

# Thinking Images: Doing Philosophy in Film and Video

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If Descartes were alive today, he would shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discourse on Method* would today be such that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily.

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*Film director and critic*<sup>1</sup>

Over the past several decades film and video have been steadily infiltrating the philosophy curriculum at colleges and universities. Traditionally, teachers of philosophy haven't made much use of "audiovisual aids" in the classroom beyond the chalk board or overhead projector, with only the more adventurous playing audiotapes, for example, or showing slides to provide historical context for a thinker's work. But with the advent of videotapes it became financially feasible to show films in classes in order to stimulate or amplify discussions of philosophical issues. And now there are numerous textbooks and anthologies of writings on the topic of philosophy and film, not to mention several journals (some of them online).

Among the recent proliferation of videos specifically designed and produced for use in humanities courses, the offerings in philosophy have been relatively meager. After all, what exactly does one *show* in order to enhance instruction in philosophy? While some of Plato's dialogues, the *Symposium* especially, lend themselves to being adapted for film, and the Myth of the Cave in the *Republic* cries out for visual presentation, these haven't been treated satisfactorily. After all, by the time one gets to Kant there are grounds for despair: the Sage of Königsberg seated at his desk pondering the transcendental deduction of categories is hardly the stuff of which great cinema is made. While talking used to be in the days of Socrates central to the philosophical enterprise, thinking and writing tend to predominate in modern times, and these do not easily allow spectacular visual portrayal.<sup>2</sup>

Given that philosophy is a discipline practiced in language, whether spoken or written, how can one "do philosophy" in the visual media of film or video? The

pages of any philosophical text could of course be filmed in sequence, but even the visual interest of seeing hands other than one's own turning the pages couldn't make the experience a match for simply reading the book.<sup>3</sup> Filming an actor reading a philosophical text aloud—however brilliantly—would hardly be more captivating. Perhaps a contemporary thinker doing on camera what professional philosophers in part get paid to do: delivering a lecture? This has been done, and many such videos are available for classroom use; but since few philosophers nowadays are great lecturers the results are disappointing. Somewhat more interesting might be the video of the philosopher being interviewed, or several philosophers in discussion. This has also been done, but one can't help feeling that a transcript of what is said would serve as well, if not better.<sup>4</sup> All that would be missed would be the opportunity to say, "So *that's* what So-and-So looks like."

In their introduction to a recent issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* specially devoted to "Philosophy and Film," Murray Smith and Thomas Wartenberg pose the question: "To what extent can film act as a vehicle of or forum for philosophy itself?"—the question of "film *as* philosophy."<sup>5</sup> A major obstacle to the acceptance of the idea of film as philosophy has been the breathtakingly narrow view of the discipline held by so many practitioners in the mainstream "analytical" tradition, for whom it has to have *arguments* or it's not philosophy. This emphasis on the discursive nature of the discipline, on proceeding to conclusions by way of reasoned argument rather than intuition, catches an important feature of philosophy but fails to give a full picture. There are many occasions in the dialogues of Plato, that master of reasoned

argument, when the dialectic reaches an aporia and Socrates then resorts to vivid imagery or the recounting of a myth to fire his interlocutors' desire for enlightenment.

It is true that "if philosophy is regarded as the attempt to think systematically about fundamental issues of human existence, it seems plausible to regard film as capable of embodying such acts of reflection," but this reflection need not be systematic.<sup>6</sup> In his own contribution to the special issue, Thomas Wartenberg questions the identification of philosophy with systematic thinking as being too narrow, invoking the obvious exceptions of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein.<sup>7</sup> Indeed many other philosophers from Heraclitus to Deleuze have generated profound ideas about existence in ways that are far from systematic: Epicurus, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, Emerson, and Heidegger are just a few names that come to mind. (Not to mention that other philosophical traditions, such as the Chinese, have produced a profusion of philosophy in which discursive thinking is absent or plays a minimal role.) While reasoned argument may be a preferred strategy for dogmatists convinced they are in possession of the truth, more agnostic thinkers prompt reflection on existence by other means, such as irony, poetic allusion, correlation of ideas or types, hyperbolic assertion, enigmatic aphorism, and so forth.

Incidentally, one might expect that films made by directors who have practiced the discipline of philosophy would contain philosophical themes. Two exemplars confirm this expectation: Terrence Malick, who studied philosophy at Harvard and Oxford, and taught briefly at MIT, and Errol Morris, who was a graduate student in philosophy at UC Berkeley for a few years in the early 1970s. Malick's *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *The Thin Red Line* (1998), together with Morris's *Gates of Heaven* (1978), *Vernon, Florida* (1981), *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), and *The Fog of War* (2003), turn out to be unusually rich philosophically. (Strange that *Days of Heaven* and *Gates of Heaven* should have come out in the same year—and what is it about philosopher film-makers that they have colored lines in their titles?) The opening lines of *Vernon, Florida*, to give just one example, are: "Reality. You mean, this is the real world? I never thought of that."

From an educational perspective, then, philosophers might enhance their teaching by showing documentaries or dramatizations that deal with the topic of philosophers and

philosophy, or feature films that can illustrate philosophical themes and issues, or—perhaps optimally—films that in some sense "do philosophy" or are explicitly philosophical. But if, as suggested earlier, the videos that are made expressly for the classroom are generally uninspiring, what would it take to improve this situation? What styles and techniques would be most effective? Or, to pose a far more radical question: what about using film and video not just to enhance the teaching of philosophy and expand the audience of learners, but rather to do philosophy by using visual media to *generate philosophical understanding*? In other words, innovate by extending the use of film and video beyond the dissemination of knowledge and understanding to new modes of knowledge production.

An autobiographical turn is, at this point unavoidable: having worked in digital video for several years now with the aim of "doing philosophy" in visual media, I would like to reflect on just what it is that I've been doing. Lack of funds to pay for such luxuries as camera crews, actors, or lights to illuminate interviewees has necessitated a rather simple mode of production (do the videography "on location," in public places or natural surroundings) and a somewhat spare style (visuals of environments, whether natural or built, accompanied by ambient sound, and voice-over recorded after the fact). Lacking interviews or talking heads, these "video essays" (where the connotation of "essay" as a trying out, or testing, in experience outweighs that of a written work) do not fit the standard documentary mold, and instead share some features with the experimental or art video. Working at such a basic level allows one to distinguish several ways in which video might be used to practice philosophy, and a variety of techniques that lend themselves to elaborating philosophical ideas in digital media. Here are the most significant:

1. Set up an *interplay* between *visual images and music*.
2. Provide *visual context* for a philosopher's thought.
3. Present philosophical ideas and *exemplify, amplify, illustrate* them.
4. Practice *irony*, especially through tension between past and present.
5. Exemplify visually and orally *modes of awareness*.
6. Provide *aesthetic pleasure* while doing some of the above.

We begin with the most difficult case, that of something central to what is added by digital media but which is apparently farthest from philosophy because it works without language—namely, music.

1. *Interplay between images and music.* About the relationship between images and music Schopenhauer wrote that “when scenes or activities are accompanied by appropriate music, the sound seems to open up their most secret sense and meaning, and to constitute the clearest commentary on them.” Indeed, according to Schopenhauer “music lets any painting, or scene from real life and the world, stand forth in heightened significance.”<sup>8</sup> This passage appealed greatly, and unsurprisingly, to both Richard Wagner and to Nietzsche, who quotes it with approval in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Wagner put the idea into practice to brilliant effect in his operas—and indeed he was writing magnificent film music long before the medium was invented and the genre developed.

The soundtrack to a film adds not only ambient “real world” sounds, whether recorded on location or in the studio, but also voices speaking language. But when music is added, the viewer’s *body* is called upon to deal with additional kinds of meaning other than linguistic. This already happens to an extent when philosophy is written in poetry or poetic prose, where some of the meaning is coming through tempo, rhythm, assonance, cadence, etc. A paradigm case of this is Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he characterizes not only as music but even as “a symphony.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the greatest composers to write film music was Arnold Schoenberg, who in 1930, while he was living in Berlin, wrote a ten-minute composition with the title, *Music to Accompany a Film Scene (Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene)*. This was to be a collaboration with the Hungarian photographer and film-maker, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, but for various reasons the project foundered and no film has ever been made (as far as I know) to accompany the music. It occurred to me that, with a composer as philosophically interesting as Schoenberg, it would be worth while to attempt the counterpart of what Schopenhauer discusses and put images to the music rather than the other way round—in the hope that the images would “open up the most secret sense and meaning” of the music and let it “stand forth in heightened significance.”

Since I was in Berlin at the time, doing the videography for a project inspired by Walter Benjamin about the ways a city commemorates its past, I looked for and found photographs from 1930 in an illustrated magazine in the State Library. To set up a tension between these images and images from the postmodern metropolis that Berlin is now in the process of becoming, and especially images of places of remembrance and destruction, could enhance the meanings of the music. Schoenberg wrote almost nothing about his *Music to Accompany a Film Scene*, but he did name each of its three parts: “Threatening Danger,” “Angst,” and “Catastrophe.” In this piece he clearly anticipates the Holocaust to come, and in view of the many philosophical discussions of that event which emphasize the failure of language to convey the horror, I thought it best to follow the composer’s example by saying very little, in order to let the viewer and listener participate in the attempt to make sense and construct meaning.

[Video excerpts illustrating these techniques can be viewed online. See Arnold Schoenberg’s *Begleitmusik: Images for the Music*, part 2 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex1.mov> ]

[Arnold Schoenberg’s *Begleitmusik: Images for the Music*, part 3 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex2.mov> ]

2. *Visual context* for a philosopher’s thought. In spite of a tendency in the western traditions to regard philosophical thinking as an activity that transcends the particular circumstances of the thinker in an ascent toward some kind of *theoria*, or contemplation of universals that are beyond space and time, the philosophies of some thinkers are explicitly dependent on *place*: names such as Rousseau, Nietzsche, Thoreau, and Heidegger spring to mind. Nietzsche in particular emphasizes the importance of the particular places where certain thoughts came to him, and so to be shown the Swiss Alpine landscape where the thought of eternal recurrence struck him may enhance our appreciation of that difficult idea.

A BBC production from 1999, in which “various biographers, translators, and members of Nietzsche organizations speak about the philosopher, his philosophical ideas, and influence” (program summary),

also goes beyond the standard television documentary format now and then. It shows, for example, a well mustached actor hiking in the landscape of Switzerland's Upper Engadin, where the thought of eternal recurrence came to him. The program also goes too far in showing spectacular scenes, shot from a helicopter, of the lone philosopher climbing a mountain ridge several thousand feet above the highest point to which Nietzsche himself, with his poor eyesight, ever dared to venture. Because of the robust perspectivism in Nietzsche's philosophy (the view that our experience of the world is a function of multiple perspectives that are dependent on our life situation and projections from past experiences, prejudices, fears, hopes, and so forth), the multiplicity of talking heads in this program is especially appropriate, but the programme is greatly enhanced by the portrayal of the places that were important for Nietzsche.<sup>10</sup>

When an idea is related to a particular place, perhaps by having occurred to the thinker while he was there, video offers the opportunity to show the place directly rather than having to describe it using language. This wouldn't matter in the case of abstract ideas or with a theoretical philosophy that presumes in its universality to transcend time and space, but is helpful in the case of a thinker like Nietzsche who often thinks it important that a particular idea should have come to him in a particular place. When a scene in a video shows a place, it shows it as it looked when the video was recorded—presumably, in the case of digital video, at some time in the recent past. But in a place where the built environment is lacking, or is old, it can look as it could have looked in the past—in, say, the late nineteenth century. Embedding the scene in a historical narrative setting it in the past will enhance this effect.

3. Present a philosophical idea, and *exemplify*, *amplify* or *illustrate* it visually.<sup>11</sup> An important figure in this context is the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, who explored the possibilities of “intellectual cinema” in essays he wrote in the late 1920s. In an afterword to a book on Japanese cinema, Eisenstein argues that montage—the technique of juxtaposing different shots in (usually rapid) succession—is an important element of Japanese representational culture, even though he believes that Japanese cinema is innocent of the technique. He points

out that Chinese ideographs (which he mistakenly calls “Japanese hieroglyphs”) can express abstract concepts by juxtaposing representations of concrete elements: “the representation of an ear next to a drawing of a door means ‘to listen’ ... a knife and a heart mean ‘sorrow’, and so on.”<sup>12</sup>

The point is that the ... combination of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e. as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to a concept. ... But—this is montage!!

On the analogy of this feature of the East-Asian ideograph, where “two independent ideographic characters (‘shots’) are juxtaposed and *explode* into a concept,” Eisenstein characterizes filmic montage as “a *collision* [in which] two factors give rise to an idea.”<sup>13</sup>

An example from Eisenstein's 1927 film *October (Ten Days that Shook the World)* suggests the power of this technique to work toward “intellectual cinema.”

A montage sequence that moves from a shot of a magnificent Baroque statue of Christ, through shots of Chinese bodhisattvas, Indian Buddhas, Hindu deities, and icons of various other religions, to a shot of an Eskimo idol problematizes the idea of the divine. As Eisenstein describes the intended effect, “We retain the description ‘God’ and show idols that in no way correspond with our image of this concept. From this we are to draw anti-religious conclusions as to what the divine as such really is.”<sup>14</sup> A later example from a different film is a sequence in Andrzej Wajda's *Samson* (1961) in which the protagonist, a Jew in Warsaw, approaches a fence behind which a large column of Jews is being led to the ghetto: as he approaches, the camera shows Nazi soldiers nailing up what appears to be a wooden cross—but which turns out to be the framework for an imprisoning fence. This sequence of images raises the question of the responsibility of the Catholic church for the persecution of the Jews in Poland.<sup>15</sup>

In the early 1930s Rudolf Arnheim pointed out the mysterious way in which slow motion in film doesn't look like ordinary motion slowed down, but results in movements “which do not appear as the retarding of

natural movements, but have a curious gliding, floating character of their own.”<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin drew wider implications about cinema from this phenomenon, suggesting that the film camera is capable of disclosing what psychoanalysis and depth psychology refer to as “the unconscious.”

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly “in any case,” but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them ... Clearly it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. “Other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. ... This is where the camera comes into play, with all its resources for swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating, stretching or compressing a sequence, enlarging or reducing an object. It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.<sup>17</sup>

All the film-maker needs to do, then, is to employ slow motion appropriately—and there it is: a philosophical idea exemplified. The freeze-frame is similarly capable of revealing hitherto unknown aspects of the world by stopping motion abruptly, a technique that also shows rather than tells the genesis of the still photograph or snapshot.

More recently, Thomas Wartenberg has shown how well Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) illustrates Marx’s idea (Karl’s, not Groucho’s) of the “mechanization” of human activity brought about by industrial capitalism.<sup>18</sup> One can also exemplify an idea while deliberately *not* illustrating it, thereby drawing attention to the tension between film’s ability to exemplify and to illustrate. We might hear, for example, Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the mysterious juxtapositions one finds in the display windows of certain shops in the Paris arcades: “The items on display are a rebus: how ought one to read here the birdseed in the fixative pan, the flower seeds beside the binoculars, the broken screw on the musical score, and the revolver atop the goldfish bowl?”<sup>19</sup> More

interesting than showing these juxtapositions illustrated would be to show different examples: say, the tuba behind the potted palm, the stuffed bird next to the ice skates, and the travel clock obscuring the lithograph of the palace interior.

[*Walter Benjamin’s Paris*, chapter 9 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex3.mov> ]

Another possibility is to present a philosophical idea in language, whether spoken in voice-over or written on an intertitle, and then to amplify it by means of visual images. This process is more complex, and potentially more interesting, than simply illustrating the idea. Amplification employs images that reinforce the thought, allude to possible extensions or parallels, explicate features implicit in it, and so forth. Benjamin for example suggests that new building technologies touch an archetypal nerve that fires up images from childhood and activates my themes from the childhood of the race.<sup>20</sup> Here is a scene that exemplifies ideas about the relations between myth and technology by finding and showing mythic or archetypal images in scenes of (in this case) structures heading toward dilapidation.

[*Walter Benjamin’s Paris*, chapter 5 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex4.mov> ]

Two other techniques can be used that allude to, or exemplify, features of philosophical thinking: the telephoto zoom and the soft focus (both of which were operative in the last example). A telephoto lens with a long focal length “compresses the space” in such a way that objects that are actually far apart appear unusually close together, while observed texture gradients and optic flows produce a distortion of perspective. In this way the scene, because it looks more two-dimensional, takes on a schematic or abstract appearance. One can zoom in with a long telephoto lens to such a tight close-up of the object of the ultimate focus that one is left with an abstract pattern that isn’t easily recognizable as the object. In the case of the Paris arcades, for example, an extreme telephoto shot of a small portion of an iron-and-glass roof may, in its abstractness, suggest the abstract dynamics of iron-and-glass construction better than a wider-angle shot in which the roof is easily recognizable.

The reverse process brings in a new element, insofar as it helps make the philosophical point that our understanding of a thing or event is always dependent on the *context*. This can be effected by beginning with an extreme telephoto shot which presents a simple abstract pattern that will not be recognizable as any particular object. As the camera pulls back, it is the gradual introduction of more and more context that makes the object recognizable. Soft focus can work in a similar way: an extremely soft focus produces such a vague image, like clouds of various colors, that the object is again unrecognizable. A gradual move to sharp focus can then give an impression analogous to a vague idea's becoming clearer and finally distinct.

4. One can employ visual media in service of the venerable philosophical practice of *irony*. The first great ironist in the western philosophical tradition is Socrates, who often says one thing while meaning another (usually opposite) thing, something stated elsewhere in his discourse or implied by the larger context of his utterance. Rather than generating an either/or dichotomy in which we take the utterance and its counterpart as excluding one another, irony in the Socratic dialogues often sets up a both/and situation whereby both the utterance and its counterpart are held in tension as equally valid.

Sometimes it may be the unsaid idea alone that Plato wants to promote, and in these cases one is prompted to read and listen between the lines for the intended meaning, thereby participating in the very process of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical irony doesn't require the dialogue form, as evidenced by the ironical strategies practiced by more recent thinkers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Their philosophies thus have to be engaged existentially, experimenting with the dual and multiple perspectives they offer, which are never made fully explicit but always require the reader's thinking participation.

Film and video lend themselves to irony because they combine two distinct media, visual images and soundtrack—both of which can present language. Filmic images naturally give the impression of showing some kind of reality, determined by what they are images of. We are accustomed to having the soundtrack of a film

accompany the visual narrative in a harmonious and enhancing way: usually what we are hearing is what we are seeing, though it may be enhanced by (non-diegetic) music on the soundtrack. If we hear voice-over, it usually works in a similar way, narrating, amplifying, or commenting on what we are seeing. But if the soundtrack goes against or contradicts the visual narrative, the ironic tension prompts us to ask which one is real. After all, real things come and go, and visual montage of scenes in ironic tension can convey, for example, the interplay of presence and absence that conditions reality.

In particular one can set up a tension between past and present by giving a spoken narrative that is historically situated in, and refers to, the past of a place, while showing scenes of that place in its present condition. The voice-over here is from a radio broadcast for children that Benjamin made in the late 1920s about the famous Borsig locomotive works outside Berlin.

[Walter Benjamin's *Berlin*, "Borsig Works" <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex5.mov> ]

When effected through voice-over combined with fairly "subjective" camera work, the presentation of a philosopher's ideas to some extent implies approval, or agreement with them. The combination of images and sound tends to buttress the ideas. But one can also negate visually an idea that is being heard voice-over. We might hear Walter Benjamin recounting with approval what his friend Bertold Brecht said about photographs, that they can "record practically nothing of the essence of something like a modern factory."<sup>21</sup> But at the same time we are seeing the famous "Turbine Hall" that Peter Behrens built for AEG in Berlin in 1909, one of the first buildings to lend architectural dignity to the industrial workplace (an achievement that both Brecht and Benjamin must have appreciated), in a series of still scenes that renders Brecht's claim questionable.

[Walter Benjamin's *Berlin*, "Behrens AEG" <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex6.mov> ]

Benjamin invokes a formulation by the symbolist painter Odilon Redon which pursues irony to the point of mystery and anticipates philosophically effective techniques available to the film-maker: "The sense

of mystery, the secret of which we have learned from Leonardo da Vinci, comes from always remaining in the equivocal, in double and triple perspectives, in suspicions of perspectives (images within images)—forms that come into being in accordance with the mental state of the viewer.”<sup>22</sup> One can exemplify this rather Nietzschean idea by doubling the image back on itself through combining a scene with its mirror image, which effects a transformation that suggests a prism- or mosaic-like order underlying and informing our visual experience.

[Walter Benjamin’s *Paris*, chapter 3 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex7.mov> ]

Film can also draw attention to itself and its strategies in an ironical mode, by means of Brechtian distancing effects, such as allowing the camera and its operator to be glimpsed on various reflective surfaces. Self-referential techniques that allow film to refer to itself as film go back a long way in the history of the medium, Dziga Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) being one of the most seminal exemplars.

5. One can use audiovisual techniques to *exemplify certain modes of awareness*. There is in any case a tendency to imagine our experience of the world on the model of visual technologies. Plato famously compared our everyday awareness to the experience of sitting in a darkened space and watching a play of images projected onto a two-dimensional vertical surface in front of us (*Republic*, Book 7). Had he been writing some twenty-four hundred years later, he would simply have used the analogy of people sitting in a movie theater believing that what they are seeing on the screen is real. Not long after the invention of the *camera obscura* in the sixteenth century, analogies began to be drawn from that contraption to the eye—and even to consciousness. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) John Locke writes, “The understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without” (2.11.17). The French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote: “When I first saw the cinematograph I realised it could offer something new to philosophy. The cinema provides us with an understanding of our own memory. Indeed we could

almost say that cinema is a model of consciousness itself. Going to the cinema turns out to be a philosophical experience.” And such a powerful experience that since the advent of film many people apparently construe their visual experience on that model.<sup>23</sup> This, however, perpetuates a prior tendency to oversimplify the phenomenon by imagining consciousness operating on the principle of “one scene at a time.”

Suppose you are sitting in a lecture room where someone is giving a talk, perhaps on the topic of doing philosophy in film and video. A mention of *My Dinner with André* reminds you of the date you have for this evening with a special friend. You hope that your request for a table at the window will be granted, since the view will form the appropriate backdrop for the special topic you intend to broach over dessert. You rehearse a few minor topics of conversation that would be suitable to raise during the hors d’oeuvre, and some more substantial themes for the main course. —Suddenly you remember that you promised someone who couldn’t attend the talk that you would tell her what it was about—and so you return your attention to the speaker and his talk (who now seems, strangely enough, to be discussing the topic of dinner conversation).

So, how exactly was your experience between the drifting away and the return? While you were visualizing the animated facial expressions of your friend and imagining the table at the window, the view of the city lights, the pleasingly attentive waiters, the exquisitely presented nouvelle cuisine, and so forth, the things that were actually present in your visual field—the speaker at the lectern, the wall behind him, the backs of the heads of the people sitting in front of you—didn’t simply disappear, but rather receded into the background. Or else the images you were imagining appeared as if transparently superimposed upon your experience of the scene that was actually present. And while you were anticipating the conversation over dinner, hearing in imagination your own voice raising the very special topic and your friend’s replying in a tone of pleasant surprise, this imagined sound didn’t completely drown out the speaker’s voice as it droned on. If suddenly asked to repeat what he had just said, you could probably manage, though recalling what he had said a few minutes before would probably be

impossible. The auditory experience is somewhat parallel to the visual: you hear in imagination your friend's voice in the foreground, as it were, and the voice of the lecturer in the background.

To take another example, this time involving the memory of a past event rather than the anticipation of a future one: suppose you are sitting at home reading a journal article, perhaps something on doing philosophy in film and video. Fascinating though the treatment of the topic is, mention of a Swiss alpine landscape reminds you of a hike you took in the mountains of the Upper Engadin early last summer. You remember walking up a steep path that winds through meadows dotted with wildflowers; you hear the sound of the cowbells down in the valley against a background of the wind blowing through the branches of the nearby pines; you see the huge boulders on either side of the path with their exquisite patterns of colorful minerals overlaid by patches of lichen; you feel the gentle breeze on your cheek and smell the air that struck you then as the sweetest you had ever tasted; and you recall the view from the highest point of the hike, looking down on the lake far below whose surface the setting sun was turning to burnished bronze. You turn the page—and realize that you have no idea what the last few paragraphs were about (except that there was something on the topic of dinner conversation).

In this case the remembered scene might be best described as being situated *behind* the pages of the journal you are holding in your hands. Again, what is in the actual visual field doesn't disappear—after all your eyes have been dutifully moving along the lines of print and gradually down the page—but there's a transparency between the pages and the remembered scenes from the alpine hike. And any sounds you heard in memory, such as the cowbells or the wind sighing through the pines, probably drowned out the muted sound of the traffic on the street outside, and whatever other noise may accompany the silent reader's reading. Although if asked whether an ambulance with its siren wailing had gone by during the previous few minutes, you would probably be able to tell.

Our conceptions of our experience tend to simplify the phenomenon drastically. Perhaps an element of wishful

thinking conditions our “one scene at a time” view of consciousness, a naïve assumption that we are simply “here now.” The reality is surely that, while we may well be here now, we are also often “there then” as well (in some other real or imagined place, and at some other time). Our visual experience is often permeated by transparent superimpositions of past memories, imagined possibilities, or future anticipations, while our auditory experience frequently consists in soundtracks of “internal monologue” or “dialogue,” together with ambient sounds from memory, which underlie or overlay the sounds we are actually hearing in the so-called real world. Most of the time, then, we are spread out—spread thin, some might say—over more than one temporal dimension, remembering the past while anticipating possible futures.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps because of an allegiance to the “one scene at a time” conception of our awareness, film-makers have tended to show such blendings of temporal horizons as switches from one to another, as in the “flash-back” or “flash-forward.” But more true to our experience would be transparent superimposition to suggest this feature of it.

Walter Benjamin discusses a more exotic version of this phenomenon, in which images from a more distant past are occasioned by one's being in a place with a history. He invokes the type of the *flâneur*, or saunterer (discussed by Baudelaire and Proust), for whom “far-off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment.”<sup>25</sup> Benjamin is concerned with the ways the past can manifest itself in the present through structures that have survived over time, and also with the ways the past thereby seeps, as it were, into the present. So, when Benjamin says the arcades are “the residues of a dream world,” the use of certain digital techniques can show how this dream world might be experienced as it conditions what we call the real world.

[Walter Benjamin's *Paris*, chapter 1 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex8.mov> ]

By contrast with the busy inhabitant of the modern city who is so intent on her proximate goal that she is for the most part oblivious to the surroundings, the *flâneur* is someone who wanders around with no particular



purpose, and is thus unusually open to the multitude of events and things going on in the cityscape. In this mode of experience one becomes especially aware of the ways that, in a city like Paris where most of the built environment is centuries old, the past emanates, as it were, from the city's streets and structures: "The street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward—if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private."<sup>26</sup>

Also Baudelaire, who characterizes the multiperspectival possibilities of awareness in terms of a couple of simple but spectacular optical devices: "The perfect *flâneur* ... is like a mirror as vast as the crowd itself, or a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which, with each one of its movements, represents the multiplicity of life and the dynamic grace of all life's elements."<sup>27</sup> The bustling commotion of the modern city prompts a proliferation of perspectives, and with each turn on the streets, a different set of perspectives combines to produce a new and complex visual experience.

[Walter Benjamin's *Paris*, chapter 2 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex9.mov> ]

Film and video are eminently suited for presenting the multi-temporal nature of awareness, insofar as one can use the technique of superimposition to suggest, for example, the way a scene remembered from the past is transparently superimposed over what is being seen in the present.

Benjamin emphasizes the temporality of overlap in his discussion of the (puzzlingly named) "*colportage* phenomenon of space":

The fundamental experience of the *flâneur* is of the "colportage phenomenon of space," in which everything that potentially happened in a particular place is experienced all at once. (Such experiences of superimposition, or overlap, are especially common in the world of hashish.) The place winks at the *flâneur*: "Now what do you think may have gone on here?"<sup>28</sup>

[Walter Benjamin's *Paris*, chapter 8 <http://www.hawaii.edu/edper/movies/Ex10.mov> ]

One can play a visual variation on an idea expressed verbally. With the *colportage* phenomenon of space: instead of showing events from different times in the same place, one can show different parts of the same place at the same time. This can be extended to a play on the phenomenological insight that our perception of the constancy of moving things, or things in relation to which we are moving, results from a synthesis of a potentially infinite series of "profiles" of, or perspectives on, the object of perception.

The film-maker can induce an experience of temporal overlap in the viewer within the compass of the film or video, simply by setting up an interplay between the visual narrative and the soundtrack. One presents some language visually: a piece of text, say, for the viewer to read. If it is re-presented later in the same way, the viewer will notice the repetition, but will perhaps also reflect on how it appears differently insofar as it's recognized as a repetition, and also because it's appearing in a different context. But if one re-presents the words in a different medium, in voice-over rather than writing, the viewer will experience a fusion of temporal horizons analogous to (and perhaps prompting reflection on) the way memories work in everyday experience. If through experiences of superimposition and overlap, as Benjamin says, "truth becomes something living ... in the rhythm by which statement and counterstatement displace each other in order to think each other," then film and video are ideally suited to the pursuit of that elusive goal.<sup>29</sup>

6. Lastly, *aesthetic pleasure* as a concomitant to doing philosophy. While the more puritanical writers have been suspicious of beautiful style in philosophy, some thinkers have thought that it performs an important pedagogical function. Socrates for example regarded *eros*, desire stimulated by beauty, as crucial for philosophical thinking, teaching, and learning, while Nietzsche was equally emphatic on this point—to the point of calling his writings both *Versuche* (essays, attempts) and *Versuchungen* (temptations, seductions). Beautiful style, then, serves the function of inducing the reader to participate in the play (and work) of thinking. Similarly, philosophical film and video will work best when they not only instruct but also captivate by way of the aesthetic pleasure they provide.

Enlightenment according to later Buddhist philosophy is not a matter of going across to the other world in order to attain nirvana, but is rather a waking up to the fact that nirvana is already here and now. (The Buddha's name means "awakened one.") At one level film and video can prefigure such an awakening if the camera operator simply goes about in the everyday world recording appropriate scenes in such a way as to show the beauty that is already there in the midst of our mundane existence, but which we usually fail to notice. As Thoreau once wrote, "It is only necessary to behold thus the least fact or phenomenon, however familiar, from a point a hair's breadth aside from our habitual path or routine, to be overcome, enhanced by its beauty and significance."<sup>30</sup>

There are several ways, then, in which film and video can be used not only to enhance instruction in philosophy but also to actually engage in the practice of the discipline. While the reactionaries in the profession tend to see the use of visual media as "mere entertainment," I regard my work in video simply as an extension of my academic research into additional, complementary media. Rather than thinking and writing, and then publishing the resulting text in a book or journal, one in this case thinks and writes a script in which some language will be heard spoken as voice over and some shown as text on-screen, and where the language then functions synergistically with visual images, ambient sounds, and music. Rather than abandoning the practice of writing, one extends it beyond writing words to writing in visual images (videography and cinematography).

In the face of declining literacy on the part of contemporary undergraduates, who read progressively less than previous generations, one can take advantage of their increasing "image literacy" by complementing language with visual images in media that are more likely to engage their attention. And there is also the potential, in the case of graduate students and one's colleagues who teach, of furthering research and deepening understanding by combining the might of the pen (or typewriter or word-processor) with the powers of sound and the visual image.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo," in *The New Wave*, ed. Peter Graham (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 19. (Since Descartes' *Discourse* is a kind of intellectual autobiography, with a narrative that ranges from his education at the Jesuit College of La Flèche in Anjou, through his military service in Germany, to his years of seclusion in Holland, it's hard to imagine how he could make a film of it while confined to his bedroom.)
- <sup>2</sup> In the 1970s Roberto Rossellini made several long films for television: *Socrates* (1971), *Augustine of Hippo* (1972), *Blaise Pascal* (1972), *Descartes* (1974). Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993) is a brilliant piece of filmmaking, but one doesn't learn from it a great deal about either the man or his ideas.
- <sup>3</sup> There are two films based closely on philosophical texts: Péter Forgács, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992), and David Barison and Daniel Ross, *The Ister* (2004), which presents numerous excerpts from Heidegger's lectures on the poet Hölderlin. This work is brilliant in parts, but lasts for a grueling three hours. My own video from 2006, *Walter Benjamin's Paris: Projecting the Arcades*, is a celebration of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.
- <sup>4</sup> The rotoscope animation of the videographed interviews in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2002) make the talking heads more interesting to watch, but even this technique begins to pall after a while with some of the less interesting speakers.
- <sup>5</sup> Murray Smith and Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Introduction," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64/1 (2006): 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Smith and Wartenberg, 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Wartenberg, "Beyond Mere Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy," *JAAC*:24.
- <sup>8</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, §§ 65, 52.
- <sup>9</sup> See my essay "The Symphonic Structure of Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in James Luchte, ed., *Nietzsche's 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra': Before Sunrise* (London and New York, 2008), 9–28.
- <sup>10</sup> *Friedrich Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil*, in the series, *Human, All Too Human: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre* (Princeton, N.J.: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1999.) My video from 2003, *Nietzsche's Thinking Places: From the Alps to the Mediterranean*, focuses almost exclusively on showing the relevant places.
- <sup>11</sup> An idea can be *presented*, whether as a text to be read or as voice-over to be heard, and then *amplified* by means of visual images. Some ideas may come across better when presented as a visual text, as if an excerpt from a book, while others may work better when heard, as in a lecture. The audience's interest can usually be held more effectively by a mix of auditory and visual presentations.

- <sup>12</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “Beyond the Shot” (1929), in Richard Taylor (ed.) *The Eisenstein Reader* (London, 1998), 82–83.
- <sup>13</sup> Eisenstein, “The Dramaturgy of Film Form” (1929), and “Beyond the Shot,” in *The Eisenstein Reader*, 95, 87.
- <sup>14</sup> Eisenstein, “The Dramaturgy of Film Form,” 109–10.
- <sup>15</sup> See Roy Huss and Norman Silverstein, *The Film Experience* (New York, 1968), 32–33.
- <sup>16</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley, 1957), 116–17. (Original German edition: Berlin, 1932.)
- <sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (third version, 1939), in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2003), volume 4: 265–66.
- <sup>18</sup> Wartenberg, *JAAC*: 28–30.
- <sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1999), 540 [R2,3].
- <sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 461 [N2a,1].
- <sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Berlin Chronicle,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 599.
- <sup>22</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 429 [M6a,1], quoting a French author invoking a passage from Redon’s notebooks.
- <sup>23</sup> Dreams are often understood on the analogy of seeing a film while asleep—so that some people even imagine they dream “in black and white” rather than in color.
- <sup>24</sup> Practices such as zazen, sitting meditation in Zen Buddhism, cultivate patience in the face of the ranging mind, and consist in an alert waiting for the babble of internal sound and flicker of images to subside.
- <sup>25</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 419 [M2,4].
- <sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 416 [M1,2].
- <sup>27</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 443 [M14a,1], quoting a passage from Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life.”
- <sup>28</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 418–19 [M1a,3].
- <sup>29</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 418 [M1a,1].
- <sup>30</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 8:44
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