Philosophy in the Moving Image:
Response to Bruce Russell

Introduction

Nowadays a number of voices, including mine, are claiming that it is possible to philosophize through moving images. Bruce Russell has taken up the commendable role of the skeptic with regard to contemporary claims about cinematic philosophizing. In "Film's Limits: The Sequel", he has taken on a fair sample of philosophical movie-buffs.[1] In this essay, I would like to attempt to defend my position in the face of Russell's objections.[2]

I think that philosophizing by means of moving images is possible. I think that it is even the case that some films, such as *Serene Velocity* and *Parenthood*, have achieved this lofty goal. By "philosophizing through the moving image" I mean that certain motion pictures can deliver or communicate philosophical insight, such as conceptual knowledge, or, to put it more informally, said films can "do philosophy." On my view, this process of delivering philosophical insight involves the objective on the part of the movie-maker to present a philosophical position, such as the analysis (or partial analysis) of a concept, as well as designing the motion picture in such a way that it enables a prepared viewer to grasp the intended philosophical point. Said viewer is also encouraged – either by the context of the motion picture or its internal

structure, or, more likely both – and guided to test the pertinent philosophical conjecture against her own experiences, observations, memories, reasonings, and counterfactual imaginings.

As I understand Bruce Russell, he rejects this on the grounds that anything worthy of the mantel of philosophizing must be accompanied by *explicit* argumentation on the part of the proponent of the view at hand. Moreover, he does not accept the suggestion that a motion picture, construed as a thought experiment, is an argument; thought experiments must be accompanied by explicit explanations, if they are to be counted as genuine philosophizing. I will try to convince you otherwise. But before I begin that task, I need to take a short digression involving a slight misconception of my view.

A Harmless Misinterpretation

Before turning to the heart of the debate between Bruce Russell and myself, I need to point to one place where I think Prof. Russell misinterprets me – though I hasten to add that the fault may be mine. Russell thinks that like him I do not think that fictional motion pictures can convey empirical facts of any generality. This is not the case. However, it might be that something that I wrote may have been misleading. In my introduction to the section on "Film and Knowledge" in the anthology *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, I very forcefully rehearsed the argument that fiction films lack evidential support for whatever knowledge claims they might be thought to proffer.[3] It may be that my representation of this viewpoint was so aggressive that Prof. Russell took the position to be one that I endorse.

But, in order to set the record straight, let me emphasize that I think that fictions often point to empirical phenomena whose existence they intend audiences to confirm on the basis of their own experience and reasoning. In *Tartuffe*, for example, Moliere meant to indicate that there was a type of pious fraud about in his contemporary France. He didn't supply statistics or evidence, but defined the type so well that viewers could use his character as a model to discover and confirm the proliferation of this kind of hypocrisy in their own experience and through their own observations. Likewise, Dickens in *Bleak House* brings to his reader's attention the emergence of dubious philanthropists, like Mrs. Jellyby, who advertise their concern for children in far off Africa while neglecting their own kin. Dickens does not document the existence of this social phenomenon. He leaves that up to the reader to do on his or her own. But one cannot deny that Dickens has communicated social insight to his readers, since had he not created such an ideal fictional type, it is questionable whether readers would have become as widely and acutely aware of these curious beings. Dickens helped readers to organize their experience in a way that enabled them to confirm, on their own, the existence of the social type in question.[4]

What is true of plays and novels is also true of films. Films can *alert* viewers to emerging social conditions about which they may have been only dimly or incoher-

ently aware, and, furthermore, once so alerted, viewers can use the guidance afforded by the film to confirm the applicability of the characterization of social affairs spotlighted by the moviemaker.

For example, the recent Italian film *A Casa Nostra* by Francesca Comencini is the sort of realist film that is predicated upon calling to the mind of the viewer emerging trends in society that might otherwise go unnoticed or unclarified. *A Casa Nostra* is designed to show how, especially over the last twenty years in Italy, money has become the dominant force in contemporary Italian culture and that, even more ominously, people have come to embrace this as normal. Comencini graphically portrays the ways in which such a money culture courts barbarism. But she leaves confirmation of her take on Italian society up to the viewer. She implicitly bids viewers to confirm her picture of the state of affairs in their own experience.

Nor is this mode of delegation unique to the fiction film. Probably most Op-ed articles in even the most respected newspapers broadcast knowledge claims whose corroboration is left to the reader to explore through her own experience. This sort of delegation, in other words, is a quite common feature of knowledge communication, including the delivery of general knowledge, empirical, and, as we shall see, philosophical knowledge as well.

Such processes of delegation, moreover, are germane to my disagreement with Prof. Russell, since I will be claiming that much of the reasoning and argumentation that he requires for philosophizing occurs in the mind of viewers under the influence, prompting, and guidance of moving images construed as thought experiments.

Philosophizing without Explanation

Throughout, Russell requires as a condition of philosophizing that philosophical points must be accompanied by arguments in favor of the points, or at least explanations of them. I think this is far too severe a view and that it does not reflect what often happens – legitimately – in philosophical exchanges. Let me address the question of whether a putative philosophical insight must always be joined with an explicit explanation.

Recently, a philosophical associate and I were having a debate about whether in following a play appreciatively, spectators either do or need to track the unfolding events by mobilizing their knowledge of large scale structures – such as narrative schemas, genre patterns, or thematic principles such as poetic justice. Or, instead, is it enough that they understand the proceedings on a moment to moment basis. Our debate about theater mirrors the one in the philosophy of music between concatenationists (notably Jerrold Levinson) who maintain that appreciative listening can keyed to the moment versus others (like Peter Kivy) who maintain that appreciation proper involves placing the evolving musical moments in larger structures. My confrere is an avowed concatenationist when it comes to theater. He thinks that

spectators need not and do not have access to large structures in their appreciative processing of plays. I, on the other hand, think that normally and quite often correctly, spectators have and frequently need to access large scale structures – e.g., "This is a mystery" – and all these structures entail for the appropriate expectation formations to take hold in the viewer. That is, in order for the viewer's appreciation to develop in a way that we would be willing to deem adequate, one often does and should advert large scale dramatic structures.

Anyway that was the debate that we had entered into the afternoon before the breakfast meeting in Spain that I now recount. Over chorizos and rolls, a group of us were discussing our experience (as non-native-speakers) of the local TV shows. Someone said "I had no problem following what was going on." Looking pointedly at my friend the concatenationist, I said "That's because you were using your knowledge of the large scale plot patterns that you recognized were apt to the relevant local programs which programs you further recognized as belonging to various narrative genres with which you are already familiar." My friend made a sound signaling that he acknowledged my point (though he has not yet conceded it, nor, knowing him, do I think it likely that he will).

Nevertheless, it is important to stress that it was not necessary for me to explain to my philosophical interlocutor how my point fit into our debate. He could work out the reasoning on his own. I had no need to be explicit. Between us, such an explicit explanation would have been pedantic. Just as it is not necessary for the experienced chess player to explain to an equally experienced chess player why it is checkmate in two moves, it is not always necessary for one philosopher to spell out for another philosopher the significance of an example or an observation for an ongoing debate. We may leave it up to our fellow philosophical discussant to work it out for themselves.

In terms of my debate with Bruce Russell about whether Ernie Gehr's film *Serene Velocity* can be said to philosophize, it is my contention that the film was made for an informed audience that recognized that *Serene Velocity* was the kind of film – sometimes called Structural Film – that had as its purpose the reflexive disclosure of essential features of cinema.[5] *Serene Velocity* was and was recognized to be a minimal film in the sense that Richard Wollheim spoke of minimal painting; it was a film stripped down to its minimal conditions of filmhood.

Viewing *Serene Velocity* with these presuppositions about the kind of film it is predictably led informed viewers to comprehend its philosophical point. Since the film was about little more than the creation of the cinematic impression of movement, appropriately prepared or backgrounded viewers surmised that the point of the film is that an essential (or necessary) condition of cinema is the capacity to impart the impression of movement, a condition which informed viewers, upon reflection, confirm to be philosophically compelling on the basis of their own experience, observation, reasoning, and counterfactual imagining.[6] They did not need to have the philosophical import of this "experimental film" explained to them. They could

figure it out for themselves. In this respect, *Serenc Velocity* delivered or crystallized or communicated or made available to informed viewers a philosophical insight that had not been made previously with emphatic philosophical fanfare in the pertinent filmworld.

It is true that when teaching philosophy in the classroom, we want our students to make their arguments as explicit as possible and to explain their examples and thought experiments overtly. But not all philosophy is conducted under the discipline of the classroom. Often genuine, productive philosophical dialogue flourishes where the appropriately backgrounded philosophical discussants can work through the point of an observation or an example on their own. No explanation may be needed if the listener is quick on the uptake and the point clicks immediately in the ratiocinative processes of the listener.

Similarly there can be institutional presuppositions – such as those of structural film – which are known to moving image makers and informed viewers alike which presuppositions make it possible for viewers to grasp the philosophical point of a film like *Serene Velocity* in the way in which informed discussants often glean the purport of comparable thought experiments with philosophical velocity. Moreover, once informed viewers identify the philosophical contention advanced by *Serene Velocity* they may go on to inspect its philosophical credentials on the basis of their own experience, observations, reasonings, and counter-factual imaginings which is, of course, what we do in philosophical contexts. Insofar as this way of conveying philosophical insight (involving the audience's deployment of its own intellective powers) is kosher in exchanges between informed philosophers, I see no reason to withhold the title of philosophy from the exchange between philosophically informed movie makers and their theoretically prepared audiences.[7]

Bruce Russell defends the requirement for explicit argumentation and explanation on the grounds that the answers to philosophical questions are (always?) controversial. This is a meta-philosophical claim, though I note that Prof. Russell leaves it up to the reader to confirm this on the basis of her own experience, i.e., on personal reasoning, observations, memories, and counterfactual imaginings. Nevertheless, I would not deny that Prof. Russell has introduced a legitimate philosophical claim here or that he was doing philosophy, since the sort of delegation of confirmation to the audience that he indulges in is not uncommon among philosophers.

Is Russell's meta-philosophical claim persuasive? I'm not sure that all philosophical answers are controversial and, hence, in need of explicit explanation and/or argumentation. This may not be the case especially when the proposition in play represents no more than one of a series of necessary conditions in a conceptual analysis. Is it controversial that a causal relation involves at least two events and/or states of affairs? In terms of our debate about *Serene Velocity*, the claim that a necessary condition for being a motion picture is that the candidate have the capacity to impart the impression of movement has not provoked any controversy either in response to Gehr's film or to writings by both Arthur Danto and myself. Furthermore, whatever ratiocination, experience, observation and counterfactual imagining were necessary to test Gehr's conjecture are undertaken in what Peter Kivy nicely

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refers to as 'the laboratory of the audience's mind', the place as well where we philosophers test the hypotheses of our colleagues.

Though, like Prof. Russell, my own standard style of philosophizing favors explicit argumentation, I realize that this is not the only way of approaching our discipline. Some philosophers express themselves epigrammatically or aphoristically or interrogatively, leaving it up to readers to see the point on the basis of their own reasoning and experience. Figures such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein come to mind. I think that it is historically ill-advised to cashier the likes of these from the rolls of philosophy. It is not how I do things, but I'm not Nietzsche or Wittgenstein (and so much the worse for me).

But if philosophers are not bound to explicit argumentation and/or explanation, why should philosophical moviemakers be?

Narrative Structure and Conceptual Analysis

In the preceding section, I challenged Russell's skepticism regarding the philosophical prospects of cinema by relying heavily on the way in which the institutional context of reception and the presuppositions, expectations, and protocols of that milieu shape our interaction with certain motion pictures. In such circumstances, prepared viewers of *Serene Velocity* readily took the significance of the film to be that an essential feature (a necessary condition) of cinema is its capacity of a candidate to impart the impression of movement, an hypothesis the film leaves to the viewer to confirm on the basis of his own reasoning, experience, and counterfactual imaginings. In this section, I would like to supplement the discussion of how context abets cinematic philosophizing by talking about at least one way in which the internal structure of a fictional movie may also contribute to the possibility of philosophizing through the moving image.

Although conceptual analysis is not the whole of philosophy, conceptual clarification, in some form or another, is probably part of the job description of most philosophers, at least some of the time. In part, conceptual analysis advances by drawing sharp contrasts between comparable cases. Thus, Kant strives to discriminate prudential actions from genuinely moral ones by considering the cases of two shopkeepers making change. It is my contention that fictional narratives have resources that enable them to bring to the attention of audiences the requisite sort of contrasts in such a way that, on the basis of their own reasoning, experience, observations, and counterfactual imaginings, thoughtful audiences perform the pertinent conceptual exercises by themselves as they might in response to certain thought experiments.

Since at least the time of Aristotle, the analysis of virtue has been a philosophical topic – both in terms of cleaving the virtues from the vices and in terms of discriminating amongst the virtues themselves. The endeavor may be fueled by contemplating comparable cases in order, for example, to locate the contrast between

true courage and recklessness. It should raise no theoretical hackles to point out that these sorts of cases can be developed in fictional narratives where different characters exhibit related virtues and vices which then cast the conditions applicable to each into bold relief.

Consider the film *Parenthood*. Its very title – an abstraction – indicates that it is an interrogation of a concept, viz., parenting, Specifically, it concerns the virtues of parenting, or, in other words, the excellences of parenting or, simply, what makes for an excellent parent. The film pursues this topic by introducing us to four generations of parents ranging from a great-grandmother through expecting newlyweds. This varied collection of parents unavoidably encourages the thoughtful viewer to compare and contrast the various parenting styles on display. Moreover, as we scrutinize this array, it is hard to resist assessing which of these parenting styles are successful and which fail – which are good and which are bad and why. The parental excellences of this character stand out against the deficiencies of another character. And as the thoughtful viewer asks herself for the grounds of these variable assessments, she is thereby embarked upon a conceptual analysis of the virtues of parenting.

As I have said elsewhere, director Ron Howard illuminates the virtues and vices of parenthood by laying before us a studied array of mutually informing contrasts such that, as we come to interpret the significance of these juxtapositions, we simultaneously gain a sharpened appreciation of what constitutes virtuous parenting. Given the particularities of *Parenthood*, no one would gainsay the response that it is the divorced sister – who in almost every other respect is a trainwreck – who is the best parent. When we ask ourselves for the basis of this intuition. the answer is difficult to miss: she alone is able to acknowledge and support her child's purposes and desires. She abandons her own agendas and projections and sees her child as an autonomous individual – this in contrast to the other parents in the family who either impose their own fantasies on their children or, worse yet, are utterly oblivious to them.

Parenthood encourages its audience to contemplate the nature of parenting, and it guides its audience towards certain conclusions about it. Its characters propose a multiple set of comparisons and contrasts which serve as a means for probing the concept of parenting. In this way, it is strictly analogous to a thought experiment. Like a thought experiment, it educes an intuition – that the hapless, third generation mother is the best parent. When we ask ourselves for the grounds for this intuition, we find it ready-to-hand, explained in the film. She is the parent who selflessly acknowledges the purposes and desires of her offspring and acts upon that acknowledgment. In this way, *Parenthood* nudges the thoughtful viewer toward a philosophical insight – toward the identification of an essential or necessary feature of excellent parenting.

That we then test this hypothesis on our own should not be considered problematic. Even when a thought experiment is accompanied with an explanation (which we have argued some need not be), it is still up to us to test it against our own experiences, observations, memories, reasonings and counterfactual imaginings. Indeed, even full scale arguments in the end must be tested in this way.

Perhaps it may be objected that what I am calling the philosophical discovery of *Parenthood* is too banal to merit the status of philosophy. But several points are worth making here. *Paenthood* is designed for popular consumption and what counts as philosophical insight may be different in the cineplex than what passes muster in a graduate seminar on the ethics of parenting. Moreover, *Parenthood's* take on the virtues of parenting is relevant to practices of parenting in the culture at large where it is still news to many that parenting must be divorced from projection. And, lastly, if it is obvious now in the seminar room that selfless acknowledgment of the child is part of what constitutes excellent parenting, that may be in part the result of popular films and television programs like *Parenthood*.

I predict that Prof. Russell will reject the thought-experiment model of the opportunity for conceptual analysis which is intentionally provoked and guided by the narrative structure of *Parenthood*. For, he will maintain that it lacks explicit argument. But on my view, the thought experiment is an argumentative strategy, one that we work out and test in the laboratory of our minds (which, of course, is where we work out and test every argument we encounter, whether or not it is stated on the page).[8]

Russell is likely – again on the grounds of inexplicitness — to deny my claim that thought-experiments are argumentative strategies whose reasonings are often implicitly delegated to receivers. Yet not all argumentative strategies are explicit. The rhetorical question is not. Like the kind of thought-experiments that I've invoked, the rhetorical question relies upon the audience to do the requisite work of reasoning to reach the conclusion. The rhetorical question exploits the cognitive stock and intellective powers of listeners and sends them toward a conclusion on their own speed. Some thought experiments may have the same potential without resorting to accompanying arguments of explanations.

Prof. Russell is likely to reject the thought-experiment account that I've offered on the grounds that without an explicit interpretation or explanation, the point of alleged thought experiments remains controversial. But what is a better interpretation of *Parenthood* or even a rival interpretation than that the divorced sister is the most successful parent and that the reason for this is that she, along with excellent parents in general, is so precisely because she acknowledges her daughter as a person in her own right. There is no controversy here such that an explicit explanation of the case is mandated. Nor does there seem anything controversial about the conclusion of the narrative thought experiment that is *Parenthood*. Surely respect for one's offspring as an autonomous individual does not cry obviously out for defense.

We test the viability of the conjecture about parenting in the film under discussion as we would comparable assertions in a written philosophical text by passing it through the court of our own experiences, reasoning, observations, memories, and counterfactual imagining. Insofar as moving images can advance a philosophical claim and then engage the intellective powers of the audience in the preceding fashion, I

think that we should be willing to say that the movie in question has conveyed, delivered, made available, or communicated philosophical insight. One can garner philosophical insight from at least some motion pictures. One can learn philosophy from moving pictures in the process of recruiting the aforesaid intellectual powers under the direction of the pertinent contextual and/or structural features of the motion pictures in question. In this regard, it seems natural to me to say that such movies are doing philosophy.

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Notes

[1] In this issue.

[2] Relevant articles by me in this debate include "Philosophizing Through the Moving Image: The Case of *Serene Velocity*," in *thinking Through Cinema*, edited by Murray smith and Thomas Wartenberg (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006) and "The Wheel of Virtue," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Volume 60, no. 1 (Winter, 2002), pp. 3-26. See also my introductions to sections VII and VIII of *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, ed. by N. Carroll and J. Choi (Oxford: Balckwell Publishers, 2006)..

[3] Ibid.

[4] I argue this point at greater length in my "Literary Realism, Recognition, and the Communication of Knowledge" in *Senses of the World*, ed. by John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[5] Though Russell says the debate is about fiction film, it should be noted that *Serene Velocity* is not a fiction film. See my "Fiction, Nonfiction and the Film of Presumptive Assertion," in my book *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[6] Here it is important to note that the viewer does not base the conjecture that the capacity for the impression of movement is a necessary condition for cinema on the fact of a single film. *Serene Velocity* rather invites the spectator to test the conjecture against all the films, experienced and imagined, available in the cognitive stock of the viewer.

[7] It might be thought that philosophizing about the nature of cinema through cinema is too easy. A moviemaker can't help but get it right so long as her film has the feature it has elected as an essential feature of film. But this is not true. If, as Russell suggests, McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* proposes projection as a necessary feature of moving images, then it is mistaken, since there are moving images, such as broadcast TV images, that are not projections properly so called. Likewise, Stan Brakhage's *Thigh Line Triangular* was thought to propose a flat surface as an essential condition of film. But , as Stanley Cavell pointed out in *The World Viewed*, films to not have a surface, properly so called. The film strip does, but that is not the film. Nor is the screen on which the film is projected its surface, flat or otherwise.

[8] At points, it seems to me that Russell gets close to suggesting that in order to count as philosophy, moving images would not only have to present arguments, but sound arguments

with true premises and true conclusions. But that is far too steep a requirement. How many of us, including most of those we regard as historical giants, could meet such a standard?