



Review: Christopher Falzon (2007) *Philosophy Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Second Edition)

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Christopher Falzon describes the aim of his book, now in its second edition, as being to introduce some of the ideas and arguments that have preoccupied philosophers over the years, drawing on films as 'a kind of collective visual memory, a vast repository of images' by way of illustration. At the outset, Falzon aligns himself with Victor Perkins' position, that films make their points in the realms of action and appearance rather than that of reflection and debate (Perkins, 1972, 69), whilst highlighting the philosophical prejudice against the visual, tracing it back to Plato's cave. Although Falzon briefly interrogates this prejudice, his book is overtly situated within the camp of using film to illustrate philosophy rather than talking about films as philosophical endeavours in their own right.

Falzon addresses the relationship between film and philosophy and establishes his project as calling into question the perception that philosophy is remote from everyday existence by looking at how cinematic images can be used to portray and talk about philosophical themes. In anticipation, no doubt, of objections from film scholars, he recognises that there is an argument that his kind of approach fails to treat films as films, reducing them to mere illustrations for philosophy. His answer to this inevitable allegation is to acknowledge the richness of the film as a text and to cite his endeavour as simply one more perspective for thinking about film. This book is not, however, concerned with thinking about film; it is an introduction to philosophy where filmic examples of straightforward textual relevance are drawn upon to elucidate philosophical problems.

Whilst conceding that some films engage explicitly with philosophy, Falzon clearly has difficulty with the position that films can philosophise. Quoting Stephen Mulhall on this point, that, films might be seen as ‘themselves reflecting on and evaluating such view and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do’ (Mulhall 2002, 2), Falzon seems to feel that this ‘robust’ view has gone too far (7). The furthest Falzon will go is that, ‘it does seem plausible to suggest that just as images in philosophy can go beyond illustration and play a role in the argument itself, the kinds of concrete scenarios that are portrayed in a film may be used to explicitly raise questions within the film’s narrative about the adequacy of sense experience for giving us knowledge of reality’ (7). A departure from Mulhall’s approach therefore is unsurprising. In his *On Film: Thinking in Action* (2002), Mulhall makes it clear that he considers films to be capable of making real contributions to philosophical debates. He is implicitly critical of precisely the approach which Falzon takes in this book: ‘In other words, 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 ways philosophers do’ (Mulhall, 2002, 2). As if anticipating Falzon’s work, Mulhall writes that ‘films are not philosophy’s raw material, nor a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophizing’ (2002, 2).

There is clearly a clash of approaches which renders explicit the most basic conflict between the disciplines of film studies and philosophy – that of the status of one’s text. At a film and philosophy conference a few years ago, I was surprised by a presentation where the display of a picture of Plato as embodying the gravitas of philosophy, was swiftly followed by a picture of Mickey Mouse as representative of the status of film studies. Although clearly intended as a provocation, I think it goes to the heart of this inter-disciplinary relationship, which is evident in the conflicting positions of Mulhall and Falzon. For Falzon, cinema is at the service of philosophy; for Mulhall cinema is philosophy.

There can be no doubt however that Falzon has respect and affection for a broad spectrum of cinema and this breadth of knowledge enables him to draw upon an impressively wide selection of films. The book is divided into sections which consider the basic preoccupations of philosophers through the ages: the theory of knowledge, the self and personal identity, moral, social and political philosophy and philosophical issues to do with society, science and technology. Each chapter begins with an elucidation of the basic principles at issue, followed by references to scenarios from films that engage with these problems. For example, following the introduction of the image of Plato’s cave and the wider implications in terms of knowledge and liberation, Falzon discusses Bertolucci’s use of the cave image to comment upon the ‘imprisoning delusions of

fascism' in *The Conformist* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1970)(23). He extends the filmic reference to *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988) in order to illustrate the parallel between Toto's escape from the confines of small village life and the liberating escape envisaged by Plato. He then moves on to *Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in order to consider Alex's psychological conditioning by the state as reminiscent of Plato's cave in the way that Alex is bound to his seat and forced to watch a series of images. He skews this juxtaposition by describing the 'perverse twists' in the Kubrick film which problematise the notion of Platonic liberation – Alex will gain his liberation as a result of the brainwashing, but has now become a prisoner of a different sort. Falzon thereby illustrates an example of a liberation that is far from straightforward and also raises the issue of where the sympathy of an audience might lie: 'Kubrick gets us to sympathise with Alex, but at the same time it is not at all clear that it would be a good thing for this particular prisoner to escape from his cave' (25).

Having set up the methodological paradigm which the book will follow, Falzon proceeds to discuss *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) as a film which operates as a philosophical paradigm in itself. Considering the film alongside the brain in the vat scenario leads on to more examples of films concerned with misleading characters – and audiences – by making them suddenly aware of the assumptions which they have made in the course of the film: *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shylaman, 1999), *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992). Likening this appreciation of the vulnerability of the senses to deception to Descartes's scepticism leads Falzon to set up philosophical training as a way to 'escape from our chains, to break away from reliance on sense experience, and learn to use reason alone' (37). This position clearly has implications for the field of spectatorship, as even the most rational philosopher cannot escape the cinematic manipulations of on-screen reality. There is surely an element in the spectatorial relationship which is resistant – or even immune – to the reason of the philosopher: what about the familiar necessity for the 'suspension of disbelief'? Falzon writes of the manipulation of the image by the filmmaker and the way in which this inevitably guides our 'cinematic seeing'. With this issue, Falzon begins to tackle the area of spectatorship and active involvement in constructing the meaning of what we see and goes on to explore this through the examples of *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *Hilary and Jackie* (Armand Tucker, 1998). It is undoubtedly a useful grouping of films and although on other occasions in the book chapters can unfold rather like a list of examples, this is one of the occasions where Falzon progresses his argument via the use of a chain of filmic texts.

Each of the chapters unfolds along similar lines, stimulating questions concerned with philosophical problems and demonstrating the relevance of these questions to cinematic examples. These links are straightforward and in most cases self-evident: questions of the self and

personal identity are illustrated with examples from *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Victor Fleming, 1941) and *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999); problems concerning moral philosophy are located in *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) and *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (Woody Allen, 1989); social and political philosophy is explored in *Antz* (Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, 1998) and *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979). Many of the films referred to, however, are very welcome new inclusions in the philosophical arena, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004). This second edition of the book adds recent films into the mix and Falzon's refusal to be trammelled by a restriction to 'high' or art-house cinema is particularly commendable: for every *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) or *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang 1927), there is a *Hollow Man* (Paul Verhoeven, 2000) and a *Face-Off* (John Woo, 1997). The overall effect of this omni-referencing is to convey the extent of the multifarious historical relationship between film and philosophy. Falzon presents a plethora of evidence that supports his proposition that films can serve to illuminate philosophical ideas and arguments, but, as he rightly states, 'film is about a lot else besides' (7). Although by this Falzon means that 'even the most "philosophical" film has to get on with the action' (7), he does of course also point to the fact that there is a lot more going on in a film than visual images, narrative concerns or philosophical self-reflexivity, which Falzon is content to leave to others to explore.

An example of such an exploration is that of John Orr, who takes an auteurist approach to film and philosophy when he considers the epistemology of David Hume and Alfred Hitchcock. For Orr, 'Hume was a philosopher by profession, Hitchcock a philosopher by default' (Orr, 2005, 26). Taking an overarching look at the way in which Hitchcock distances and draws in the spectator at the same time, Orr describes Hitchcock as 'a philosopher of the senses in the twentieth century' (2005, 28). Mulhall's book takes the *Alien* quartet and considers the ways in which the films' philosophical concerns with anxieties about human identity and embodiment raise questions about the nature of the cinematic medium itself, as well as comment upon the industrial and artistic implications of each individual director's contributions. These broader, film-as-philosophy based approaches are not what Falzon is attempting. When considering the cloning process in *Alien Resurrection* (Jean Pierre Jeunet, 1997), for example, Falzon sees this as an illustration of 'the reducing of the human being to a manufactured product' in the context of the relationship between science and human progress (192); for Mulhall, the scene is existential philosophy in action:

Ripley's clone thus confronts the multiple, interlinked conditions of her own existence – as the meat by-product of a cloning process, as the sole member of a new species, and as a specific, individual creature. (Mulhall: 130)

Falzon's analysis of films is limited to pointing out the textual philosophic references, many of which are self-conscious and deliberate on the part of the filmmakers. There is a preoccupation

with philosophical reasoning and debate evident in Woody Allen's films and a conscious, intellectual challenge to the logic of language and argument posed by *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, 1975). This is not to detract from Falzon's employment of these texts as pedagogical tools. The book as a whole represents an attempt to open students' eyes to the relevance and prevalence of philosophical conundrums to their contemporary cultural experience. More than this, it also serves to create a database of illustrative material which successfully renders accessible the central areas of philosophical concern one would expect to see on an 'Introduction to Philosophy' course. This accessibility is achieved through the apposite selection of filmic material, the quality of that material and the subtle development of arguments alongside shifting cinematic perspectives. Falzon's perspective is that of the philosopher, writing about philosophy, utilising film as an illustrative tool. His coverage of the fundamental principles and debates is engaging and well supplemented by his use of cinema. This is not an introduction to thinking about film as philosophy, but, as a guide to basic philosophy for movie-buffs, Falzon's book fits the bill.

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Mad Max (George Miller, 1979)
The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999)
Metropolis (Fritz Lang 1927)
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