

Foreword

Aristotle tells us that “philosophy begins in wonder,” so we begin this foreword to our special issue of *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict & Violence* on “Film and Violence” by wondering out loud whether a form of popular entertainment like film can really be a suitable topic for philosophical investigation. To paraphrase Tertullian, “What does philosophy have to do with film?” For most of the century and a quarter since the first motion picture was commercially screened in 1895, the obvious answer for most philosophers would surely have been, “Nothing whatsoever.” Indeed, one could argue that if there is a relationship between philosophy and film, it lies in their being almost perfect antitheses. Ideas and arguments are the currency of philosophy, which is a practice that aims—or at least was once thought to aim—at universal, abstract, and necessary truths. Film, on the other hand, is ordinarily a vehicle of storytelling; the filmmaker shows us contingent actions connected to each other within a narrative framework, actions that are necessarily concrete and particular. And, perhaps most importantly, with the exception of documentaries, the stories recounted in films are almost always fictional or at least fictionalized. Why then should philosophy, with its mission to discover *truth*, be bothered with the smoke and mirrors of film?

That at least is the sort of question we might expect from a philosopher like Plato, whose writings are touchstones for what it means to philosophize in the Western tradition. Plato never stepped foot inside a movie theatre, but he may have been the first person to imagine something akin to one. In the *Republic*'s famous allegory of the cave, Socrates compares the plight of ordinary human beings to that of a group of prisoners bound in place and forced to stare continuously at the wall of a cave, onto which various moving shadows are projected. Just as in a movie theatre, light and shadows are projected onto a surface to create the appearance of people, things, and activities that are actually absent, even totally fantastical. Meanwhile, voices and other sounds echo off the wall, creating the illusion that they are coming *from* these shadows. Socrates imagines the deception to be so convincing that the prisoners, who have never seen anything *but* this spectacle, are fully duped into believing it to be real. The philosopher's journey to knowledge begins with breaking free of both the physical fetters and the thrall of these images, in order to venture out from this underground theatre into the light of the real world. Upon returning to the cave, the liberated prisoner would require time for his eyes to adjust to the cave's darkness, his defective vision exposing him to ridicule of his fellows. Given our interest in both film and violence, it's worth noting that Socrates' allegory ends by describing a homicide, as the prisoners unite to kill anyone who attempts to release them from their bonds and drag them from this theatre to make them like their visually-impaired comrade.

No doubt, this cave and its prisoners present what Socrates' companion Glaucon calls “a strange image”—and a highly ambiguous one as well, which accounts for it having been interpreted in a multitude of ways within the Western tradition. But almost every commentator has noticed, at bare minimum, how this allegory highlights the ways in which our senses and imagination are defective instruments for discovering the truth, since they can't distinguish counterfeit images from the real thing. Arguably, it's this fallibility—and perhaps gullibility—of our senses that makes the cinematic experience possible. Both the prisoners in the cave and the audience in the movie theatre see nothing but images, yet they react to them *as if* they were real. Of course, modern moviegoers ordinarily know that the

procession of images on the screen is unreal, even when the movie comes with a tagline—“To avoid fainting, keep repeating: ‘It’s only a movie’”¹—that suggests otherwise. But that famous line is itself a reminder of just how emotionally powerful movies can be. As Plato reminds us, the power of dramatic mimesis resides in its ability to bypasses the intellect, the part our psyche that knows it is “only a movie,” and engage the part that *feels* rather than reflects. The horror, fear, or delight we experience when watching a film demonstrates that for our emotions seeing is believing. Unable to distinguish reality from illusion, they respond to what is portrayed on the screen *as if* it were real, since reality and a well-crafted illusion feel much the same.

Plato is also famous for his misgivings about the dramatic arts, arguing that the mimesis of actions on the stage tends to water the emotions while causing the intellect to suspend its powers of discernment. Such a complaint would seem to apply even more emphatically to cinema due to the heightened realism of the illusions it creates and the powerfully visceral responses it can elicit from audiences. So, if the cinematic arts are emblematic of the “cave” from which philosophy seeks to escape and, on top of that, also share all of the defects Plato associates with drama generally, we have to conclude that philosophy and film are an odd couple indeed.

Yet, we have it on no less an authority than Plato’s student Aristotle that philosophy may actually have a certain kinship with the dramatic arts—and, we might add, *eo ipso* with film—which, given the preceding considerations, strikes us as a fact also worthy of philosophical wonder. “Poetry [ποίησις *poiēsis*]”—which encompasses all forms of drama—“is more philosophical and serious than history,” he argues, “for poetry speaks more of universals, while history speaks of particulars.”² The ancient dramatic poet and the modern cinematic auteur are both in the business of depicting human actions as something more than merely discrete, contingent events, unique and unrepeatable in their particularity. Meaningful episodes are knit together to form a coherent narrative, in which each action makes sense relative to the character and aims of the agents and the situation to which they are responding. The plausibility of the resulting plot depends on how well it captures the real logic of human action, its regularities and causal relations, which the drama foregrounds and allows us to see with uncommon clarity. Part of the artistry of a good drama, whether on the stage or the screen, is to create a mimesis, a facsimile of the real world, that is comparable to the original in its vividness and emotional impact. But that part alone, which Plato derided as a mere production of shadows, is not enough. A serious drama must also depict human interactions in a way that allows us to discern their most universal aspects, revealing something of the truth of our condition as human beings. That’s what Aristotle believed brought drama close to philosophy. Drama *shows* in its concreteness what philosophy seeks to *explain* conceptually. Or, as Franz Kafka observed a couple of millennia later, “The dream reveals the reality, which conception lags behind.”³

Such considerations might lead us to conclude that film, our most popular form of dramatic entertainment for the better part of a century, offers us an especially fertile field for philosophical investigation. Yet, it was only in the 1980s, more than fifty years after cinema had emerged as a form of mass entertainment, that philosophical reflections on film began to gather momentum. Before then, with very few exceptions, if philosophers took the time to reflect on film, it was either to dismiss it as a diminution of real art (Heidegger), a spectre that,

¹ Tagline for *Last House on the Left*, directed by Wes Craven (1972).

² Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b.

³ Quoted in Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, trans. Goronwy Rees (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012), 32.

despite its revolutionary potential, risked further aestheticizing the political (Benjamin), or else as a soporific alternative to philosophy (Wittgenstein). There were some who broke from this dismissive consensus, of course. Maurice Merleau-Ponty made deft use of the experience of film in his *Phenomenology of Perception* and especially in his 1945 lecture on “The Film and the New Psychology,” which brought together film, phenomenology, and Gestalt psychology.⁴ But the most notable exception has been the Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell, whose 1971 book *The World Viewed* was the first sustained attempt to show the significance of film for philosophical questioning, advancing the bold thesis that film might not only be an *occasion* for thinking, but even a *way* of thinking in its own right.⁵ Unsurprisingly, Cavell’s provocative claim that films can actually *do* philosophy has been contested by many of his colleagues, some offering arguments with pedigrees reaching back to Plato. Yet, other contemporary philosophers, such as Stephen Mulhall, have echoed and amplified Cavell’s arguments for the philosophical importance of films. Mulhall contends that films offer visions of the world that appeal to our hearts and imaginations without necessarily bypassing reason in the process. They can raise philosophical questions, show us the world from a new perspective, and even “argue” in a fashion for certain philosophical positions.⁶

If the relationship between philosophy and film remains a bone of contention, no one can dispute the connection between film and violence. Cinematic and televisual portrayals of violence have been a perennial theme in discussion about film, both in academic studies and in the popular media.⁷ Violence, real or threatened, drives the plots of many, if not most, of the narratives we watch on the screen. Detectives solve grisly murders, survivors of various outrages seek revenge, terrified teens flee slashers, gangsters spray bullets, martial artists trade punches, and armies clash on battlefields and sometimes in outer space. Though nearly everyone claims to want to reduce the levels of violence in society, movie audiences regularly get enormous enjoyment out of watching on the screen what we say we abhor in real life. Of course, not all cinematic violence is meant to titillate. Sometimes the aim is to bring audiences closer to the disturbing brutality suffered by those whose cruel circumstances might otherwise remain invisible to most of us. Many worry that exposure to cinematic violence might desensitize us to real violence, though perhaps it may also arouse our empathy and awaken us to realities that would not ordinarily appear on our radar but *should* be matters of our moral concern. One thing is certain, however: whatever the reason or the result, filmmakers and audiences alike are endlessly fascinated by the spectacle of violence.

As for real violence, as opposed to its cinematic depictions, it seems safe to say that it is coeval with human existence—and perhaps even with life itself, which is a ceaseless but ultimately losing struggle against the death-dealing forces of nature. In fact, the early Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus took it one step further and asserted that violence was

⁴ This lecture, delivered at l’Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, is reprinted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 48-59.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1979).

⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

⁷ Here we make no distinction between cinema and television, nor will we throughout the issue. Despite occupying relatively distinct industrial and technological spaces (concerning distribution, broadcast regimes, budgetary restraints, etc.), they are in all important respects continuous with each other. A different argument would need to be made for hypertext content and other forms of screen media, but we find no philosophical grounds to distinguish cinema and television.

woven into the very fabric of the cosmos, a first principal of existence as such.⁸ But regardless of whether violence is metaphysically primordial, as Heraclitus believed, the result of a catastrophic fall from an originally irenic condition, as Augustine of Hippo taught, or just a brute (and brutal) fact about our world, it is incontestable not only that human history is awash in blood, but that even today, when the better angels of our nature are said to have gained the upper hand, violence remains an enduring and seemingly ineradicable feature of the human landscape. We encounter it in the form of crime, warfare, terrorism, revolution, political repression, and, not least of all, the everyday acts of cruelty that punctuate so many of our interpersonal conflicts. Violence has never ceased to be one of humanity's central preoccupations. In the realm of the arts, it is a thread that runs from Homer's *Odyssey* to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Even the sciences are haunted by the spectre of violence, which inhabits both the metaphors of geological science and the Malthusian presuppositions of Darwinian biology. Never far from the focal point of our attention, violence pervades our world and our imaginations in a way that suggests Heraclitus may have been right.

What role can philosophy and film, individually or together, play in helping us come to terms with the ubiquitous presence of violence in our world, whether we regard it as an anthropological constant or a series of episodic disruptions of the peace? With respect to philosophy, the question can be answered only through the concrete analyses in which it engages. There is a long tradition of philosophical reflection on violence that extends back to the ancients (Heraclitus, Plato, Lucretius), came to play a decisive, even foundational, role in shaping the social and political thought of the great philosophical architects of modernity (Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke), figured prominently in the philosophical critiques of many late modern and proto-postmodern thinkers (Hegel, Nietzsche, Bataille), and is continued in the pages of this journal. The program of the social science, as it has emerged in the past two centuries to assist us in understanding the nature, sources, and functions of human violence, is indebted in countless ways to these and other philosophical trailblazers. Philosophy and violence are no strangers to each other. But can philosophical engagement with the lights and shadows that flicker across the screen of the movie theatre, immersing us in images designed to arouse our emotions and draw us into fictional worlds, be an aid to the intellect that seeks to understand the frighteningly real phenomenon of violence? Can film itself even perhaps offer analyses of violence to which the philosopher ought to attend? In short, can philosophical light be wrested from the shadows of the cave? These are the proposition this volume sets out to test. The essays included here take up a variety of positions on violence, examining an assortment of films from a diverse range of theoretical perspectives. We believe readers will find them all highly stimulating in both the freshness of their insights and the thought-provoking nature of their conclusions.

The first essay in this issue, Tom Livingston's "Temporal Experience and On-Screen Violence: The Digital 'Oner' in Action Cinema," examines the intersection of temporal experience and screen media in relation to the digital "oner"—the directorial technique of the long take, a single shot without "cuts," which lasts much longer than a conventional shot. Drawing on specific examples from the comedy-action *Kingsman* franchise, directed by Matthew Vaughn, Livingston attempts to understand why this directorial technique is so often

⁸ According to Heraclitus, "Homer was wrong in saying: 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away." Cited in Philip Paul Weiner and John Fisher, *Violence and Aggression in the History of Ideas* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1974), 5.

associated with violence and what we can learn from its representation of violence about “the violence of representation.”

M. Blake Wilson’s “Slicing Up Eyeballs: Blind Justice in the Criminal Underworlds of Nicolas Winding Refn” takes up the “cinematic destruction of the eye,” as performed by a number of filmmakers from Bruñuel to Refn, engaging their work from the perspective of psychoanalysis. Focusing on Refn, Wilson points out how this violent act of blinding, which forces viewers to reassess their own visual apparatus, points to the director’s skeptical attitude toward justice and law enforcement. The “blind” and impartial justice associated with black-robed judges, “order in the court,” and scales held aloft is absent from Refn’s crime dramas, which transport us into a world where the only justice is the imperative of revenge.

In their essay on “Haneke, Moral Violence and Morbid Curiosity,” Damian Cox and Michael P. Levine also examine the relationship of the spectator to the portrayal of violence on the screen. Their argument pivots on the distinction between what they call moral violence and entertainment violence. Entertainment violence, a movie staple, is designed to generate some form of satisfaction in the viewer, if only the satisfaction of morbid curiosity. Moral violence, on the other hand, aims at breaking down the moral character of its victim and, unlike entertainment violence, typically produces in the viewer a state of “unpleasure.” They illustrate the latter using the films of Michael Haneke.

Casey J. Wheatland’s “‘They’re Saved from the Blessings of Civilization’: Violence, Law, and Progress in the Westerns of John Ford” distinguishes between two functions of law. In the first instance, law serves as a brake on cycles of vengeful violence, enabling a fragile form of moral progress to occur. In the second instance, law joins a deliberate or intellectual element to a more violent element, which is tasked with preserving the political community as a necessary condition of moral progress. Wheatland analyses these two facets of the law as they emerge in the westerns of John Ford, arguing that the violent element of the law recedes into the background as the once lawless communities come to enjoy the blessings of civilization.

Seung-hoon Jeong’s “Sovereign Agents of Mythical and (Pseudo-)Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin and Global Biopolitical Cinema” also takes up the relation of law and violence, highlighting how the agents of the law arrogate the office of dispensers of divine (or pseudo-divine) violence within a secular space. Drawing from the work of Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” and on a genre-diverse assortment of films—from Christopher Nolan’s noir superhero franchise *The Dark Knight Trilogy* to the art cinema of Lars Von Trier, from documentary to animation—Jeong raises questions about the sanctity of life and the possibility of justice beyond the law.

Jean-Marc Bourdin’s “*Incendies*, the Promises of Blood” offers a reading of Denis Villeneuve’s 2010 film *Incendies* [Fires], which tells a deeply personal family story set against the background of a civil war in an unidentified Middle Eastern country. What starts out as the discovery of family secrets unfold in a way that opens up onto a number of issues, including the escalation of violence to extremes, the role of the victim’s perspective in narration, and the importance of both promising and maternal love in interpersonal relationships. Bourdin pursues these issues, making use of the mimetic theory of René Girard.

Concluding our collection of essays, Christine Ratzlaff’s “Purgation or Purification: Violence in Post-Apocalyptic Television as Aristotle’s Catharsis” plunges us back into the history of philosophy via an examination of Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, the release of emotions of pity and fear, which he associated with the social function of tragedy. Ratzlaff pursues her investigation of tragedy by bringing Aristotle to bear on three post-apocalyptic television series: *The Walking Dead*, *Zoo*, and *The 100*. In the process, she connects catharsis to a number of different human fears—the fear of physical danger, the fear of social violence, the fear of “the other,” and the fear of technology run amok.

The year in which this issue comes out has careened from one disaster to another. A little more than midway through 2020, we have already witnessed devastating fires that raged through southeastern Australia, deadly earthquakes in Puerto Rico, a humanitarian disaster in Yemen, ongoing refugee border crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, the crushing of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, massive civil unrest throughout the United States that is unabated as we write, and wildfires that have turned much of the west coast of the United States into an inferno. Anyone who wasn't paying attention to natural or human violence before this year would find it impossible to ignore it now. Of course, understanding the violence of nature is primarily a problem for climate scientists, public policy makers, and theologians dealing with the "problem of evil." These violent chthonic and terraqueous forces have always been with us, a constant reminder that it is only on sufferance of powers much greater than ourselves that we dwell on this planet. Now, however, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the terrifying prospect of total war, the human race is menaced by a new mortal god—the power of our own violence, vastly magnified by the technological prowess bequeathed to us by modern science—capable of ushering in an unprecedented cataclysm. The need to understand our violence has never been more urgent. This issue offers no pat solutions for what ails us, but we hope it can at least help to give us a clearer sense of the contours and scope of our plight.

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