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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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## A Second Look at *On Film*

Review: Stephen Mulhall (2008)  
*On Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition  
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### 1. Overview and General Observations

It is perhaps somewhat misleading to describe the new edition of Stephen Mulhall's exceptional book, *On Film*, as a second edition, for this may lead one to think of it as slightly modified reprint of the first, whereas it has been so greatly expanded as to be, arguably, a new work (indeed, its additions were so substantial it no longer qualifies for Routledge's 'Thinking in Action' series). The first edition of *On Film* was a short work, 142 pages, which defended a notion of 'film as philosophy' through meticulous explications of the four *Alien* movies as well as other films by their directors (Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet). This material now comprises Part One of the

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second edition, which totals 270 pages, contains two additional parts, and extends Mulhall's approach to the *Mission: Impossible* films.

Part Two contains two chapters. In the first, Mulhall replies to criticisms of the first edition, both by philosophers, who objected to his claims about film's ability to philosophise, as well as film theorists, who critiqued aspects of his film analysis. This chapter will be of special interest to readers of this journal, for he singles out reviews published in *Film-Philosophy* for special consideration. The second chapter in Part Two analyses *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002) and serves as a bridge between Part One, which focuses on the *Alien* films, and Part Three, which focuses on the *Mission: Impossible* films. Like the films discussed in Part One, *Minority Report* is a hybrid science-fiction film and Mulhall also convincingly argues that it resembles them in that it reflects on stardom and the conditions of the possibility of film. At the same time, Tom Cruise is the star of both *Minority Report* and the *Mission Impossible* films. Thus Mulhall's analysis of *Minority Report* serves as a bridge between the thematic concerns of Part One and his film selections in Part Three.

Mulhall's decision to focus on the *Mission: Impossible* movies in Part Three may seem arbitrary. Several similarities to the *Alien* films emerge, however, over the course of his analyses. Mulhall focused on the *Alien* films in the first edition because they were a series of sequels each of which had a different director and thus, he argued, could be understood as engaged in a type of philosophic dialogue, a 'dialectic of inheritance and originality' (132) with each director inheriting the narrative universe of his predecessor's film and evaluating it through modifications introduced in his sequel. The *Mission: Impossible* films are similar in that they too have each had a different director: Brian De Palma, John Woo, and J. J. Abrams. Moreover, these series differ from other Hollywood film series, such as the *Batman* franchise, in that the central character of each has been portrayed by the same actors, Sigourney Weaver and Tom Cruise. Thus the *Mission: Impossible* films, like the *Alien* films, provide Mulhall with fertile ground for reflecting on the role of stardom in film appreciation.

In keeping with the format of reviews in *Film-Philosophy*, I will pose questions for Mulhall in subsequent sections of this review, focusing on his additions to the second edition of *On Film* since the first has been so expertly reviewed in this journal. Let me offer, however, some general observations.

The second edition of *On Film* is a remarkable book, and my questions to Mulhall should not be taken as criticisms but invitations to amplify on his intriguing ideas. Many critics praised the first edition for its original analyses of the *Alien* films. Mulhall documented his engagement with film studies in his book's notes, but *On Film* was noteworthy for its lack of jargon or reliance on concepts drawn from a particular theoretical vocabulary. Reading it, one felt as though one was watching the *Alien* films alongside an insightful, knowledgeable, articulate fan. Mulhall's enthusiasm was infectious: one felt compelled to watch the *Alien* films again. The second edition deserves the same praise for its subtle analyses of *Minority Report* and the *Mission: Impossible* movies.

This is not to say that it is entirely free from flaws. Mulhall's analyses seem rushed at times. It may be telling that his discussion of the *Alien* films ranges over 112 pages, whereas his remarks on the *Mission: Impossible* films are confined to 69 pages. At times, this brevity may invite the worry, which some voiced about the first edition, that he reads too much into some films. For example, his reading of *Mission: Impossible II* (John Woo, 2000) with its tortuous analysis of the film's allusions to Greek mythology (the bioweapon in *MI: II* is named 'Chimera') struck this reviewer as forced - not wholly unconvincing but requiring more justification. These are, however, just quibbles. Overall, Mulhall's readings of the *Mission: Impossible* movies are just as original as those of the *Alien* films in the first edition. His analyses of *Minority Report* and *Mission: Impossible III* (J. J. Abrams, 2006) stand out as particularly insightful.

This accomplishment is in a way even more impressive. Films such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) are popular Hollywood films but have a certain critical-academic respectability. *Blade Runner* is listed among the American Film Institute's Top 100 films, both have

received almost universally favorable reviews, and *Alien* figures prominently in writings by contemporary philosophers, such as Cynthia Freeland's *The Naked and the Undead*. The *Mission: Impossible* films have a less impressive reputation. Each received lukewarm reviews,<sup>1</sup> and the directors responsible for them, Mulhall notes, with the exception of J. J. Abrams who had not directed a film prior to *Mission: Impossible III*, 'have a reputation for... valuing surface sheen over human and artistic depth' (192). The fact that Mulhall uncovers so much in these films is all the more impressive for the fact that so many have believed them to be utterly mindless.

## 2. Can Films Philosophise?

The most controversial claim of *On Film* will likely remain Mulhall's assertion that films can philosophise. Mulhall objected in the first edition to approaches in film studies that treat films as mere fodder for theory or depict them as 'philosophic' only insofar as they contain entertaining illustrations of philosophic puzzles. By contrast, he proposed to show that the *Alien* films, and by extension other films, can be understood as 'reflecting on and evaluating... views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do' (4).

Much of the criticism of the first edition, among philosophers, was directed at this idea of film as philosophy. Mulhall devotes much of Part II to replying to this criticism. He expresses, however, a certain disappointment with this response to his book:

[T]he most disappointing aspect of the critical responses to my book is that even those responsive to its concerns tend not to engage in any detail with the specific readings of particular films that make up the bulk

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<sup>1</sup> It is revealing to contrast the reviews of the *Mission Impossible* tabulated on [www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com) with those of the *Alien* films. *Mission Impossible III* is the best reviewed of the *Mission Impossible*, with a 70% approval rating, whereas the first two films each have 57%. By contrast, *Alien* has a 97% and *Blade Runner* has a 91% approval rating.

of my book itself, and that are in fact where its more general claims either stand or fall. (134)

The frustration Mulhall expresses in this passage makes it difficult to review the second edition. Like his original reviewers, I find his idea of film as philosophy to be both his most provocative yet most ambiguous claim. Yet I worry that I am not doing justice to his book if I simply disregard (again) his interpretations of particular films. For now, then, I want to ignore Mulhall's challenge to assess his interpretations with the promise I will return to it later in this review (albeit only to question the legitimacy of this challenge).

### 3. What Does it Mean to 'Philosophise' Anyway?

Mulhall cites Julian Baggini's review in *Film-Philosophy*, 'Alien Ways of Thinking', as one of the more helpful responses to question the idea of film as philosophy. He presents Baggini as doubting whether films can philosophise on the grounds that they 'offer us symbolic representations of the world, but don't provide us with reasons for thinking that these representations are accurate'. By contrast, Baggini proposes that 'reason-giving', which he distinguishes from mere 'provision of formal arguments', is central to philosophy. Mulhall also cites Tom Wartenberg and Murray Smith as critics who doubt whether films can philosophise, with Wartenberg arguing that 'narrative can yield a philosophic truth' only if 'the truth it establishes is general' and 'does not rely on the specific details of the story' and Smith arguing that art's 'particularity' prevents it from achieving the 'abstract, conceptual character of philosophy' (143).

Mulhall offers several replies. Here I hope that I am not flattening out too much in them by reading him as chiefly concerned to defend what he calls 'the argumentative relevance of particular experience' (133). Mulhall draws attention to the various ways in which philosophers can invite us to imagine specific scenarios so as to 'reorient' our thinking, and he persuasively argues that films can initiate such reorientations through representations of particular experiences. For example, he points how Socrates likens the polis to a family in *Crito* so as to reorient his interlocutors' thinking on their responsibilities to the

state and he suggests that Dickens - and thus, presumably, artists working in other media, such as film - sought to 'enlarge the moral imagination of his readers' in a similar way (141).

My sense is that Mulhall's replies are sound. I think here of the role examples play in, say, Bernard Williams's writings, such as his lorry driver example in 'Moral Luck'. When philosophers debate about Williams's example, and whether it establishes the reality of moral luck, they do not simply use it to access a 'general truth' that can be verified independently of the details of this story. Our philosophic conclusions flow out of our imaginative experience of them - our capacity to imaginatively project into this situation and reflect on what our imagined regret discloses to us. Yet it strikes me as counterintuitive to suppose that Williams's example (to say nothing of more canonical literary moments in philosophy, such as Plato's cave allegory) can count as philosophy, whereas a comparable scene in a film, such as *Sophie's Choice* for moral luck, could not simply because it is a fictional representation not couched within a text by a professional philosopher.<sup>2</sup>

So, I do not deny the persuasiveness of Mulhall's replies to his critics. However, I do find them vaguely unsatisfying. Here I would note that Baggini's criticism is slightly misrepresented. Baggini explicitly states that he does not reject Mulhall's claim that there is an 'open border' between philosophy and literature.<sup>3</sup> He writes that he does not think "film as philosophising' is impossible' and he cites *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) as a film engaged in

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<sup>2</sup> Baggini could argue that my examples support his claim that films philosophise only when they engage in reason-giving. A cinematic version of Williams's lorry driver example would be philosophic, I seem to be claiming, because it provides *reasons* for accepting the reality of moral luck. My sense, though, is that a film like *Sophie's Choice* need not offer full-blown reasons for believing in moral luck for it to inspire viewers to reflect on agency, regret and the scope of moral obligation. I take it that initiating such reflection, reorienting viewers in this way, would count as philosophy for Mulhall. Finally, my sense is that Mulhall is right to favour this more permissive conception of philosophy. For example, Nietzsche's literary remarks on eternal return in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* strike me as philosophic even if they do not, by themselves, give me a reason to believe in eternal recurrence.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Baggini are taken from Baggini, "Alien Ways of Thinking: Mulhall's On Film," *Film-Philosophy*, v. 7, n. 24. [<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol7-2003/n24baggini>]. Accessed 22 September 2008.

the reason-giving he equates with philosophy. His point is not that films cannot philosophise but that the *Alien* films do not philosophise.

This misrepresentation is telling. Mulhall presents Baggini, initially at least,<sup>4</sup> as doubting if films can philosophise, but Baggini never denies this claim. His point seems to be that the interesting puzzle raised by *On Film*, its 'important and lingering question', is how it calls into question what it means to think 'in just the ways that philosophers do'. If I read him right, Baggini's point is not that films cannot philosophise but that the more you ponder Mulhall's proposal, which is persuasive, the harder it is to pin down what makes philosophy unique. This worry is reflected in his remark that 'there are good motives [for] wanting the open border [between philosophy and film] to remain a border, one we cross with ease but the legitimacy of which we recognise'. As I see it, Baggini presents his idea of philosophy as reason-giving not to exclude films from philosophy - their borders remain 'open' - but to clarify what makes philosophy special, a proposal that leads him to doubt whether the *Alien* films count as philosophy.

My sense is that Baggini is right to think that the puzzle raised by *On Film* has less to do with film and more with philosophy. Mulhall's proposal that sequels by gifted directors can constitute a philosophic dialogue, or that a film like *Alien* reorients our thought on issues of life, sexuality, and the relation between identity and embodiment, even if it does not supply us with full-blown reasons to think that life is 'an inherently masculine assault on women' (28) *are convincing*. But the more I follow this train of thought, the more the distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy becomes hazy. If a film does not need to supply us with reasons for accepting some philosophic claim, does it need to at least *assert* some philosophic claim? Does assertion, claiming that things are thus-and-so, play a privileged role in philosophy such that a film is philosophic only if, when properly interpreted, it can be shown to have asserted some such claim? Or is it enough for it to simply inspire viewers to reflect on certain

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<sup>4</sup> In fairness to Mulhall, I should note that he addresses this criticism on pp. 140-141 of *On Film*.

problems, philosophic ones, without asserting solutions to them? The more I pursue these questions, the more confused I become as to what distinguishes philosophic films from non-philosophic ones, or whether film is uniquely related to philosophy in ways that distinguish philosophic films from philosophic novels, philosophic plays, philosophic comic books, and so forth.

It is for this reason that I find myself vaguely dissatisfied with Mulhall's replies to Baggini as well as, to a lesser extent, other critics. To be clear: I cannot find a flaw in them. Yet I wonder whether the real motivation behind these critics' concerns is not that *On Film* proposes that some films philosophise but that it renders it unclear what it means to philosophise. To be fair, there are references in *On Film* to Cavell's ideas about philosophy. There are intriguing passages in which philosophy is linked with thinking 'undistractedly' about things 'ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about' (144). However, my sense is that Mulhall has a more provocative understanding of philosophy, one he draws upon in suggesting that films can philosophise, but which he never fully divulges to his readers.

This complaint may not seem problematic. Mulhall states that his proposal about film is a 'modest' one (131). So perhaps I and others are wrong to read him as defending too radical of a claim about film's ability to philosophise. Second, my criticism can sound contradictory to his approach. Mulhall explains that he accepts Cavell's strategy for drawing conclusions about film, which is not to 'read off an art form's... possibilities from the independently given properties of its medium' but to let an understanding 'accrue' based on 'critical interpretations of specific films and specific achievements of film' (153). Perhaps he favours a similar approach to philosophy - i.e., that its nature is best revealed by exemplary moments of it - and thus pressing him for something like a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for an activity's counting as philosophy contradicts his investigative method. Finally, one of his concerns about film theory is that it deprives films of the chance to call theoretical strictures into question. By contrast, he argues that philosophy's willingness to subject its foundational principles to question should compel it to adopt a more open

stance toward film. This seems to suggest, however, that it is a feature of philosophy's self-questioning nature that it cannot deliver the kinds conditions I seem to be requesting - that it is necessarily a continual work in progress.

The problem with these responses is that they downplay what makes Mulhall's proposal so intriguing in the first place. Mulhall's claim that a film like *Alien* can philosophise is convincing partly because *Alien* is a smart film: to call it 'philosophic' seems appropriate praise. But I take it there is more to his suggestion. That is, the idea of film as philosophy is provocative because it implies that film is *uniquely philosophic*. Toward the end of his reply to his critics, Mulhall quotes Cavell's epigraph to *Contesting Tears* to illustrate his view on the relationship between philosophy and film:

To my way of thinking the creation of film was as if meant for philosophy – meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, and about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression. (146)

I admire Cavell's writings, but I often stumble across passages that strike me as both undeniably accurate yet enigmatic, passages in which he seems to be thinking at a level of detail that exceeds my abilities. This epigraph is one of those passages. The point that I would make, however, is that Mulhall's quoting it suggests that he sees film as standing in a special relationship to philosophy. There is a unique link between the two - one that distinguishes film, presumably, from other examples of putatively philosophic art.

It is not clear to me that this link is adequately explained in *On Film*. My aim, then, in pressing Mulhall for clarification of his understanding of philosophy is not to badger him into a plodding discussion about necessary and sufficient conditions but to invite him to amplify on the genuinely intriguing vision of philosophy that is at work yet remains hidden in *On Film*. One catches glimpses of it in his admittedly brilliant readings of the films he analyses, but these are only glimpses, and their effect, I find, is to leave it unclear what it means to

philosophise and what it means to say that some films think in 'just the way philosophers do'.

#### 4. Specific Readings of Particular Films?

Now, I take it that part of Mulhall's reply will be to advise me to take a closer look at his specific readings of the films he discusses, where, again, his 'general claims either stand or fall'. Let me return therefore to this challenge to assess his specific readings of particular films, albeit not to take it up but to explain why I find it difficult to accept. (Here I would add that his readings of the *Mission: Impossible* films are brilliant, and I doubt I could match his subtlety in exposing the tension in them between the perceptual modes of television and cinema and the tensions between professional and personal identity.)

Mulhall's ambiguity as to what counts as philosophy makes it difficult to accept his injunction to focus on his readings of particular films. I quote from one passage in which he explains how his general claims rely on his specific interpretations:

[T]he increasingly common generation of sequels and series in contemporary Hollywood might be seen as one way in which film attains the condition of modernism... and thereby the condition of philosophy. Once again, however, we cannot settle this question of whether any of these sequels actually does attain or exemplify that condition except by watching them – by attending to our concrete experience of their qualities. (133)

Mulhall's claim seems to be that whether a film meets the 'condition of philosophy' cannot be determined without interpreting it. We cannot determine if a film is just another Hollywood sequel or one in which its sequeldom initiates a philosophic dialogue between directors without looking to see whether its director manifests an awareness of her debt to her predecessor and critically evaluates it in specific scenes. Notice, though, that interpreting such scenes is needed to determine *if they bear out the conditions*

of philosophy. According to the above, it is not needed to determine *what the conditions of philosophy are*.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear, then, that Mulhall is right to fault his critics for ignoring how his general claims rely on his specific readings of particular films. For one can discuss what count as the 'conditions of philosophy' apart from his specific remarks on the *Alien* or *Mission: Impossible* films. What stands or falls is whether he succeeds in showing through his interpretations that these conditions are discernable *in these films*. At the very least, there is an ambiguity here as to the relationship between Mulhall's general claims and his interpretations of these films.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, I am not sure how far to press this criticism. The second edition of *On Film* is a wonderfully readable book. Mulhall's prose is engaging, and his enthusiasm for the films he analyses is infectious. I found myself not only watching the *Mission: Impossible* films in preparing this review but pouring over *Notorious* (Hitchcock, 1946) and episodes of *Alias*, which Mulhall links with *Mission: Impossible II* and *III* respectively, while reading passages from *On Film* simply to watch these scenes unfold in time with his analysis of them. I have not discussed his readings of these films in any detail, but they are brilliant, and it could be the case that *On Film* would be a far less fun book if it devoted less attention to explicating them and more to elaborating some vision of philosophy, even if this vision is, as I have suggested, a provocative one. Perhaps we can look forward to a third edition in which more of this vision is shared with his readers.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Mulhall's remarks on the same page on how his reading of the Voight-Kampff machine in *Blade Runners* supports his claim that this film engages in philosophy. Unless I am missing something, here too his claim is that his reading of this device is key to determining *if the film exhibits the conditions of philosophy* but not to determining *what these conditions might be*.

<sup>6</sup> This ambiguity invites the worry that he may commit some of the same errors he criticises in film theory. Mulhall dislikes film theory because it tends to treat film as a mere fodder for theory, but the above passage makes it sound as though philosophic films are simply those which illustrate some antecedently specifiable set of 'conditions of philosophy'. I don't think Mulhall would be happy with this position, but avoiding it would require him to clarify the relationship between his general claims about philosophy and his interpretations of specific films.

## **Bibliography**

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