Nathan Andersen

'Is Film the Alien Other to Philosophy?: Philosophy *as* Film in Mulhall's _On Film_'

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Julian Baggini

'Alien Ways of Thinking: Mulhall's _On Film_'

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I'm grateful to Nathan Andersen and Julian Baggini for their careful, thought-provoking, and generous reviews of my book. As a result of their refusal to be irritated or otherwise disconcerted by the unorthodox ways in which I try to inhabit the border between film and philosophy, they both manage to raise a number of interesting and important questions about how one might -- as I claim we can -- think of at least some films as philosophy in action, and hence of film as philosophising rather than as raw material or ornamentation for a philosopher's work. So in my response to them, I will focus on this question, and try to say a little more about the ways in which I intended my book to justify that claim.

I will begin with Baggini's review, since he is plainly rather more anxious about my claim than Andersen -- and indeed, I will want to elaborate on some of the suggestions Andersen makes in explaining what he takes to be the central implications of my claim. Without meaning to deny Baggini's highly nuanced and self-questioning ways of framing his worry, I think it not unfair to see the following thought as lying at the heart of the matter for him:

'the problem I have encountered [with _On Film_] is that for philosophy to be anything more than an exchange of opinions, it must involve the giving of good reasons for accepting or rejecting the position under discussion. These reasons may well be other than formal arguments, but they
must be reasons of some kind. Such reasons, however, appear to be lacking from the _Alien_ quartet.'

And a little later:

'I see it as central to the philosophical enterprise that we offer reasons as much as is possible and that reason-giving ends only when it has to, not before. In contrast, along with much film and literature, the _Alien_ films offer us symbolic representations of the world, but don't provide us with reasons for thinking that these representations are accurate.'

The idea that philosophy is peculiarly, or distinctively, subject to the claims of reason is surely undeniable; at any rate, I don't want to deny it. But then, everything hangs on what one is prepared to count as a way in which reason makes its claims on us, and what one is willing to acknowledge as a way in which one might answer to these claims. Baggini is careful to distinguish the giving of reasons from the provision of formal arguments, with premises regimented in technical formulae so as perspicuously to display the conclusions they support; the latter is only one genus of the relevant species. But must our acknowledgement of reason's claims on us take the specific form of giving reasons in support of our opinions or our 'symbolic representations' (which I take to mean something like our 'view') of the world?

There are other possibilities. Andersen gestures towards two: what, in his opening remarks, he calls 'reflective film criticism', and what he calls in his concluding paragraphs 'providing pathways for thinking'. The first involves changing one's mind about what is happening in a given film 'not because [the critics] propose that there are hidden elements in the film that cannot be understood apart from some theoretical apparatus -- but because they lay out and make plain what is already on the surface, showing that close attention to the explicit dimensions of the film reveals it to hang together much better than initial audiences and critics supposed'. Suppose we think of this as a mode of description that helps us to make sense of our experience of a film, and hence of the film itself. Then we will see a close link between reflective film criticism and providing pathways for thinking, which Andersen explains as the provision of 'an open space in which thinking takes place, enabling new modes of organizing and making sense of experience and knowledge. In order for there to be a pathway for thought, there has to be a motivation for the movement of thought. Questions . . . provide this motivation'.

I want to say a little more about these ideas of making sense and of questioning, understood as alternative ways of meeting the claims of reason.

First, making sense. One state in which reflective beings might find themselves is that of disagreement; two people hold opposing views on a given topic. Here, philosophy can usefully intervene by providing and assessing the reasons one might have for either view. But such disagreements presuppose a shared space of thought, one given by the givenness of the topic - a shared sense of its shape and significance. Sometimes, however, we want to, or need to, or simply do, re-imagine that space, by finding a new way of thinking about the topic -- one that reorients both participants to the dispute by altering their sense of what stances are available to them with respect to its topic. And at other times, we find that we lack any sense of a shared space for thinking; we find ourselves utterly disoriented by our situation, unable to find our feet with others, and with ourselves, with respect to what we confront. Then we need to find our orientation by imagining how we might take a stand here, and hence by finding a way to recognize certain topics and opinions about them as defining a space of thinking that we might inhabit.
Could we justify such new ways of thinking about a topic by the giving of reasons? Well, if what we mean by the giving of reasons presupposes a given space of reasoning or thinking within which competing positions locate themselves, then obviously not. But that does not entail that such re-envisionings of the space of reasons are beyond the claim of reason; it means that they are answerable to it in different ways. For example, when Socrates faces judicial execution, and his friends urge him to flee from his captors, he tells them that it would be wrong to do so because disobeying the Athenian polis would be like disobeying his parents. He thereby reorients their thinking about Athens by comparing the polis to a family. But the degree of conviction this imaginative connection elicits is dependent upon the extent to which it can be followed out in detail, the way in which it makes sense of various aspects of political life, the further connections it allows us to draw in a range of related cases, and our willingness to rethink our own status and our own experience of life (in the family and in the polis, but not only there) in the terms it suggests. Socrates's imagination is thus not a faculty that is essentially other to that of rationality, or essentially unconstrained by it; it is accountable in a variety of ways, but none would straightforwardly fit the model of 'giving reasons for and against an opinion'.

To return this line of thinking to the matter of my book: I would wish my readings of specific films to be understood as accountable, as answerable to the claims of reason, in just the ways described above. Those readings aim to make sense of the films they respond to, to show how various elements within them have a significance that depends on the way they hang together with other elements to make a coherent whole, and thus allow us to make sense of our experience of them. The way in which a given film coheres internally has definite (if not logically determined) implications for the ways in which it can be seen to hang together with other films in a given series (whether within the Alien universe, or within a given director's body of work); hence a reading of one film gains credibility insofar as it engenders a coherent reading of other films to which it is linked, and of the links between it and them. And my reading of the _Alien_ films as a series offers two other dimensions in which such accountability is at issue, and hence measurable: the relations between the various stages of Ripley's understanding of herself and her universe, and the relations between each director's understanding of Ripley's universe and that of his successors and predecessors. We might think of these as Ripley's ongoing dialogue with herself, and as an unfolding conversation between her directors; we might also think of each film in the series as embodying a dialogue between Ripley and her director. Since in each case, the plausibility of each individual's reading of Ripley and her universe can be measured in terms of its internal coherence, its willingness to follow through the consequences of its particular way of making sense of things, and its willingness to respond critically to opposing readings, the dialectical evolution of these interwoven conversations seems no less answerable to reason than are Socrates' discussions with the young men of Athens.

Perhaps it is also worth saying at this point that the accountability of Ripley's and her directors' readings of the Alien universe is to be assessed not just within that universe (as readings of the fictional world of the films), but also within our universe -- our experience of the human condition. Ripley's understandings of human embodiment, sexuality and integrity are engendered by and directed towards the world of her experience; but that world is a recognizably human world. It contains alien species and extrapolations of human technological achievements, but it is not a fantasy of human reality, if by that we mean a fictional world that represses or rewrites the fundamental elements of our finitude. If Ripley's readings of her life can seem variously empowering, self-punishing and childlike to and for her, they cannot avoid showing us how our own accommodations with such understandings of human existence can manifest our own empowerment, masochism and immaturity. Does this sense of film as a projected moving image of human reality require a Bazianian, realistic theory about cinema, or a metaphysical ontology (as Andersen seems on occasion to imply)? My sense is rather that my use of the ordinary word 'real' in these contexts needs as much and as little justification as my use of any other ordinary word in this text, or indeed in any text. I am accountable for every word I use, as is any speaker; but I am not bound to give such an accounting in any specific
What about philosophy as questioning? If I understand Anderson rightly here, a number of philosophical themes come together under this heading. One has to do with a familiar model of philosophy as an essentially parasitic discipline; lacking any subject-matter or body of knowledge of its own, it comes into its own by asking questions about the subject-matter of other disciplines that cannot be answered with the resources characteristic of that discipline. So a philosopher of science might ask why we should accept inductive reasoning -- based as it is on the assumption that the future will resemble the past -- when it is patently possible that any past pattern in our results or our experience might cease to hold at the very next moment. We cannot avoid this problem by saying that inductive reasoning has worked well so far, since that begs the very question at issue; but any specific scientific results will also presuppose the validity of inductive reasoning, and thus be similarly incapable of providing an answer.

What is standardly known as philosophy of film applies this kind of parasitic model to the realm of cinema. It asks questions about what the relation might be between the screened moving image and reality, between an actor and her character, between an actor and a star, between acting in cinema and acting in other media, between a film and its sequels, between the viewer of a film and what the film represents, and so on. Insofar as the films I discuss in my book turn out to be preoccupied with just these kinds of question, and to be critically evaluating various answers to them (by, for example, following through the consequences of accepting a given answer for understanding the power of the medium, confronting them with alternative answers and assessing their relative merits), then they have as much claim to be philosophical exercises as do the articles and books that appear in journals and series devoted explicitly to philosophical treatments of cinema. After all, a person's way of working can intentionally have a philosophical dimension without his being professionally identifiable as a philosopher. Einstein's questions about physics are at least as much philosophical as scientific; so why must we reject the possibility of a film director's endeavours as being similarly both philosophical and cinematic? Whether the films I discuss are in fact preoccupied in the ways I take them to be is, however, another question; answering it is a matter of judging for oneself, case by case, whether my readings of them succeed in making sense of them in those terms.

Another aspect of the idea of philosophy as questioning has a more explicitly Heideggerian inflection. For Heidegger defines the distinctively human mode of existence as that in which the essential nature of things (including ourselves) is an issue for us; in other words, we treat the essence or Being of anything and everything as a question -- as something for which an answer is not given once and for all but rather to be sought, through the systematisation of our natural interest in questioning (through such modes of inquiry as physics, history and ethics), and the periodic questioning of the assumptions that such systematic practices of questioning necessarily take for granted. Philosophy appears here as the radicalisation of that human questioning. As Stanley Cavell once put it:

'I understand [philosophy] as a willingness not to think about something other than what ordinary human beings think about, but rather to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them, sometimes in fantasy, sometimes as a flash across a landscape . . . Such thoughts are instances of that characteristic human willingness to allow questions for itself which it cannot answer with satisfaction . . . Philosophers after my heart will wish to convey the thought that while there may be no satisfying answers to such questions "in certain forms", there, so to speak, directions to answers, "ways to think*, that are worth the time of your life to discover.' [1]

I'd like to conclude by drawing three morals from this conception of philosophy's essence. First,
there is no essential break between the natural, inherent reflectiveness of human life-forms and the inveterate reflectiveness of philosophy; what distinguishes the philosopher is the persistence and the single-mindedness with which he employs the capacity for self-questioning that informs every aspect of our ordinary existence. Second, the advent of philosophising can occur within any and every mode of human existence, insofar as those engaged in a particular form of human practical activity find themselves driven to question the nature of their own enterprise and the resources with which it is pursued, and to incorporate both the process and the product of this self-questioning into the practical activity from which it emerged. And if this is possible for the physicist and the literary critic, why not for the film-maker? Third, if philosophy requires a certain self-questioning or self-accounting from every other human enterprise, then it must in all consistency require it of itself. This means that any truly thorough-going conception of philosophy must put its own internal resources and self-understanding in question, and thus acknowledge that any such self-conception is open to question by others, as theirs is open to question by it. Philosophy therefore cannot avoid the responsibility of accounting for its own understanding of itself, recognizing that it will have competitors, and accepting that the critical dialogue between their proponents will never end as long as philosophy remains true to its own questioning nature.

Hence, although I need to believe that my own conception of what counts as a legitimate way of philosophising can acquit itself before the bar of reason, I have no investment in the idea that my way of thinking about ways of thinking is the only plausible way of so doing. Accordingly, the questions so pertinently raised and elaborated by Andersen and Baggini must, as a matter of intellectual necessity, remain open to further exploration.

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Footnote


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