

## Popular films as philosophy as 'therapy': A Wittgensteinian view

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### Résumé :

Wittgenstein et Cavell ont été des figures centrales dans la croissance de l'intérêt pour le film comme philosophie depuis la publication de mon livre *Le film comme philosophie: Essais sur le Cinéma après Wittgenstein et Cavell*, publié il y a environ une décennie. Dans ce papier, je cherche à suggérer comment, après Wittgenstein, 'le film comme philosophie comme thérapie' peut être aussi fructueux pour les films populaires que pour les films d'art et d'essais. Il est sûr que de cette façon je suis en train de suivre les traces de Cavell (avec le vieux Hollywood) et Mulhall (avec le nouveau Hollywood). Mais les films sur lesquels je vais me concentrer dans cet article, y compris les plus grands succès de tous les temps, sont dans certains cas plus populaires que ce qu'ils ont considéré. Je soutiens que les films que je discute ici sont d'un intérêt philosophique et d'un import thérapeutique. Ils abordent des éléments importants de notre temps dans son côté ténébreux, et ils le font d'une manière qui implique essentiellement le spectateur. Ils ne donnent surtout pas des conférences ou des cours didactiques, mais facilitent en effet une expérience ouverte de sagesse croissante, et d'engagement éthique et politique. Afin de pouvoir voir ces films, on doit surmonter un préjugé: le préjugé que le divertissement de masse ne peut pas avoir un import intellectuel important. Heureusement, une sensibilité largement wittgensteinienne, place après le dernier Baker, une bonne chose pour surmonter les préjugés intellectuels: c'est en fait la tâche centrale de Wittgenstein ...

### ملخص

لقد مثل كل من فيتجنشتاين و كفال وجهين مركزيين لازدياد الاهتمام بالفلم كفنسفة منذ نشر كتابي و ذلك منذ عشر سنوات تقريبا : الفلم كفنسفة محاوللات في السينما بعد فيتجنشتاين و كفال ساسعى في هذه الورقة الى اقتراح كيف انّ الفلم كفنسفة و كعلاج يمكن ايضا أن يكون مثمرا بعد فيتجنشتاين بخصوص الافلام الشعبية و الفكرية ايضا لأ شك في أنني أكون بذلك قد سرت في نفس الطريق الذي سار فيه كفال ( بخصوص القديم من هليوود) و موهال (بخصوص الجديد منه)، و لكن الافلام التي سار كفال عليها في هذه الورقة هي بالإضافة الى اكبر النجاحات السينمائية عبر الزمن أفلام أكثر شعبية مما كان يتصور سادافع في هذه الورقة على الفكرة التي مفادها ان الافلام التي سأذكرها هنا هي ذات اهمية فلسفية و تملك طابعا علاجيا فهذه الافلام تعالج عناصر هامة من عصرنا في جانبه الحالي بصورة تجعل المشاهد يتفاعل معها بطريقة جوهريّة فهي لا تقدم لنا محاضرات أو حصصا تعليمية و انما تيسر علينا امكان الدخول في تجربة منفتحة على حكمة متزايدة و على التزام أخلاقي و سياسي و لكي يكون بوسعنا مشاهدة هذه الافلام، علينا التغلب على حكم مسبق و المتمثل في كون الاستمتاع الفني الجماعي لا يمكن أن يكون له امتداد فكري هامّ و من حسن الحظ فإنّ حساسية تعود على اكثر تقدير الى فيتجنشتاين تمنحنا بعد باكر ما يمكن ان نتغلب به على الاحكام الفكرية المسبقة و هنا تكمن في الحقيقة المهمة المركزية لفيتجنشتاين .

### Abstract :

Wittgenstein and Cavell have been central figures for the growth in interest in film as philosophy, especially since the publication of my *FILM AS PHILOSOPHY: ESSAYS ON CINEMA AFTER WITTGENSTEIN AND CAVELL*, published nearly a decade ago now. In this paper, I seek to suggest how, after Wittgenstein, 'film as philosophy as therapy' can be as fruitful for popular films as for 'arthouse' films. Of course, in doing so, I am treading in the footsteps of Cavell (with old Hollywood) and Mulhall (with new Hollywood). But the films that I focus on in the present piece, including the highest grossing films of all time, are in some cases even more popular than those that they considered. I argue that these films that I discuss here are of philosophical interest and therapeutic import. They address important features of our time in its heart of darkness, and they do so in a way that essentially involves the viewer. They do not mainly lecture or didacticise; they facilitate an open-ended experience of growing wisdom, and of ethical and indeed political engagement. In order to be able to see these films, one has to overcome a prejudice: the prejudice that mass entertainment cannot be of significant intellectual import. Luckily, a broadly Wittgensteinian sensibility, after the later Baker, places one well to overcome intellectual prejudices: this is in fact Wittgenstein's central task...

“A film is something very similar to a dream and the thoughts of Freud are directly applicable to it.” – Wittgenstein.

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in the question of whether films can function as philosophical works, can ‘do’ philosophy. This interest however seems sooner or later inevitably to founder on the following dilemma: Either the philosophical work done by films is paraphrasable, in which case ultimately the films in question are merely pretty or striking *vehicles* for philosophising which precedes them; or the philosophical work done by films is not paraphrasable, in which case it seems mysterious/dubious/systemically-obscure.

However, this dilemma, while in its own terms quite correct, rests, I submit, on an unjustified presumption. The presumption is that philosophical ‘work’ has to be understood (if it is to be worthwhile) as issuing in theses/theories/opinions. But there is another possibility, a possibility explored at greatest length in Wittgenstein’s philosophy: that philosophical work at its best is ‘therapeutic’, in very roughly the psychoanalytic sense of that word.<sup>1</sup> Namely: that philosophy need not – and in fact should not – issue in any controversial theses or opinions, any theories, at all. Rather, it should work with the patient’s own presumptions, exposing them to awareness, and thus empowering the patient to autonomously acknowledge, justify, overcome, or transform them.

My co-edited collection *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (Palgrave, 2005, jointly with Jerry Goodenough), and especially Hutchinson’s and my essay in that collection, endeavoured in a preliminary way to develop the idea sketched above. In the present piece, I want to enter a little further into it, and into the following associated question: Is there a way to understand how some of the greatest *popular* films work that transcends any heresies of paraphrase, transcends film theories that would subject films to their diktat, and empowers the viewer to understand the work that the films in question do as therapeutic work upon and with them, the viewer? A difficulty facing the efforts to understand films as philosophical works has been their (in most cases) consistently ‘dialogical’ nature, the way that they offer different voices, and not just (as most philosophical prose works do) one voice: but this is a *strength* of these film as philosophical works once they are understood as therapeutic works.

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Take films such as *Apocalypto*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Children of Men*, Bergman’s *Persona*, Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*. Are these films simply disguised pieces of didacticism? Do they have a simple ‘message’, which they wrap in an emotive, elaborate, striking and pretty coating, to sugar the pill? (How *could* a film be a major philosophical/ethical/political work, unless it basically did this? But/or equally: how *could* a film be such a work if it did basically only this?)

I say not. I say that there are not only these alternatives: Instead, you (and I am speaking here primarily of film-makers; though also of film-critics) can offer up your thinking on film as an exploratory ‘therapeutic’ intervention that is designed to facilitate a process of thinking and feeling on the part of the viewer. The work, the philosophical work, is

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<sup>1</sup> To understand the sense of the term ‘therapy’ that is in play here, see my and Crary’s *The New Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge, 2000), and the later work of Gordon Baker.

work that they have to do for themselves. Whatever the viewer can do for themselves, one should leave them to do for themselves...

The *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy can if you wish (see below) be said to make a new philosophical 'argument', cutting across and beyond Descartes. But it doesn't make this 'argument' *in the abstract*. It encourages you to *experience* it. In general terms: the film challenges you; you go into 'dialogue' with it. You go into therapy with it, much as this is the process of reading the *Tractatus* or the *Philosophical Investigations* with understanding.

Let me illustrate this point by setting out briefly *how* I 'read' the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy:



In Peter Jackson's films of *The Lord of the Rings*, we *see* on the screen – we experience viscerally the point-of-view manifest in – a pathological search for safety, for surety (Most notably, we see this vividly in scenes in which one reaches for the Ring, for invisibility, for escape to a private realm that is one's own, a realm where one can be lord and master). The desperate search for safety – for something that one can hold onto confidently – of Frodo et al *results* in one being 'overpowered' by an overwhelming dread at an 'overwhelming' watching, judging, heartless and destructive external agency. The search for safety *results* in one seemingly being confronted by absolute nemesis, with no expectation of being saved by a benevolent force – there is none as strong, or none that is willing, one is quickly convinced. That 'God' is onto me, and that 'God' is a malevolent demon; just that super-Cartesian possibility is, I am urging, lived out at the deep dark heart of *Lord of the Rings*.

In fact, building on suggestions in my and Goodenough's *Film as Philosophy*, and in my essay on *The Lord of the Rings* in my book *Philosophy for Life*, I would argue that Jackson's analysis, building on and going beyond Tolkien's, is far subtler and more psychologically-real than Descartes's emotionless academic rendition of the mind 'meditating' upon the terrors of possible cosmic aloneness and the company one might surprisingly and regrettably find oneself keeping in that aloneness. For Jackson, the God-awful malign demon is not a self-standing ontic thing. Rather, to be God-powerful, *it needs something to complete it*. It needs *you*, or more specifically, your fear and addictive desire and weakness. It needs your desire for power, that corrupts, that takes you from others; it needs your self-fulfilling fear of 'it'; it needs your weakness, that would hand the power over to 'it' in a doomed bid to lessen the grip upon you of dread. The

malicious demon (in Jackson/Tolkien) *depends on you*. He is not *all*-powerful, without the One Ring that is in your power. You are not nothing beside Him; you are just pitifully small and vulnerable in comparison, as you toss on the sea of fate. He will only *become* all-powerful if you try to become him, or alternatively simply give him the power he seeks.

The rationale here, and it is a profound one, is this: If God/Satan/Sauron quite simply is all-powerful, then – paradoxically – your worries are significantly tempered. For there is then no quest, no chance of escape, nowhere to hide. One can give up worrying. The mind in search of absolute safety-certainty, the mind unused to not-worrying and unwilling to risk such a state, must then restlessly pass on from the assumption of one's absolute abjection before God. If one is infinitely less than God, then one is to some extent relieved, *even if* God is malign: *because at least there is then nothing more one can do*. One can simply sit back, and wait to be annihilated or tortured etc., safe in the knowledge that there is no way out. Belief in an omnipotent God, even if the God has an Old Testament temper or much worse, is a means to the psychological security of not actually having to go on actively worrying and acting. The mind in search of absolute safety, the mind in search of any possible threats to it will quickly, restlessly, move on: the more worrying thought that comes to one next (a thought that is common in schizophreniform mental 'disorder', but that is never arrived at in Descartes's meditations) is that perhaps one does still have a part to play, that one's actions will be consequential, that what one does or thinks next could make things even worse. Paradoxically, there is something even worse than abjection before an all-powerful malevolent demon: namely, the threat of a less than all-powerful malevolent demon whose power and action *depends on you*, on what you do and think. The ceaseless, hungry, terrified motion of schizoid thought is right here: Jackson correctly identifies and powerfully depicts a potentially-self-fulfilling threat to thought and to one's very sense of identity more profound than – and a logical *extension* of – that which Descartes set out for us. This then is literature/film *as* philosophy, with a vengeance: Jackson's Tolkien has taken us somewhere philosophically new, somewhere undreamt of in Cartesian philosophy.

This then is the case for seeing the Lord of the Rings as a subtler and nastier moral threat than Descartes's demon, and thus for seeing Jackson/Tolkien as offering a philosophical corrective to Descartes, filling in the gaps in his presentation of what it would actually mean to imagine a malign demon of infinite or (better) of great power. The really disturbing, the more deeply psychologically-challenging notion, the clear and distinct idea that can unworld one, is *that 'malignity' is quite incomplete without us*, without our existentially ongoing participation. The desire for the Ring is the desire to *be* the Lord of the Rings (and this explains the otherwise inexplicable title of the work: because Sauron is not even a real character in the story), to become invulnerable through being all-powerful; the desire to be shot of the Ring is the desire to already be abject before such an all-powerful Lord of the Rings; both are (pathological) efforts to escape from the ordinary lived human condition of 'limited' always-already-embodied existence, the worst fear of which is being confronted, not with a malign omnipotent demon, but with a malign demon who can only be completed *by you*.

And all this, I am saying, *has to be experienced* to be believed. These *are* the kinds of thoughts that go on, even if through a glass darkly, in the intelligent viewer of these films. Only some account like this can, after all, explain their great success: because, in plot terms, the *Lord of the Rings* is of course a pitiful failure. See, for example [this excellent Volkswagen advert's take](#) on the trilogy, and [this](#) offering from

howitshouldhaveended.com , which makes the point just as well. *It only makes sense* as an essentially *psychical* quest. One that the viewer must engage in, for themselves...

And this, in essence, is how I would respond to a reader who said: "Haven't you refuted yourself? How can you give 'readings' at all, and expect us to hear them as anything other than didactic dogmatism, if film-as-philosophy, after Wittgenstein, is essentially a matter of personal experience of the viewer?" My readings are *invitations* to a viewer to see the film in the kind of way I am laying out, or indeed to consider their having already seen it in such a way: i.e., in the latter case, *suggestions* as to why the film in question has the power that it has, if one has allowed it to have power (and has not resisted it, as people often resist popular films in particular, on prejudiced, weak grounds such as, 'But this is mere entertainment, it can have no serious content'). The real work of the film is done on the viewer at the time, and afterward, and in successive viewings, and it is done *dialectically* and *dialogically*: the viewer is necessarily actively *involved* in the process and not merely lectured at (by me or by the director).

Thinking through matters such as this has been the goal of my work in film as philosophy since 2005, when my co-edited book of that name first appeared. The most notable development during that time in my own work, has been a greater effort, already somewhat-signposted in my Introduction to the book, but now somewhat delivered on, to include a treatment as philosophy of some of the most *popular* films in cinematic history. I am referring to films such as *2001*, *Apocalypso*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of course (see above), and (most recently) *Avatar*. If it can be shown that even movies such as these function as philosophy, then the strength and importance of the 'film as philosophy' idea that my co-edited collection crystallised for the first time is/will be redoubled.

(The reader will have already noticed that I *combine* thinking about such huge blockbusters as these willy-nilly with 'art-house' classics. This I regard as a central finding of looking at films as philosophy: that the films which can be thus viewed successfully are diverse, and undercut the 'high' vs. 'low' culture divide. I will return to this point.)

Let me now then venture this: When one really understands films such as *Lord of the Rings* (see the relevant chapter of my *Philosophy for Life*, Continuum, 2007) and *Avatar* (see my paper in [Radical Anthropology](#)), they don't have generalised messages as such.

Take *Avatar*, as examined in my *ThinkingFilm* feature-thought, [here](#). Its metaphors, I suggested there, are rich and open. They are not closed and simple. They involve the viewer in their development.

*Avatar* is a call to us all *to re-enchant and to replenish and to restore the ecosystems of our fragile world*. In this way, it is a quintessentially philosophical film: for it aims to cultivate in us the love of true wisdom.

The criticism of us and our culture that *Avatar* makes of us is one that bites deep in a Cartesian philosophical culture. *Avatar* suggests that we are *stuck* in a kind of dream from which we need to wake up into the world in its ecological richness, before it is too late. It suggests this in part by virtue of immersing one in a world such that one feels one is walking in it, not just dreaming it. But it shows how painful a process it is really to arrive at this virtue.

So: these films that I am discussing are *not* mere disguised bits of propaganda. They *essentially* involve the viewer. They guide the viewer on a proposed 'journey' (a journey 'mirroring' the 'hero's journey' of the protagonist(s)) – the journey is psychically individual, *as well as* partly collective. The specificities of each person's journey will be different; and indeed, one may refuse altogether to take the journey (as many critics have done). Part of the way that I/we account for / give accounts of these films is inevitably autobiographical. I am allegorising *my* reading/viewing of these films. The 'message' that I speak of is thus the message *for me*; and everyone, each person, must in this way speak for themselves. This is not relativism; it is simply reality.

These films do not then make *arguments* in the ordinary philosophical sense of that word: they don't yield premises and conclusions, etc.. As I've said, they rather offer (what Wittgenstein sometimes calls) *therapy*. This is philosophy not as theory nor as quasi-factive impersonal claim, but as a *process* that one must work through for oneself. It is different from the idea of philosophy to which we are accustomed; it sits ill with the idolatry of science which lies at the heart of our civilisation. So much the worse for that idolatry. It is *idolatry* of science and the taking of technology as a 'neutral' tool that has got us as a civilisation and as a species into the mess we are in. *Avatar* (and *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Apocalypto*) dramatises and extends the logic of this. Thus we should *expect* that a non-scientistic vein of philosophy, such as Wittgenstein offers, is what is appropriate to help us understand how to extricate ourselves from that mess.

Our expectation is not disappointed. These films are works, like Wittgenstein's writing, designed to *heal*. But: healing, healing of one's mind, one's body-self, and of one's world, is an art, not a science, and is through and through processual.

Take *Children of Men*. A new-born child presses a claim for care upon anyone and everyone, no matter what their filial relation or otherwise to it might be. *This* is the point made by this powerful film, about a dystopian future in which there are no children being born: the meaning of the film's superficially odd title (based by the way on a line in the bible) is that any children born are children of all of us, of men as well as women. The film charts the journey of its central protagonist from a situation of cynicism to a situation of total care for a new-born child that is 'not his'.

The film is thus a vivid and rich metaphor for the care we all must have for the future of humankind.



The newborn baby in the film directly symbolises of course the whole of future humankind.



All who come after us are the children of all women, and all men. That is what I think the title really means...

And again: it is not enough to effect a paraphrase of the film. One has to *feel* it. The film offers one the opportunity – seeks to engage one in – an emotional-ethical transformation.

Thus: these films are *not* (unlike, say, video-games) *escapist*. They provide an *illusion* of escape. Actually, they *return* one: to oneself and to the world, to (in fact) our world-in-peril.

Ready to know it (as if) for the first time...

Take another example: *District 9*. The kind of film that changes the whole way you see humanity. I think that what really has interested and *taken* me, in my viewings of this film, was the 'therapeutic' journey that the film took one on from seeing the aliens as disgusting to seeing them as more human than human, by the end. I found that by the end the faces and bodies of the aliens (I wish we knew their true NAME(s)!) were *expressive*. Whereas I didn't really feel that much at the beginning of the film. 'Christopher's' face and his son's came to seem to me extremely expressive, and completely deprived of being disgusting. So: the way I saw the aliens changed completely. By the end, they clearly were souls.<sup>1</sup> And one partly makes that change precisely through the parallel change in view that Wikus experiences. Important moments such as when he is made to kill a 'prawn'; and when Christopher sees the 'lab' where they have been torturing the aliens and drops his gun and Wikus says "I..I didn't know that they were doing this...". He manages to SEE them, at last, when he saves Christ[opher]. I have found the moment shortly afterward when he thrusts out his robot arm to prevent the missile from blasting Christopher's slowly rising command module particularly moving.

And then comes possibly the highlight and greatest visual-emotional touch of the whole film: when we look into Wikus's face as he is about to be killed by the cruel Afrikaner soldier-commander, and now one of his eyes is changing, one of his eyes is becoming an alien eye; and my experience was of love and compassion toward him, and I had no experience any more of being 'othered' by this transition toward alienness, as I had had earlier from his arm and his back etc changing. I think that that is the genius of the film: you gradually becoming capable of seeing the alien in others (or in you?) as fully deserving of respect and care and love, as just more wonderful ... being (humanity is of

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein's discussion of one's attitude toward a soul, and what it means to be ensouled, in 'Part II' of his *Philosophical Investigations*.

course an inadequate word here). (This is, undoubtedly, a profound example of what Wittgenstein discusses in 'Part II' of the *Investigations*, under the auspices of 'seeing-as'...)

My friend Adrian Cruden has suggested to me (and I think he is right) that the use of aliens from outer-space to portray the commonality of the oppressed (such as Christopher's frequent concern to get back to his son as the authorities began the destruction of the District) is a very effective plot device in the film: what could be more "otherly" than beings from Outer Space. The comments at the start of the film about the "prawns" could of course just as easily have been made by white about blacks under apartheid, or right now by any number of people about (say) asylum-seekers or immigrants.

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This is what I see in these films. But again, I believe it is to a greater or lesser extent, consciously or unconsciously, what many millions of others see too. I believe that I am tapping here into the *reason* for the vast popular *success* of (most of) these films. For that success can otherwise be somewhat hard to understand: As already noted, *Lord of the Rings* has multiple fairly obvious flaws, including a quite basic and fundamental plot flaw; *Avatar* can easily be seen as a predictable and just very shiny exercise in cheese, or as a predictable 'anti-American' rant. Many critics have responded to *Avatar* either from 'the Left' (with cynicism and a knowing superiority to such alleged sentimentalism, romanticism and superficiality, or even with silly allegations that the film is itself tacitly racist against indigenous peoples, against the disabled, etc.) or from 'the Right' (with anger against the attack within the film on cultural norms, on (American) militarism, etc.). It is the critics from 'the Right', who are if anything slightly closer to the truth, I think, despite themselves. *Avatar* is shocking, in the extent to which, when one experiences it closely, (when one experiences for instance that arrow transfixing and killing one's American/military/racist/speciesist self (Col. Quaritch), so that the world can be saved, and so that in due course Jake can be fully reborn as a Na'vi) the journey it proposes and offers takes one far indeed from one's comfort-zone. I think that the reason why the film has been found by so many millions to be emotionally compelling – as emotionally compelling as the Na'vi themselves are, in their general emotional healthiness and expressiveness – is the kind of line of understanding of the film that I am alluding to here. People find it compelling, *because* of the 'journey' it takes them on, *because* of the assumptions it puts into question, *because* of the way that it speaks to our condition as alienated from our planetary home and from each other. And this is why *Avatar* was banned in China; this is why it has inspired colourful protests against the apartheid wall in Palestine; why it is inspiring the activist work of the [Radical Anthropology Group](#) and so on.

The exact same is true of *Lord of the Rings*; the drastic plot-flaws and unbelievable nature of the narrative end up being pluses, not minuses. They are gentle tacit 'alienation effects' in roughly Brecht's sense of that word. They *enhance* the experience of questing that the viewer vicariously has; the psychological journey that one is taken on, into oneself, into one's courage and resources and faith in oneself, in others *and* in what Aragorn calls "this good Earth."

Looking for character-development, plausibility, etc. in movies such as *Apocalypto*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Avatar* is a complete mistake. That is not the kinds of films they are. They don't really have characters (in the sense that a classic novel does) at all. They are myths. They have heroes' journeys, etc., and, relatedly, they have transformative effects.

They are revelatory, 'therapeutic' works. That is why I think them philosophical, *in spite* of their appearance. Or rather: Their appearance of being non-philosophical is *the very thing* that enables them to be truly philosophical...

True, some of the narrative-pleasure of *Lord of the Rings* and (especially) *Avatar* comes from following what can reasonably be described as character-development in complex plot-settings. In fact, utterly crucial to these films is the audience taking a vicarious transformational journey with the heroes: Jake's persona by the end of the film is profoundly different from what it was at the start. I am not of course denying any of this; I am suggesting that this 'character-development' is not the kind of thing one finds in the world of the classic novel: it is not defined by its quiddities and specificities. On the contrary: It is defined by its universal resonance. What are developed are not so much characters as great mythic ciphers – ciphers, ultimately, for the persona *of the viewer themselves*.

Some films then precisely don't have characters, *and are all the stronger for that*. For instance, in *Lord of the Rings*, it is crucial to realise that Frodo, Aragorn and Gandalf are all essentially the same 'character'. They are 3 versions of the same arc. That's not a criticism, it is an understanding!

These films' appearance fools one into thinking that they cannot be deep. And *so* they creep up on you, with an ecological depth and a cultural critique that literally astonishes. I am referring for instance to the way in which *Apocalypto* shocks one to the core at the end: one suddenly realises that the film is not about a bunch of human-sacrificing savages running a barbarian empire: *it is about us*. We have been watching a culture that we looked down upon as oppressive imperial eco-destructors: only to find with a shock of recognition that Barbarians *are* us. A complete process of rethinking is then necessarily undergone, and the film watched the second time around is completely different from the first time.

Consider in this connection the following remark from John Gray's perceptive new book, *The silence of animals* (Penguin 2013, p.9): “[B]arbarism is not a primitive form of life, Conrad is intimating [in *Heart of Darkness*; the point is famously riffed on by *Apocalypse now*, whose title, I suggest, points forward to that of Mel Gibson's movie], but *a pathological development of civilisation*.” Barbarism is not what precedes civilisation: it is what happens as a civilisation becomes decadent, and/or after it collapses. The point is also explored in Michel Henri's book, *Barbarism*, and in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (on which, if interested, see my 2011 review of Mulhall's book on Coetzee, in MIND). But isn't it wonderful to see it sprung on us in a novel and shocking way in a popular film?



Notice by the way the clear resemblance between these Mayan temples in *Apocalypto* and the border-wall (keeping out the 'barbarian, monstrous' south from the 'home of the brave') in *Monsters*. It's not a coincidental one, in my view. Who are the monsters, who are the barbarians? This is the uncomfortable question thrust upon them by these films.

Some would nevertheless argue that popular Hollywood films with their action-sequences and loud soundtracks cannot be anything other than simplistic propagandistic 'message' films. I don't agree that an apparently-bombastic soundtrack is a sign of a film being a propagandistic film. I think those who say so have missed one of my central points about *Lord of the Rings* and *Apocalypto* (and *Avatar*): I think that these films work by pursuing what Cora Diamond (in relation to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*) calls an indirect method. They precisely to appear to be crude, by virtue of having bombastic soundtracks etc. . That is how they then secretly work their magic. Their surface crudity is the *vehicle* for them to be able to do something deeper. Precisely in encouraging one to think that they aren't deep, they carve out a space for depth. In the case of *Lord of the Rings*: a film about psychotic madness etc. precisely needs to appear to be a film that is about a real-life epic struggle. (See my piece on the film [here](#) for more on this point). In the case of *Apocalypto*: the ride of the long chase in the latter half of the film slows down the process in one of realising that the film is actually not about a high speed chase in the Amazon - it is about *you* (us), about our culture. (We should note furthermore that *Avatar* was successful, whereas other 3-D films with more dramatic and 'bombastic' effects have failed. I am offering a reason(s) why.) The *point* of *Apocalypto* is how much greater is the shock that occurs to one at the end of the film, where the film has its whole weight, than were any of the superficial shocks from the thrill of the chases, the chase of the animal with which the film opened, and the long chase through the jungle which superficially makes up its second half.

The therapy that Wittgenstein offers and that I seek to offer is the therapy that comes of finding the experience of watching a (good) film a dialogical one, in the sense that, while of course the images etc are not affected by one, nevertheless what the film one is watching IS or amounts to includes one's response. There is a *continuity* suggested in these films between art and the rest of one's life. The therapy is a therapy for the individual viewer, *and* a therapy for our culture. For a sick society. For the darkness of our time.

In this article I have invoked broadly-Wittgensteinian themes to defend some major popular films against the criticisms usually crudely levelled at them. However, I hope that you the reader don't get from this the wrong impression: I am by no means arguing that only these films are any good! Nothing of the sort! I am a big fan for instance of Eisenstein. I think that *Grizzly Man* is a deep ecologically-interested work; I am a huge fan of Herzog. I teach on these people, and on Bergman, and Resnais, and Von Trier, and Malick, etc.. I accept that often it is *more obvious* that what I am saying in this article is true of those film-makers than it is of Gibson, Jackson, Cameron, etc. . 'Art-films' often/generally are more essentially open to 'interpretation', demanding of 'reading' (Though the scare-quotes are advised: the terrible danger of such words is that it can once again sucker us into the heresy of paraphrase.)

What I dispute is only the crude 'high' vs. 'low' culture dichotomy and the concomitant very silly reductivist 'logic of commerce' point ('If it makes big money then it can't be any good!') that I believe sadly makes it impossible for many students/people from being able to say "I see you" to *Avatar*, *The Lord of the Rings*, Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*.

These films too, I am suggesting, necessarily *involve* the viewer, are *not* merely 'morals' wrapped in a shiny package. They too co-perform something; they too philosophise... The difference between them and the 'art-films' one is encouraged to look down one's nose from is only one of degree, not of kind, I am saying.

A final substantive point: *Avatar*, like a number of other major philosophical films, places centrally in itself the metaphor of awakening from sleep, from dream. Now: Neither in a dream (unless it be a shared dream! (Think *Inception*)) nor in spectatorship (which has been the traditional model of philosophy (See for instance John Dewey's critique of this in *The Quest for Certainty*, (Minton Balch and Company, 1929)) - and of film-viewing (is this partly why philosophy and film have been so well-suited to each other? That both have usually been thought of as an essentially armchair activities? If so, this I think reflects badly on both)) does one encounter real others. One doesn't encounter anything more than the kind of thing that the killer Dollarhyde dreams of, in Mann's superb movie *Manhunter*: oneself, glorious, reflected back at one, instead of the eyes of another. This postulation of the other only as a device to mirror the alleged glory of the self is a nightmare of egoism/solipsism:



How can it be avoided? Simple: by taking the risk, the leap of faith, necessary in actually encountering others. In meeting real, other people. This is how film can be therapeutic/transformational: by engaging one in a personal encounter which is also a shared encounter (This is one reason why, once more, it is important that we still generally see films in cinemas); by vicariously and then really throwing one into the world. This is the 'point'/task, I claim, of many of the films that I have here praised. And we can see it clearly also in *Blade Runner* and *Inception* (and *Wings of Desire*) and more through a glass darkly in *Memento* (and *Manhunter*). Look for it clearly (though not without great difficulty) also in *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and even in *Last Year at Marienbad*. Other films, besides those mentioned above, which in my view clearly have this engaging therapeutic intent include *Monsters* – on which see Phil Hutchinson's masterful [thinkingfilm](#) piece –, *District 9*, *Never Let Me Go*, *Melancholia*, *Collateral*, *2001*, and the films of Terrence Malick. Films of 'high' and 'low' culture both. Films the *watching* of which is partly a creative act.

These films that I have mentioned here in this piece, indiscriminately popular and 'art house' works, are those that I think offer the best opportunity for broadly Wittgensteinian thinking on film. Some of them, I will probably be writing on more in the next few years. These are exciting times, for thinking film as philosophy...