all means, Plato, feel free in this company to dispute me.

Plato

Well, then. What about the ending?

Socrates

Yes?

Plato

Does not the film end with the three men sheltering from a rain storm trying to decide what to do with a foundling?

Socrates

That is as I remember it.

Plato

How then are we to interpret this?

Socrates

Perhaps as a moral message.

Plato

Please explain.

Socrates

Well, the men turn aside from speculative discussion of the question of 'what actually happened' and hence from the problems of whether we can ever know what actually happened and whether there is some determinate state we can label what actually happened and they focus their attention on a concrete, this-world problem: should the abandoned baby be ignored, robbed, or cared for. Significantly, neither the priest nor the commoner offer to care for it. Only the working woodcutter with too many children of his own. So Mr. Kurosawa may be suggesting that things move on, past the rape/murder and now a concrete problem demands a responsible decision. The woodcutter who makes it has been an onlooker and possibly is complicit in some of the events, hence his act may not be altruism, but redemptive.

Plato

Yes, but . . .

Socrates

CU SOCRATES

(Interrupting Plato sharply)

Remember, Plato, I cannot tolerate 'yes-buttery'.

Plato

CU PLATO

Forgive my slip. (Socrates responds.) I agree to your somewhat existentialist reading of this last scene of the film, which would also agree with the period of its making. What I want to add is that I see a contradiction between this moral dilemma and the epistemological one.

Socrates

What is that contradiction?

Plato

You say that Rashomon can be read as telling us that interpretations are concrete, reality is abstract. Yet the baby is presented as concrete, real, and a moral challenge. So reality is not an abstraction from interpretations.

Socrates

You may be right. (Plato looks pleased.) But you may not. The men discuss and interpret the baby.

Plato

Yes and its pitiful cries concretely cut through the discussion to touch the heart and override the calculation of the woodcutter.

Socrates

Well done, Plato! You have me against the ropes. Do you recall the upshot of this discussion?

Stan

It was, if I remember rightly, the possibility of doing philosophy on film.

Socrates

Exactly. Plato and I have now had a philosophical discussion of an issue refracted through a film, a film that raises and solves the issue a certain way and which he claims is contradictory. Hence we have treated Mr. Kurosawa's film just as we would a thesis in a dialogue or a paper in a journal.

Al

Look, I thought we were doing epistemology. Its a side-track to discuss doing philosophy on film rather than knowledge on film.

Socrates

Perhaps you are right. But we have at least shown that film can function like statements in saying something and hence being true or false. Furthermore, I tried to get Stan to admit that not films but we construct worlds on film. Films seem to be vessels or sets of conventions by means of which we construct worlds.

Stan

I guess I wouldn't deny that.

Socrates

Then why did you quote approvingly Cavell's phrase 'a succession of automatic world projections'?

Stan

That's easy enough. The camera is a machine, a non-human and automatic thing that responds to light rays.

Socrates

A machine that has to be pointed, focussed; using an emulsion that has a speed and allows choice of aperture size; that is then developed and processed, cut and joined. None of these activities is automatic.

Stan

Sure human being use cameras. That doesn't change the fact that unlike a painter or a writer, no machine mediates between the creator and his material.

Socrates

The printing press is a machine.

Stan

But the writing could be done by hand.

Socrates

The pen is a machine.

Stan

What?

DURING THIS EXCHANGE, WHICH SHOULD PLAY AND BE CUT RAPIDLY, A GLINT OF THE SHARP INTELLECTUAL TEETH BEHIND SOCRATES AFFABLE MANNER SHOULD BE AFFORDED US.

Socrates

Yes, Stan: the pen, the pencil, the brush are all tools, and machines are only elaborate tools. Their technical name is 'levers'.

MCU STAN WHO APPEARS UNHAPPY, BUT DOES NOT SPEAK

Socrates

The mechanics of writing and drawing machines are simple, but quite automatic.

Stan

I don't buy that. What I am trying to separate out is that we learn drawing and writing, but a machine does photography for us.

Socrates

And I am saying, Stan, that we have to learn photography too. A camera will not produce a picture any more easily than a pencil will produce a drawing.

Stan

You don't really believe that.

CU OF SOCRATES AS HE RESPONDS INDICATING THAT HE IS FROWNING AT STAN'S CONTRADICTION HIM.

Socrates

Oh!

Stan

We could teach a child, or should I say a slave

STAN'S BEING IRKED BY BEING PRESSED SHOULD SHOW IN THE WAY HE PHRASES THIS SELF-CORRECTING PHRASE

Stan

to do passable photography a lot quicker than we could teach it to do a passable drawing--and a whole lot quicker than we could get it to recall geometrical theorems!

Socrates

SOCRATES TRIES TO LIGHTEN THE ATMOSPHERE

Ah, Stan! The sins in my name that Plato did.

CU OF PLATO WHO FLUSHES UNEASILY

Socrates

But I will not be drawn by your irony. Perhaps machines do speed up the learning process sometimes. But does that address the parallels? A pencil is a reducing lever, to spread graphite on a surface in a more delicate way than we could with our fingertips. If you flex some muscles, apply some pressure, the lines curve, if you flex some others they are straight. And similarly you can make the lines thicker, darker, and so on.

Stan

Even then, what you draw is not what the eye sees, but what you choose to select. The camera, once positioned, reproduces automatically what it sees.

Socrates

Would you think two cameras would produce the same . . . ?

Stan

Well . . .

Socrates

Identical?

Stan

No . . .

Socrates

And two emulsions?

Stan

Close.

Socrates

Close is not enough. So you agree that which machine, which emulsion, makes a difference.

Stan

Only slight.

Socrates

That's enough. Now, when the spectator looks at the results, is that automatic?

Stan

Huh?

Socrates

Is seeing automatic?

CU OF STAN. HIS FACE IS A STUDY. HE OPENS HIS MOUTH TO REPLY, BUT NOTHING COMES OUT. REVERSE ON SOCRATES WHO WAITS, LIKE A CAT WITH A STAGGERING MOUSE, KNOWING IT CANNOT ESCAPE.

Socrates

Do two people, looking at one photograph, see the same thing?

Stan

Yes and no.

Socrates

Explain 'yes'.

Stan

To all intents and purposes the stimuli before their eyes are identical. Hence if each's perceptual apparatus is normal--

Socrates

It is.

Stan

Then each sees the same thing.

Socrates

Here we are at the crux. Can a one-month old infant see a movie?

Stan

(Puzzled, he is not quite aware of which corner he is being backed into)

No.

Socrates

Why not if the image strikes its eyeballs, the sound waves its eardrums?

Stan

(Pulls himself together)

Because it cannot yet organize its perceptions.

Socrates

Do we learn to perfectly coordinate our perceptions?

Stan

Learn, yes; perfectly, no; to a degree.

Socrates

What degree?

Stan

(Now looking for help)

A sufficient degree?

Socrates

(Briskly, beginning to close the trap)

Good, then you agree, Stan, that we do not see the same things but we see things sufficiently the same to make communication possible?

Stan

Right. But how does this relate to your dispute about machines?

Socrates

I will show you. You said cameras are automatic unlike pencils. I said cameras just like pencils, have to be used, controlled. You countered that competent controlling of a camera could be acquired far more quickly than competent control of the pencil. While I conceded that, I got you to admit that photographic machines vary, and the viewer's viewing varies. Now I put all this together and say--talk of film being automatic is highly misleading because it makes us think of mirrors rather than pencils. But mirrors are not an art medium because at best we can build distorting ones that amuse us briefly. Whereas cameras and celluloid seem to be machines with virtually limitless creative variety. Films are made and experienced not automatically projected and received.

Stan

Er, look Socrates

Socrates

(Kindly) Yes, Stan.

Stan

I seem to be in a corner and yet my feeling is that I haven't made my point.

Socrates

Well Stan, I can only corner you about the point you made, not about the point you now feel you should have but haven't made.

Stan

Can I try again?

Socrates

If you concede on the point made, yes.

Stan

(Grudgingly) I do--for the moment.

Socrates

I don't like the 'for the moment,' Stan. You are always free to reenter a discussion. But we should know when and why this one is concluded.

Stan

I concede.

Socrates

Good. Then will you try and formulate what you feel has hitherto eluded you?

Stan

Right. Perhaps in using the idea of automatic what Cavell wants to say is that the resemblance between a photograph and its object is created without human mediation, even if mediated by human choices.

Socrates

This is a complex thought, but it seems to me we have already covered it. If viewers and viewing differ, then resemblance is not to be taken as a given, inherent in the reproduction.

Stan

If you take that attitude then you are going to have to explain why almost all governments require that our passports contain photographs rather than drawings or paintings.

Socrates

What is the problem?

Stan

Governments must judge that photographs actually resemble the things photographed in a manner no other likeness does.

Socrates

They do. And I agree with them.

Stan

Then why do you challenge Cavell?

Socrates

Because, dear Stan, the resemblance is not there in some naive sense; it is a widely held theory about recognition of persons. The human face at a certain angle and in a certain light is taken as identifying. What resembles what is a function of our theories. In the abstract everything resembles everything else under one or another aspect.

Stan

I'm not sure you got the point of my quoting Cavell.

Socrates

That is of course quite possible. So let me request that we go on, and you bring it up again if that feeling continues.

Stan

(Knows he has lost but is not convinced and doesn't know why.)
Yeah.

Socrates

Have we digressed? Our talk was roaming over the matter of interpreting what happens on the screen as philosophising, and now we have a grasp of how a machine makes that possible. Where do we go from here?

Frankie

Do I take it, oh Sage, that you see movies as just another of the arts, using a particular kind of materials but otherwise not special?

Socrates

(Cagily)
It would seem so.

Frankie

What then of all the ink spilled in ninety years about whether film is an art?

Paul

And how it relates to the other arts.

Socrates

(Archly)
Are these questions serious?

Franke/Jorge/Paul

What do you mean, serious? Are there any questions more serious? We are always serious!

Socrates

Gentlemen, do not jump at me all at once. But at least you bark the same thought. You want an answer, I suppose. Yes, I can think of many questions more serious than whether film is an art and how it relates to the other arts. The truth or falsity of Mr. Kurosawa's claims about elusive truth and human concern, for example.

Frankie

Socrates, you bewilder me. Is not mapping the arts into the field of human endeavour serious business?

Socrates

Frankie, I fear you ask the wrong person. Now young Plato here certainly would answer 'yes' to your question. Would you not?

Plato

Unless, sire, I wanted to devalue my own work.

Socrates

(Harumphing and twinkling slightly, having expressed some opinions of Plato earlier, puts on a straight face.)
While I, by contrast, am a questioner, as interested in finding out what people are saying and how flimsy it is than in offering alternatives. Plato has doctrines. I teach attitudes. Intellectual humility above all. What does it matter whether the label 'art' is applied to film at all or only in some ways?

Art

(Consternation)
Socrates! You, a nominalist?

Socrates

Indeed, and a realist and a lot of other things people want to project back on my defenceless memory. Now, the question.

Plato

The arts . . .

Socrates

Plato, I want to hear from the others.

Al

Maybe I can give some reasons.

Socrates

Good. Go ahead.

Al

Well, it's not merely a question of labelling.

Socrates

But?

Al

But also a question of seriousness. When we allow that something is art we tell each other to take it seriously, to study it, to look to its contribution to human culture.

Socrates

What is the alternative?

Al

Well, the meretricious, the factitious, the trivial, and commercial.

Socrates

By Zeus! Classification of the film is going to protect us from all that?

(Knowing he has been unfair he continues to talk, drowning down the interruptions.)
 Tell me, Al, do you know the writings of one Pauline Kael?

Al

Sure.

Socrates

You will not be offended, I hope, if I ask you to reflect on the ideas of a female?

Plato

Master, now may I remind you we are in the twentieth century?

Socrates

Quite right, Plato. Shall I continue, Al?

Al

You must.

Socrates

This lady has written extensively about films but is highly critical of what she calls art house films, and suggests that films are a hybrid of other arts and skills, and, resonate with the popular rather than the refined sides of the culture.¹⁷ What think you of this?

Al

First I gotta set you straight about Ms. Kael. She doesn't write in the kind of philosophy journals the rest of us here do, and which serve to preserve the memory of your dear self. She's a journalist, for God's sake, and so it is hardly surprising she lauds popular culture.

Socrates

I was aware of that, Al. Tell me, do any of the film makers we take seriously publish in these philosophy journals referred to by Al?

¹⁷The erudition of the 'Socrates' in this work is wide-ranging indeed. He is here paraphrasing the ideas of a woman whose principal employment appears to have been writing short interpretative essays on films, mostly for a magazine called The New Yorker. Such was her influence that these were regularly collected into books, which have survived in fiche storage. The particular reference is to "Trash, Art and the Movies," which appears in the collection Going Steady, New York 1970.

Al

Of course not.

Socrates

Don't get impatient with me, Al. The dialectic moves slowly!

Al

Yeah.

Socrates

Do we take them any the less seriously for that.

Al

. . .no . . .

Socrates

You hesitate.

Plato

I do. Take them less seriously that is.

Socrates

Your standards are very high, Plato.

Plato

Is there anything wrong with that?
 (Arching his eyebrows, turning up the irony)
 Wrong? Not wrong? Perhaps illiberal? Anyway, let me not be distracted. Why then should Ms. Kael's status be of concern when we want to decide the truth of her ideas? Do you criticise her ideas, Al?

Al

I'll concede Socrates -

Socrates

How gracious.

Al

. . .the point was not her status or even the self-serving character of her ideas, but the fact that she denies the status of serious high art to movies on grounds I find shaky.

Socrates

What are these grounds?

Al

Insofar as she argues it through at all, the best I can make of it is that she thinks the medium got into the hands of showmen because it was expensive and arrived on the earth when class hierarchy and patronage of the earths were in decline. So movies sought their audience

and hence their inspiration in the masses. Because of this, the best movies resonate in popular culture, myths, current social preoccupations and the like.

Socrates

Is her analysis universalizable?

Al

I don't know. French movies seem to be part of the metropolitan serious high culture of writers and dramatists.

Socrates

Good, let's make that correction. American movies are how you say Ms. Kael describes them. Now, what is the matter with her view and how does it relate to our question of the importance of resolving the status of movies?

5. INT. NIGHT. WIMPY BAR MLS

Hap

Can I get a word in here?

Socrates

Certainly, Hap.

MCU HAP

Hap

Kael takes the movies very seriously, writes and thinks about them regularly, urges others to do the same, yet denies them a higher status than trash art. Am I right?

Socrates

You are.

Hap

Further, they are a group effort embedded in the commercial matrix. Two more strikes against them as traditional art.

Socrates

Right again.

Hap

The unexamined assumption is that the traditional arts provide a sort of canon of what serious art is.

Socrates

Explain.

Hap

Well, it's a sort of definition by induction. You ask, is film an art and answer by saying we need a criterion.

Several Voices

Aw, come off it, etc.

Hap

One at a time.

Plato

You are saying anything can be anything else.

Hap

No; I am saying anything can be classed or not classed with anything else.

Plato

Despite essential differences?

Hap

What essential differences? Everything is both similar to and different from everything else, depending on theoretical point of view.¹⁸

Socrates

The essentialist natives among us are getting restless, Hap. Bring us back to Ms. Kael.

Hap

What I am saying, in short, is that films may alter our notion of what art is, of the boundaries and the class of art objects, rather than be excluded from our traditional categories of what art is.

Al

But Kael thinks popular or trash art is interestingly different in its origins and the standards we apply to it from traditional arts.

Hap

So we can learn to look at the traditional arts differently?

¹⁸I wonder if I am alone in finding this exchange quite fascinating. There are unmistakable elements of Popper's philosophy here ~~and~~ yet by any dating the dialogue was written at a time when, we have been taught, Popper's ideas were sorely neglected. Once again, however, we must be careful not to place undue weight on such a piece of evidence. In the absence of corroboration the possibility that the author of the "Dialogue" had any direct knowledge of Popper is to be doubted.

How do we get a criterion? By looking at the existing arts, analysing their major features, then projecting these into criteria and checking to see if film fits.

Saul

Something is amiss with this?

Hap

Yes, It's essentialism via ostension.

Socrates

(Feigning puzzlement)

Unpack your jargon, please Hap.

Hap

Traditionally philosophers sought knowledge of the essence of things. Nominalists merely took note of the labels. The technique I described blends both. So the essence of art is what it is seen to be.

Socrates

Is this philosophically sound? What something seems to be today it may not seem to be tomorrow.

Hap

No thanks for up-staging me, Socrates!

Socrates

Jargon again, Hap.

Hap

To up-stage someone is to steal the audience's attention away. You did it by anticipating and blurting out the point I was going to make.

Socrates

Please excuse my impetuosity. The topic is so exciting.

Hap

Excused. I can put it as a question. The traditional arts constitute a set. When we ask of a new individual, is it a member of this set, there is no determinate answer. If we add it to the set we change the characteristics of the set. If we ask whether it fits the set we can answer 'yes' or 'no' merely by selecting the features we attend to.

Stan

You mean we can get any answer we like.

Hap

Sure.

Al

Ah.

Hap

Look, much traditional art has religious/magical origins.

Stan

Acknowledgement!

Hap

Agreed. Cavell, wasn't it?

Stan

Right, although only in the context of film discussions.
Do go on.

Hap

Movies emerge in the secularized machine age, they have no
religious/magical origins.

Stan

Overtones?

Hap

Overtones maybe. I spoke of origins.

Stan

You did.

Hap

Overtones can be in the mind of the commentator, origins,
I hope, can not.¹⁹ So, movies do not have direct con-
nection to the concerns of religion and magic--the nature
of God, the universe, the sacred and the profane, man's
position in nature--you all know the sort of stuff.

Socrates

Yes Rashomon is 'about' truth.

Hap

Truth, yes. Philosophy, i.e. secularized religion.

Art

Or religious-ified science.

Hap

Yes Art, right. Film comes out of secularized popular
entertainment without strong connection to the Great

¹⁹ Notice again how this anti-Idealistic sentiment is expressed in
what we may now detect to be a Popperian manner.

Issues that the traditional arts traditionally deal with.

Socrates

Hap, may I criticise you?

Hap

Sure.

Socrates

You are telling us what film is, what it does.

Hap

Yes.

Socrates

But in the matter of the status of movies as art the question is just as much of their potential as of their actual.

Hap

I agree. So I could sum up my objection to Kael by saying that the status of film art is not given by its origins, not infantilized by its difference from the traditional arts, but rather, is an open matter that may actually affect the way we think about art itself, in due course.

Socrates

May I criticise you again, Hap?

Hap

By all means.

Socrates

There is something very iffy about what you have said. Rather than convincing us that films are indeed a new art in thus and so ways, you have contended that it is possible they are.

Hap

I agree, that is what I have contended.

Socrates

Do you not find this sort of possibility argument rather weak?

Hap

What is weak about it?

Socrates

It seems to support no very definite conclusions.

Hap

You are mistaken there, Socrates. It supports at least one very definite conclusion.

Socrates

Namely?

Hap

That Ms. Kael is wrong in 'Trash, Art and the Movies'. No need to raise your eyebrows. Ms. Kael in herself is not of great importance, any more than I am or the rest of us here. What is important is our purpose, the issues under discussion. My aim was to establish the mere possibility that films can be more than the argument of Ms. Kael allows. Do you or do you not grant that I have made that point?

6. WE HAVE CUT AWAY FROM TIME TO TIME IN THIS LAST EXCHANGE TO A BALD MAN STANDING WITHIN EARSHOT OF THE CONVERSATION, BUT CLEARLY DIVIDING HIS ATTENTION BETWEEN IT AND THE MOVEMENTS OF THE COUNTERHANDS IN THE WIMPY, WHOM HE IS CLOCKING WITH A STOP WATCH. HOWEVER, ON THE CUE OF HAP'S INTERROGATIVE HE MOVES DECISIVELY TOWARDS THE BOOTH AND DRAWS UP A CHAIR WHEN INTRODUCED.

Socrates

Clearly, since I teased you with its weakness, it was granted. Are you now about to continue?

Hap

Yes. Or, rather, I think I should defer to Hugo here.

Socrates

Professor Munsterberg!²⁰ I did not see you arrive. Your partiality for things American is well-known to me. But yet, a hamburger joint. This surprises me.

Hugo

No more than it surprises me to see the rather odd assortment of customers in this place. Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity in Hap attacking Ms. Kael's trash view of the photoplay whilst sitting in the archetypal scene of junk food. Is not that so?

²⁰Hugo Munsterberg, a distinguished neo-Kantian, was recruited to the Harvard Philosophical Department by William James. His monograph, The Photoplay, A Psychological Study, New York 1915, is a major originating text of our field.

Socrates

The irony has not escaped me, or failed to annoy those of us unreconciled to the century of the mass media.

A SIDELONG GLANCE AT PLATO MAY NOT BE OUT OF PLACE HERE' WITH A REACTION SHOT, POSSIBLY ONE PREPARED FOR BY AN EARLIER REACTION OF PLATO'S TO THE FOOD.

Hugo

As to my appearance here. You did not notice me because I appeared momentarily. Our author as it were "cut" away to me and here I am.

Socrates

Oh how delicious.²¹ You suggest our dialogue here is a film and the devices that overcome time and space in movies are available to us?

Hugo

Quite so. Or, at least, to whatever is conceiving us. And I make the further point that we can be aware of the process. Clearly outside film or writing it would be difficult to assemble this group and have them engage in dialogue.

Socrates

An awareness of film is not unknown on film?

Stan

May even be (shudders in anticipation of his own words) inscribed there?

Hugo

Correct. There have been many films in which the characters on the film step into an on-film film, or, the characters on the film we are watching become aware of their being on film and even that we are watching them.

²¹A variant version, no longer fully intelligible, reads:

Socrates

We have you to fill the "hole" as it were, left by our director's pattern of shot and reverse shot, each containing no figure to take on the camera-eye-view position. Hence our viewers have to construct--the vogue word is "suture"--up this gap. What a clever device of our author.

Socrates

I can think of Mr. Buster Keaton's²² and Messrs Olson and Johnson's Hellzapoppin! Oh yes, and Messrs²³ Hope and Crosby in their series of Road films also.

Al

Others would be M. Truffaut's Day for Night, or Mr. Richard Rush's The Stunt Man.²⁴

Hugo

Thank you, gentlemen, for making my point that films, like people can be, as we say in psychology, reflexive.

Stan

Before you continue, Dr. Munsterberg, can I ask you this? We didn't see you a moment ago. Now you maintain you have been spliced in, and you see no difficulty there. Well (doubtfully), maybe. But where were you before you were cut in?

Hugo

Since I have been dead since 1916, Stan, where do you think I have been?

Stan

Rubbish. The dead don't come back to life. Especially they don't come back to life to be photographed or filmed. When I look at a photograph of grandma it makes her present to me while I am not present to her. You claimed to be spliced in, to be being photographed on film, yet we should be absent from your presence and we are not.

Hugo

(Is amused, but kindly to Stan's evident frustration.) You talk as if you were defending a favourite theory, Stan. Why take this presence/absence metaphysics seriously? (Stan colours.) Why should there be limits to the magic of the movies?

²² Buster Keaton was the maker of many films during the "silent" primitive period of film history. These films, some of which survive, are listed in older standard reference works.

²³ Socrates is alluding to relatively obscure comedy films: Hellzapoppin is a 1941 film; the other reference is to several films starring the comedian Bob Hope and the singer Bing Crosby made between 1940 (Road to Singapore) and 1962 (Road to Hong Kong).

²⁴ The Stunt Man is a 1982 movie.

Stan

Magic?

Hugo

I may have come from nowhere, but I have not forgotten what was said here earlier, or what some of my successors at Harvard have written. Attention to the past is a mark of the serious scholar, is it not?

Al

Look, Stan, I think I know what Hugo is getting at. This is a film, see? Now things on film come and go, yet participate fully when present, okay?

Stan

Somewhere, something, or somebody gets photographed by a camera, right? How else?

Al

Something, maybe. But not necessarily the thing we see in the film. People, things, events on film are often artifacts, Stan.

Stan

(Whose rudeness is a function of being crushed.)
You content to be an artifact, the Imaginary,
Munsterberg?

Hugo

(Rising a little to the slight)
In this I am like all of us in this dialogue, my esteemed junior colleague. It is perhaps time for me to turn to helping Hap with the challenge posed by Socrates. This was, you recall, to shift from the promissory, programmatic possibility to show that films are capable of being more than trash and have in fact been so.

Socrates

This discussion is eagerly awaited.

Hugo

Let me begin with a pedestrian manoeuvre. Ms. Kael loads her argument neatly by centering it around a well-chosen film, Citizen Kane.

Art

Well chosen?

Hugo

For her purposes. She postulates it as the greatest American film and also as a trash, pop art film. Q.E.D.

Art

So, your argument will be that the film is more than she makes it out to be?

Hugo

Decidedly not. The film is dazzling and highly inventive in its narrative and expository devices but there is a clever shallowness that leaves one little to think about.

Art

If this film is excellent trash, then, logically, to avoid conceding to Kael you must take up her other premiss that Citizen Kane is the supreme achievement of the movies.

Hugo

I will. But first to be scrupulous and point out that Ms. Kael claims it rather to be the supreme achievement of the American cinema. This is never said, rather intimated, possibly in order to render denial an easy matter.

Socrates

I enjoin my pupils to avoid speculating about motives, Professor Munsterberg.

Hugo

My mistake. Anyway, in this discussion we have mentioned work of Mr. Kurosawa, Mr. Bergman, and we should also add Mr. Ray -

Jorge

Nicholas?

Hugo

Satyajit.²⁵

Hap

(To Jorge)
Idiot!

Socrates

Gentlemen! Evaluative terms threaten us precisely because their emotional overtones make it hard for us to control ourselves.

²⁵ Satyajit Ray was an Indian film maker whose many films continue to be screened to appreciative audiences, even if their appeal has something to do with the quaint contrast between the India they show and the world's leading industrial and military power that she now is.

Hugo

My argument fails if it is contentious. What I want to show is that films of themselves need not be shallow and that some films already made are far from shallow. This bears out my original contention that film ushered in a unique new art form with potential to make the aesthetic experience available to the mass of people.

Saul

But isn't all this a series of empirical questions? Supposing we agree that these and those films are more than shallow, isn't it the case that whether they are appreciated by the mass of people and whether their appreciation amounts to an aesthetic rather than a sensational experience is a matter of fact?

Hugo

Such a hard-nosed line of argument could be stretched to the interaction of aesthetics with art too. Let us not be sucked into sceptical traps disguised as empiricism.

Socrates

Excellent, Prof---may I call you Hugo?

Hugo

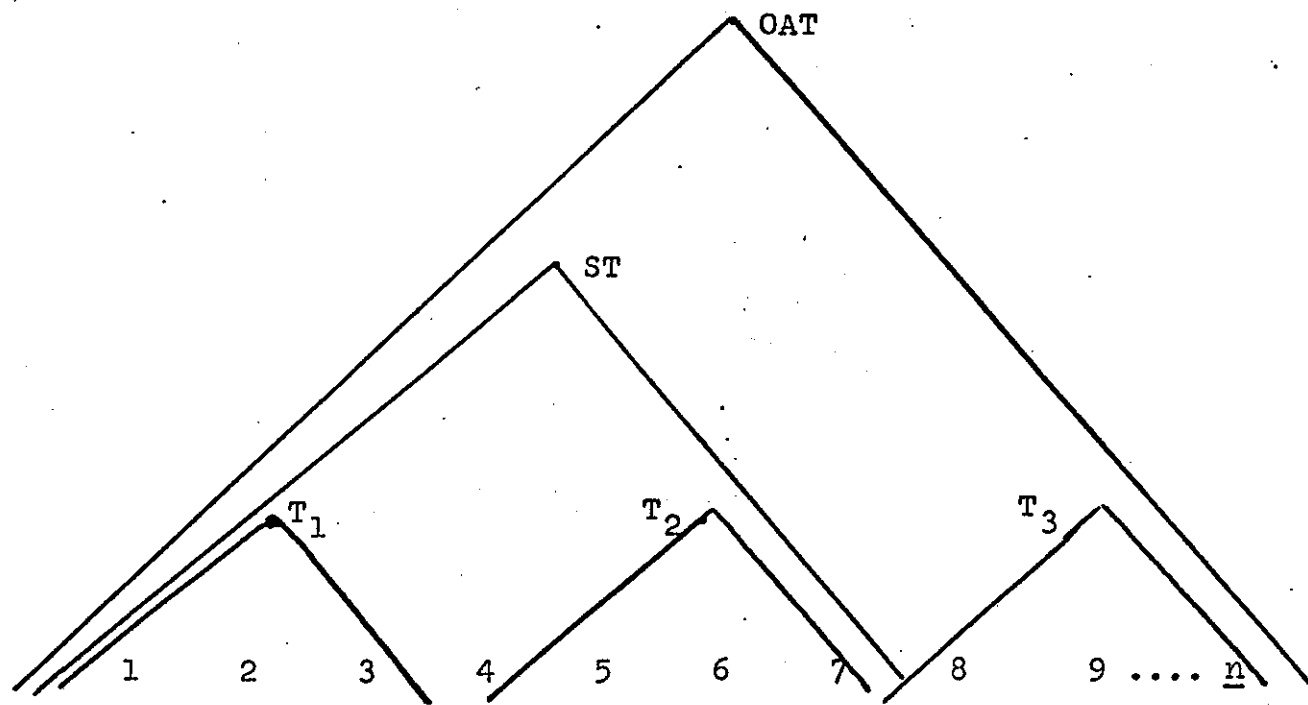
Nothing could delight me more, O Socrates.

Socrates

Perhaps, Hugo, before being concrete regarding Citizen Kane or some other film, you need to address to us your views on criteria of shallowness.

Hap

As always, O Socrates, you have put your finger on a tender spot. Philosophers of science in this present century have laboured mightily on the question of what makes a theory deep. If we envisage the structure of theory as in this diagram, perhaps things will be a little clearer:



MS SOCRATES
REVERSE MS HAP

Hap

(Pointing to the diagram)

The arabic numbers 1 to n designate phenomena our theories are to explain. T_1 to T_3 are explanatory theories. We might want to say the phenomena are at level zero and the theories at the first sub-basement of depth. Now super-theory ST explains the phenomena explained by theories T_1 and T_2 , and it also explains phenomena 4 which got lost in the gap. We might say ST is deeper than T_1 and T_2 . The same claim can be made for overarching theory OAT . Depth has to do with unifying and explaining greater ranges of phenomena, and the previous theories.

Socrates

This diagram seems to be perspicuous.

Hugo

Okey-dokey, as we Americans say. A philosophical theory that explains more than, as well as explaining, previous philosophical theories is deeper than them. Philosophy does progress in this way, unlike art. In bringing up Mr. Kurosawa, Mr. Bergman and Mr. Ray my intention was to point to films that are in any sense deep, including the one just diagrammed, deeper than Citizen Kane. It follows, I think, that it is no mere possibility that films can be art, but a matter of established fact.

Socrates

Do I understand you to be proposing a cognitive model of art, Hugo?

Hugo

I do not know the expression, Socrates.

Socrates

A cognitive model of art?

Hugo

Yes.

Socrates

Very simple, really. The idea is that works of art embody ideas, or knowledge, or information--

Hugo

Indeed. But that claim is stronger. It is that such cognitive claims are the heart of art and that the value of art can be assessed by assessing its cognitive content.

Hugo

So: if the ideas are good, the art is good?

Socrates

Yes, and if the information is valuable so is the art, and so on.

Hugo

However neat, this view would seem to have obvious weaknesses that warrant its rejection.

Socrates

What do you have in mind?

Hugo

To begin with, what about non-verbal arts? Music, dance and much visual art seem not to offer cognitions of the world at all. They rather transact in such things as mood, feeling, image.

Socrates

An obvious line of retreat would be to confine the cognitive model to such arts as novels, plays, films.

Hugo

Obvious indeed, and also flawed.

Socrates

How so?

Hugo

Leaving aside the emotional propaganda sides of art, the crucial objection seems to me to be this; we may repudiate the moods, the philosophy, or the ideas of a work which we nevertheless appreciate as art.

Socrates

Some examples would help.

Hugo

Do you accept the ideas of Mr. Bergman's trilogy Through a Glass Darkly, The Silence, and Winter Light?²⁶

²⁶These three films of the Swedish master are less revived today and so it may be appropriate to mention that they are to say the least somewhat religious and pessimistic in their outlook. For discussion of them the book Bergman on Bergman, New York 1973,

Socrates

No, indeed.

Hugo

Would you not though consider them very fine works?

Socrates

You speak truly. Other examples?

Hugo

Is the picture of and information about Germany in Triumph of the Will²⁷ to be believed?

Socrates

Of course not.

Hugo

But is it not a powerful, almost persuasive work?

Socrates

It is.

Hugo

Do you need more examples? We have not found the epistemological relativism or the substitution of practical moral action of Mr. Kurosawa's Rashomon to be true, but the film evokes much admiration. This said, may I, with respect, ask you to guide the discussion back to depth?

Socrates

We are straying, it is true. Yet perhaps not. If a work's value is not to be identified with its ideas, yet you assess the depth of ideas by their relation to one another, how will we assess the depth of films?

²⁷ Fraulein Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 film Triumph des Willens pioneered the twentieth century agit-prop style of documentary. Not only was its subject the Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg, but that rally was staged and choreographed with the cooperation of Fraulein Riefenstahl and for the benefit of her cameras. Many more, after all, would see the film of the events than could be present at the event. This led the way to politics and sports events being controlled by television. At the end of the second world war the fear of resurgent fascism was such, and superstition about the power of film was such, and the skill of this film was such, that it was not released for public viewing. Present-day students can find it in any good filmological museum.

Hugo

My diagram of theories was heuristic. To sum up my ideas simply I should say two criteria are required. First I think the depth of a work derives from the scope and depth of the problem it addresses. But only partially, because our assault on a problem may be a failure. So a second criterion has to be that the depth of the film is also a function of its success with the problem.

Hap

Is there a criterion of success?

Hugo

I am not sure. There are debates about what is successful, as there are debates about what is true, but they have as yet to issue in criteria.

Hap

Then we get nowhere.

Socrates

Each problem we solve, Hap, yields new ones. That in itself is no objection.

Hugo

Right. Let me phrase this in the right mode. It seems to me that the proper way to frame an argument about a film's claim to depth is to show what its problem is, discuss the depth of the problem and the degree of penetration of the solution. Because Kane deals with a relatively jejune problem--how to understand a man's life when people are an enigma--and does no more than illustrate it, we feel the film doesn't take us very far, and it doesn't.

Socrates

By contrast?

Hugo

Well, Mr. Kurosawa's film is about truth and about morality and about action. He brings all these into relation with one another and puts in place a coherent solution. For this reason our disagreement does not make us feel the film is all surface.

Socrates

Bravo, Hugo. You are helping me to get a glimpse of some new vistas. Yet there are nagging problems.

Hugo

Yes?

Socrates

Again, you cognise art.

Hugo

That's for clarity of exposition. I don't need to.

Socrates

Please explain.

Hugo

Well, could I ask each of you to specify some of the problems film makers address?

Socrates

Gentlemen, you have been challenged.

Al

Well, of course, many of the major problems of life.

Saul and Jorge

And of existence.

Frankie and Hap

And of art.

Stan

All of the above and one more.

Socrates

Haven't we covered everything?

Stan

Nope, There is the problem of film itself, what it is to be a film, and to experience a film.

Socrates

And what it is to be married, eh, nudge, nudge. Say no more.²⁸

²⁸Scholars dispute Socrates meaning here. Only one book on film theory from this period, S. Cavell's Pursuits of Happiness, alludes to the philosophy of marriage. Socrates own marriage is alleged not to have been a great success. One feels, however, that in having Socrates in effect crib a line and gesture from a sketch by the Monty Python group (infra) the writer of the Dialogue is violating Socrates character elsewhere in the piece. He is, as they say, losing control of his material.

Stan

Soc., old boy, who'd have think you'd be a Monty Python²⁹ fan?

Socrates

(Recovering himself)
Hugo, you have a rich menu.

Hugo

It is easily handled. A good problem, such as of knowledge, can be treated superficially. But most any problem, pursued in depth can be very rich. Whether the problem is of mood or feeling, whether it is technical, how to portray something, or cognitive, or reflexive to the medium itself, we can assess its depth. In his Persona Mr. Bergman begins with material to make us aware of film-making and viewing, but also of looking and probing, of beginnings and endings, or separateness and identity. He weaves all these problems through an enthralling encounter between a mental patient and her nurse. Despite their differences and confusions each takes from the encounter new strength to continue. There is not in Mr. Bergman as much as in Kant, but there is as much as there is in the fictions of M. Sartre.³⁰

Hap

Or Earl Russell.

Hugo

More!

MLS OF THE GROUP

(General muttering and consternation)

Socrates

Would not a defence of Citizen Kane be possible if we allow film making or image making to be the problematic of a film?

Hugo

Not fair, Socrates.

²⁹Monty Python's Flying Circus was a television comedy series in the surrealist manner that was broadcast in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. It continued to be rebroadcast and syndicated for many years after. Its six creators all went on to successful solo careers in various capacities.

³⁰Jean-Paul Sartre was a French philosopher of existentialist leanings several of whose literary works were made into films.

Socrates

What?

Hugo

We took Ms. Kael's view of its superficiality as a given and tried to see if that left us with the view that the medium was superficial. I have tried to refute this and now you say but what if Citizen Kane isn't superficial? I say, so what if it isn't? Nothing in my argument turns on this or that claim about specific films.

Socrates

Despite years in the grave your forensic skills are still well-honed, Hugo; so unlike some of my other followers in this field.

Stan

Clarity and obscurity may stem from the nature of the topic, if we trust the singer we will try to follow his song.

(Murmurs of Dissent)

Socrates

Perhaps we can look at a parallel argument about the use of film in history and documentary.

Stan

What's that got to do with philosophy, Socrates?

Socrates

Really, Stan, we musn't get professionally possessive about our field or its boundaries. Philosophy is, as it were, what philosophers do, or have done; philosophers are those who do philosophy.

Stan

We can do better'n that!

MCS STAN TRYING TO SPEAK

Socrates

Perhaps; with philosophy as seduction and other tasteless ideas. No. No. I will not be interrupted. My own view is that what counts is pursuit of the truth and the high road to that is to pursue the problems and the arguments wherever they lead. We have been worrying away at assessing art and interpreting it cognitively. Why not now look at films where the cognitive element is explicit.

Saul

You mean documentaries.

Socrates

Quite so.

Al

What's the problem?

Socrates

Can we get a better grasp of a film being deep from documentary and use that to clarify in general what it would be to call a film 'deep'?

Al

You guys want to explain to me why documentaries are so special?

Socrates

Do they not make some special, that is direct, claim to truth?

Al

Doesn't all art?

Socrates

Perhaps we need to distinguish. When we speak of the truth in fiction here we have in mind the same sort of thing as when we speak of the truth of documentary?

Al

Uh-huh.

Plato

Young Mr. Nichols³¹ says of documentary that it claims to represent to us that what we see is what there was and what there was is what there would have been.

Socrates

A little exegesis, Plato, please.

Plato

What he seems to be saying is that a documentary claims to show something that actually occurred and moreover,

³¹Plato plays on words here. His reference is to Bill Nichols, Ideology and Image, Bloomington 1981, pp. 241. His phrasing, of course, evokes John Ford's 1939 film Young Mr. Lincoln, an allusion thought apposite, presumably, because theoretician's of Mr. Nichols generation were deeply influenced (although Nichols himself was severely critical of) a long study of the film published in the French magazine Cahiers du Cinema. The text of this work is reprinted in translation in Nichols' anthology Movies and Methods, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1976.

not to have disturbed it while recording it.

Socrates

Ah, that helps. The claim is that documentary is continuous to, a representation of, the real world. Whereas Rashomon offers a philosophical truth, documentary offers rather an historical truth?

Plato

There is no reason that documentary should not offer philosophical truth as well.

Socrates

Undoubtedly.

Hap

The trouble is, some would claim of certain fictions that they offer historical truths.

Socrates

Oh? Please explain.

Hap

Well, I'm thinking of the historical novel where the author incorporates all known facts and embroiders only where he is free to.

Socrates

Are such works serious?

Hap

Sure. Or, at least, in so far as any speculation or conjecture is serious. Think of Robert Graves' I Claudius and Claudius the God, half made as a film, finally realised as a television series. Graves is a scholar of Rome and one can learn much historical truth from his novels.

Socrates

As one can, I suppose, from Mr. Bergman's The Virgin Spring, Mr. Schaffner's The War Lord, and even from the Messrs Python's Jabberwocky and The Holy Grail. It looks as though the problem of specifying the truth in documentary by contrast to the truth of fiction is a knotty one. Anyone else?

CU PLATO QUIZZICAL

Plato

At best a diagnosis.

Socrates

So?

Plato

I suppose any medium in which statements can be formulated or hinted at has the possibility of making falsifiable statements or non-falsifiable ones--be they about philosophy, history, or whatever. Some of these we call facts. Generally, fictional works offer some falsifiable statements, usually of a general kind. Generally factual works offer both. It is the inductivist prejudice that there is some hard and fast line between falsifiable and unfalsifiable, and between facts and speculations that has led to the useful but philosophically misleading concept of documentary.

Socrates

Plato--having read your Republic with its metaphor of the cave perhaps I should not be surprised you are heading for a pessimistic conclusion.

Plato

True, O Socrates. Much documentary is, it seems to me, forwarding not so much historical facts as historical interpretations. That is, points of view on history that, though controvertible, are not clearly falsifiable.

Socrates

How do you distinguish fiction from documentary?

Plato

At most by emphasis or stated aims. Indeed their mutual interpenetration would be my argument for denying any hard and fast contrast. As the tradition of film-making lengthens through time and films exercise influence on each other we can notice much crossing over from fiction to documentary forms and vice versa.

Socrates

Are we then stumped? What of truth and depth?

Art

How about a simple answer?

Socrates

(Sceptically)
Always welcome, Art.

Art

Maybe its this way. Criteria of truth and depth are as elusive in film as in science. We aim for both, yet we also, in seeking them, come to learn about them, but it is always a question for discussion, not one that is settled.

Socrates

Not settled? I like that philosophy.

PAN/DOLLY AROUND THE FACES. EACH LOOKS UNABLE TO CONTINUE, FIDDLE WITH OR DRAIN CUPS. SOCRATES GATHERS UP HIS ROBE.

Socrates

Gentlemen! Let us agree to continue this another day. Since film has made us all immortal, present despite our absence, we can but hope that new thoughts or the stimulus of new recruits, such as we hear of from Downsville, will advance things further at that time.

THERE BEING MURMURS OF AGREEMENT SOCRATES EXITS THE WIMPY BAR, CAMERA LETS HIM LEAVE FRAME, THE CRANES UP AND PANS ROUND TO SETTLE ON MARQUEE DISPLAYING SIGN "WOODY ALLEN'S ZELIG".