



Review Article

***A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment* by Rupert Read, Routledge, New York, 2019, 232 pp, ISBN 978-113859023, price (eBook) £40.99, hardback £115.00**

Film as Philosophy, Wittgenstein, and the Environment

Reviewed by **Daniel Tilsley**

For full disclosure, this reviewer was a former supervisee of Dr Rupert Read at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Read's new book, *A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment*, has proven to be vital in understanding and developing the very (controversial) idea of 'film as philosophy'; and as such, for anyone interested in new developments in film as philosophy, or students of film-philosophy in general, Read's book is a must read.

As Read opens his introduction, 'This book considers films as philosophical investigations'. Read's aim is to further the argument that film *can be* philosophy, in the sense that film can contribute philosophically transformative ideals as a work of philosophy. That is, film can bring about a transformational change in our ways of seeing the world by inviting us to reflect on our ideas and thoughts about the world. As the title suggests, film, as philosophy, can *enlighten* or awaken the audience into a state of reflection.

As a prominent member of both the Green Party and the Extinction Rebellion movement, Read's

primary incentive is to show how certain films can have a transformative/enlightening effect on our fundamental relationship with the environment that induces us to *wake up* to the imminent environmental catastrophe we face: 'These films act as radical eye-openers about the role of humans in the world, and thus help us *see* ourselves as part of the living ecological system'.

A key strength of Read's approach to ecological philosophy is that he does not strive to justify the case that the world is headed for ecological destruction; here, one will find no defence for such arguments. This is a strength of the book, because such things are plain for all to see. Read wastes no time in engaging with the delusions of climate change deniers, a policy seen recently in his refusal to debate one such denier on the BBC. Instead, Read rightly takes for granted our ecological crisis against which an urgent response is needed; and such urgency permeates his book, which makes a bold attempt to enlist the transformative powers of film *as* philosophy in the battle against ecological disaster.

It is important to emphasise the (left-leaning) political undertones of this text, not just in terms of environmental politics; and this is particularly so in his chapter concerning the reframing of the film *Waltz With Bashir* as a critique of Israel. Read is a major figure in the British Green Party, and naturally one must come to expect a political charge in his filmic commentaries. To an extent, political ideology is itself a theoretical stance – and this perhaps creates a tension with Read’s claim that his approach to film is ‘anti-theoretical’. Nonetheless, Read’s book is a valuable contribution to understanding the politically utilisable potential of film in the service of engendering new ways of seeing, or critical perspectives on political issues.

Naturally, the very idea of film as philosophy has attracted opposition (see, for example, Murray Smith and Paisley Livingston), which, for Read, rests ‘on an unjustified presumption... that philosophical “work” has to be understood (if it is to be worthwhile) as issuing in views/opinions/theses/theories...’. Read hopes to show that this is not the only means by which philosophy must take place. For Read, as inspired by the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein: ‘philosophical work at its best is “therapeutic,” in very roughly the psychoanalytic sense of that word. Or better still, that philosophical work is “liberatory”: essentially freeing us from unaware constraint by views.’

Effectively, Read’s version of film as philosophy (like the latter philosophy of the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*) works as a form of therapy. For Wittgenstein, philosophy was responsible for our unconscious or automatic presumptions that governed our ideas (or ways of seeing the world) and thoughts about things. Philosophy should rather, according to Read, ‘work with the “patients”... presumptions, exposing them to awareness, and thus empowering her/him to autonomously acknowledge, justify, or overcome or transform them, where necessary’. Philosophical therapy aims to reveal these presumptions and liberate us from them. This is the most important contribution of Read’s text to the relationship between film and philosophy, which advances upon the phenomenological-therapeutic philosophy of film which was developed by

Amédée Ayfre and Stanley Cavell; an employment of film as a fundamentally humanistic form of therapy that can be utilised in the service of the generation of critical perspectives in our relationship with the world.

Read’s approach to film is thus thoroughly Wittgensteinian (and Cavellian, referring to the great American thinker, Stanley Cavell – essentially the forefather of film as philosophy): ‘This book maintains an openly Wittgensteinian, anti-theoretical, anti-elitist stance...’. Rather than subjecting films to a preconceived ideology and seeing how they conform and prove such theories (something often done with the horror genre), Read, through his methodological approach inspired by Wittgenstein and Cavell, remains open ‘to the films’, allowing ‘them space to breath (rather than dictating to them via spectating on them from a position of superiority)’. A big part of Read’s project – and others, including Stephen Mulhall – is to combat this elitist trend in analysing films, where the academic acts as if she/he knows better than both the film and the audience.

However – and I suspect that Read would agree – not all film academics or theorists treat themselves as superior to the films that they discuss. There are those who do use film to prove or support (illustrate) preformed theses; this is what Mulhall called philosophy in a parasitic mode. Indeed, the application of theory to the understanding of film can be beneficial – for instance, phenomenological theory can be useful in understanding *how* film can be philosophically impactful for the audience by connecting the film with the experience of a film. In Read’s and others’ account of film as philosophy, it is not entirely clear how there can be a relationship between the viewer and the film without some element of theory.

An impression one may get from Read’s investigations is that there is perhaps an aversion to analytical practices found in film studies, in which the structural elements – for example, the *direction*, but also elements such as soundtrack and *mise-en-scène*, etc. – that make up a film are placed under investigation. This creates a tension with Read’s claim that ‘I would like “film-theorists” and “film-philosophers” to *look* more at the films that they discuss or dissect’. It is

problematic to make a claim of film – for instance, about its philosophical point of view that already exists within the film – without supporting this through analysis of the fundamental structures of the text. The chapter on *Gravity* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, however, contains the sort of analysis that does treat a film like a text comprised of structural elements, investigating the camera angles and movements such as long takes, as well as the *mise-en-scène*. An important element of unity between philosophy and film studies is achieved here. These are issues which investigations into film as philosophy should be focusing on in order to validate the reasons as to *why* we should see the philosophy of the films under discussion as that which is claimed.

Read displays the anti-elitism of film as philosophy through a willingness to engage with films not traditionally considered to be highbrow, ‘arthouse’ entertainment (although he certainly deals with the highbrow French New Wave pictures such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and *Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), both directed by Alain Renais, as well as Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011)). As Read writes, ‘the films included in this book have run the gamut from the ultimate “difficult” arthouse movies (of Resnais) all the way to the highest grossing films of all time’. Read aims to find the philosophical voice in popular blockbusters such as Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) (it was a popular blockbuster at the time – see the BFI Film Classics *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Peter Krämer, 2010), Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (2001–2003) and James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009). Read, as an academic, is unashamed to proclaim such films as great works of philosophy *and* art alongside arthouse productions.

According to Read, ‘I take these films to manifest a kind of call to action. A call which necessarily goes beyond the academic.’ For Read, more popular, Hollywood-grade films will be accessible to general audiences, more so than arthouse films. This too is a valuable contribution to the academic practice of philosophy: it reminds academics, and those looking to get into film-philosophy, that there is no shame in investigating the philosophical value of popular films.

Briefly, and by no means exhaustively, I will note the filmic content of the book under review. *Waltz With Bashir* and *Apocalypto*, for Read, are essentially philosophical commentaries on imperialism. This is, as mentioned, the most politically charged section of the book, in which the former film is taken, to paraphrase Read, to challenge or condemn ‘Israeli dismissiveness of Palestinians’ through unreliable narration. In Chapter 2, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, as Read argues, ‘could help open our eyes to the danger of the ultimate eco-cidal crime: a full-scale nuclear war’, while *Last Year in Marienbad* screens the potentially transformative process of therapy. Similarly, the section on *Never Let Me Go* investigates the film’s role as a Wittgensteinian object of comparison. Read’s most ecological discussions are centred on the films, *Melancholia*, *Solaris*, *Gravity*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Avatar*.

Perhaps controversially, Read closely links the narratives *Gravity* and *2001* as similar ‘hero’s journeys’ in which a return to ‘mother earth’ becomes the end-point of a transformative journey away from the earth. Indeed, Read owes much to the philosophy of Hannah Arendt in these discussions. His *Lord of the Rings* section – which Read prides as ‘meet[ing] the ultimate test of a central claim of mine: that the hugely popular world can be philosophically significant’ – conducts a dual psychological and political investigation of the trilogy which revisits Read’s ecological concerns, as well as his ideas on the hero’s journey.

The Wittgensteinian–Cavellian method that Read (and others) has continued to develop finds its most recent and clear elucidation in this latest text. Films that may have only been of interest to a film historian, or as fodder to prove the ideas of the film theorist or philosopher, or as easy-access ‘illustrations’ of pre-formed philosophical theories, can be sources of legitimate transformative philosophising through a form of philosophical-humanistic therapy that aims to act upon and transform our ways of thinking, according to Read’s Wittgensteinian-Cavellian method that he forwards in this book.

We can take away from Read's book the same idea that he takes away from *Avatar*: that we need to open our eyes – or *wake up*. That is, we need to allow films to enlighten us to adopting a transformed relationship to the world – and in particular, the environment.

References

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About the contributor

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