

Freshman Seminar Film Courses

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explain how to design and teach a course that meets the special requirements of Freshman Seminar programs by using feature films to examine philosophical themes. Two such courses are discussed. By organizing each course around a theme, the teacher can use the films to illustrate and, sometimes, critique philosophical positions that she elaborates. Discussing the films, the students develop analytical and interpretive skills important for more rigorous philosophy courses as well as for work in other disciplines.

Entering students often find university bewildering. To help them adjust to academic life many universities have instituted Freshman Seminar programs that feature small classes taught by professors on interesting subjects not covered in the ordinary curriculum. These courses are supposed to provide students with a more informal and relaxed atmosphere than they might find in large introductory lectures and with an opportunity for contact with faculty rather than teaching assistants. Typically, they are pass/fail, count for a single credit, and meet weekly or even biweekly. Faculty called upon to teach in such programs are likely to face students looking for a fun and relatively undemanding course. Since they serve a different end than courses in the regular philosophy curriculum, these courses call for teaching strategies and course designs that differ from those of typical philosophy courses. Feature films are often good vehicles to raise philosophical issues, but because they are designed to entertain, they rarely pursue issues far, deeply, or rigorously, and using them instead of readings to teach philosophy is challenging. The aim of this paper is to explain how to design a substantial philosophy course around feature films. Central to the approach advanced here is that the film is used most effectively when it is treated not as a course reading that one would expect to learn from, but as an illustration of a position on a philosophical issue and an occasion to elaborate on the issue.

Interpretive and Analytical Skills

Graduate study in philosophy provides the training a person needs to teach the serious courses that form the core of a philosophy curriculum. Freshman Seminars are not intended to be such courses. Hence, the first challenge is to determine what is appropriate and possible to make of them. I have experimented with a number of formats for teaching Freshman Seminars. One year, I gave students a list of topics organized around a theme and led a discussion at each meeting; there were no assigned readings. Another year I did a slow reading of Plato's *Apology*. Both were successful and well received; but I was not sure that the former left students with any skills, and the latter was too much like a regular course without the papers and final that motivate students to engage the material.

For the past few years, I have taught a "Film and Philosophy" Freshman Seminar. This class is scheduled for two and a half hours every other week. I screen a feature film, we take a short break, and then we discuss the film. Because the films vary in length and because discussions can also be longer or shorter, some class sessions exceed the official time; but students are warned on the first day of class that this will happen, and the class meets in the evening when they will not have to rush to another class. It is also advisable to announce at the first session that the films were not chosen for entertainment but for their intellectual value and to warn students that some will be in foreign languages. Indeed, I got the best group of students when the published description mentioned that there would be foreign films with subtitles; perhaps this deterred the students looking for fluff.

Films have several advantages for a course like this. First, the kinds of interpretive skills one needs to appreciate films include many skills that one could use to interpret literary and philosophical texts. Hence, what the students learn in this course can be readily transferred. Second, films are more accessible than texts; their themes are less complex and easier to grasp. Third, films are entertaining even to unsophisticated audiences and would often, in any case, be topics of discussion among students. Even a brief analysis that explains a theme or clarifies obscure points can enhance a film's entertainment value. While there would be more to be learned from analyzing a philosophical work, analyzing a film yields quick results with relatively little labor. In a world where many entering students are highly skeptical of the value of analytical reflection, a film discussion provides a powerful demonstration that thinking about what we experience enhances and enriches the experience. Hence, a film seminar can help to orient students toward appreciating the value of the more rigorous analysis they will encounter in other courses. Perhaps, one of the most useful points to convey in a Freshman Seminar

is that even apart from any utilitarian purpose, learning is valuable, life-enriching, and potentially transformative. We take this for granted; for many freshmen it comes as something of a revelation.

A well-constructed freshman film seminar can also help students take some of the baby steps to acquire analytical and critical skills that they will need in their regular philosophy courses. Most students will need to be told that a film screened in a course of this sort is not only telling a story but also making a point. They come to see this when they recognize how the elements of the story line serve to support the point. The point is, in effect, the conclusion that the audience is supposed to draw, and the story serves as a kind of argument. A film will generally portray plausible consequences that follow some interaction of characters or circumstances. Like works of literature, the film tells a story whose philosophical interest and significance lies in its being typical. The more plausible its story line, the more support it provides for its conclusion. So understood, a film is an instance of what Aristotle regards as rhetorical argument, in contrast with what he calls "scientific argument." Whereas the latter uses universal premises to support a universal conclusion, a rhetorical argument brings individual examples to support a universal conclusion. For the philosophical viewer, the film will always be inadequate because a single story could never provide the sort of universal support that a philosophical claim really needs. So the film provides, at once, an illustration of a kind of argument, and a lesson in the limitations of this kind of argument. In discovering the way a film makes its case, students often see how inadequate the story line is to the point it is supposed to prove. Thus, by means of the film's failings, students come to see the need for more sophisticated argumentative and analytical tools.

This last point is a bit unfair because artistically constructed feature films are often compelling. Indeed, philosophical discussion of a film sometimes requires breaking its spell. One can do this by imagining an alternative story line. If the story had turned out differently, it would no longer support the "conclusion." Just recognizing this possibility helps students to see the logical structure of the film. Alternative scenarios are built into some films in the form of sub-plots or foils that suggest the opposite outcome; in art, these, as well as ambiguity, can be virtues. A teacher can draw on such devices to construct alternative positions and "arguments" that throw the philosophical issue in relief. And because it draws on internal details of the film, this type of analysis enhances the film's artistic value. Simply by moving the students from passive observation to active engagement with the film, a Freshman Film Seminar can prepare them for the stance that they will need to adopt in regular philosophy courses. The course lays the foundation for regular philosophy courses by introducing students to the idea that positions

need to be argued and by preparing them to look for arguments, even if the "arguments" that they find in films are rhetorical.

Some philosophers will surely be uncomfortable with the implication that a film, or any work of art, can be understood adequately as making a case for a conclusion, and my claim that films contain rhetorical arguments will seem reductive and simplistic. Let me acknowledge the possibility that using films as I am proposing here does compromise their artistic integrity. If so, others will need to decide whether this is a price worth paying or, better, to find a way to achieve the philosophical goals just sketched without such compromises. Let me suggest, however, that such concerns may be exaggerated. We need to keep in mind where the students are coming from. In my experience, entering students have often *heard* that works of art are complex and ambiguous. The trouble is that they rarely have the analytical skills to explore complex meanings and to appreciate ambiguity or the patience to work through the details. Too often, I fear, claims about ambiguity in art become, in their minds, vindications for not thinking about art. One way to appreciate a film as a work of art is to try to view it as I am proposing here. In my experience, most feature films are not nearly as ambiguous as one might have thought. And films that are truly multi-faceted are best appreciated as such by *trying* to analyze them in the way I am proposing. Again, so far from undermining the artistic dimension of films, the analysis I am proposing is exactly what entering students need to help them learn to appreciate the richness of film as art.

Philosophical Themes: Two Courses

The most challenging part of a film and philosophy course is to teach philosophy. Films are often good at raising issues and provoking discussion. But that is only the beginning of philosophy. The problem is how to teach a substantial course with material that is not rigorously philosophical.

The first step toward a solution is to choose a philosophical theme and a group of films that can be plausibly construed to treat it. For those, like me, with no particular expertise in film, it is hard to find films that are good individually and suitably connected with each other.¹ Reviews, summaries, and, sometimes, more extensive analyses are available on line; but one often looks in vain to find a simple statement of what a film is really about. To say that a film is, for example, a western gives one a fair idea of the scenery and some main character types, but it does not even hint at what may be at stake philosophically. In the rest of this paper, I present and discuss the films that I chose for two recent Freshman Seminars. If enough people teach courses of this sort, there will eventually be a body of knowledge or, at least, lore about themes and films appropriate to address them.

The second step is to reflect on the range of philosophical treatments of the theme. "The nature of reality," the theme of my first course, is a central topic in ancient philosophy, and philosophers know that Plato identifies form as the principle of reality, whereas the Ionian philosophers and atomists take the principle to be matter of one sort or another, and Aristotle identifies both form and matter as principles but gives priority to form. A course on ancient philosophy would refine these positions and focus on the arguments for and against them. A film seminar must confine itself to identifying a film's position, reconstructing its rhetorical argument, and exploring the larger thematic issue. But a film can make this recondite issue alive and significant in a way that a text rarely can. Likewise, "man in the state of nature," the theme of my second course, was a central concern for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political philosophy. The issue was to understand what man would be like if he lived alone in nature, apart from society, so as to be able to reconstruct or, at least, reconceive society in a way that is consonant with human nature. The controversy between Hobbes and Locke, on the one hand, and Rousseau, on the other, is whether man *in nature* is self-sufficient and free because he is able to gratify his own needs, as Rousseau thinks, or whether he is weak, unable to provide for himself, and miserable, as the others hold. Closely connected is the question of what, if anything, society contributes to improve human life. These last questions have been treated, humorously and seriously, in a number of films. Screening these films provides an occasion to discuss the thematic issue they address and to consider how the films take a stand on it and make that stand plausible.

Explaining how to understand the films screened in each course as taking a stand on the course's thematic issue and how to connect them with the other films in the course is the work of most of the rest of this paper. There is no need to go into great detail here; the films themselves are not difficult to understand. Nor is this the place for a philosophical treatment of the thematic issues. One who decides to teach a course like these needs to know the philosophical literature before he undertakes the course. What, rather, needs to be shown here is why each film's plot allows it to be seen as addressing the thematic issue and, indeed, taking a stand on it. This can require a bit of creativity; for, as we will see, the same film can be interpreted as addressing different issues. That is a sign that a film is richer than one issue, but to achieve its philosophic ends the course needs to focus on the issue. My general approach is to screen the first film with little introduction, and then to begin the discussion by introducing the philosophical issue I want to focus on in the course. Once students understand the issue, they start to think about how the film addresses it. Details and incidents are recalled and the class comes to see them as evidence until, eventually, the stand

the film takes on the issue becomes clear. Considering whether these details do support the stand raises the possibility of taking a different stand on the issue. Thus, under the guidance of a teacher familiar with philosophical literature on the issue, discussion of the film broadens to discussion of philosophical concepts and issues.

Syllabus for Course 1:

Film and Philosophy: The Nature of Reality

Description and Objective: Many films have explicit philosophical content. Some explore conflicts in values; others consider different ways of knowing and interpreting reality. Still more films have implicit philosophical content. This class will examine philosophical questions by using film as a medium to present philosophical issues and provoke discussion. Considering films in this way will also enhance our appreciation of them as artistic works. Most of the films we will see raise questions in the branches of philosophy known as metaphysics and epistemology. In each session we will view a film and discuss the philosophical issues it raises.

Each film we will view this semester deals directly or indirectly with the nature of reality in general and, more particularly, with human nature. Some films suppose that reality consists of a form or structure that may be akin to mathematics; others take reality to be something that may receive this structure but is independent of it; and still others explore the possibility that reality may have both dimensions. In each case we will consider both the film's interpretation of reality and how it aims to make a case for that interpretation, and we will try to think critically about the interpretation and the case for it.

Requirements: Class will meet every other week. Because the films are of varying lengths, some class sessions could exceed the allotted time period. You must attend every film and every discussion in order to pass the course. Requiring attendance is appropriate because the class meets relatively infrequently and because it is the only requirement. In the event of an unexcused absence, the professor may, at his discretion, allow you to earn credit for the missed class by viewing the film on your own and writing a three-page paper on an assigned topic.

Schedule:

Shane
The Thirteenth Floor
My Dinner with André
Pi
The Seventh Seal
Rashomon
The Wild Child
Blade Runner
Being There

Shane sets the stage for the course. It is about the conflict between farmers and ranchers in the developing west. The farmers form an organized community with laws. They have private property that they work and improve, and they have wives, children, a town, and commerce. The ranchers need large stretches of land to graze herds of cattle, and they resent the encroachment of the farmers. Crude and passionate, the ranchers live far from civilization except when they come to the local saloon. The action of the film occurs when the ranchers attempt to run the farmers off the land, and the title figure, a drifting gunslinger attracted to the domestic life of a farm family, and especially the wife of the family, comes to the farmers' aid. In the film, the farmers are assumed to have the greater right to the land because, apparently on Lockean grounds, they put it to better use. But their civility puts them at a disadvantage against the ruthless ranchers. Shane is the hero of the film because he defends the farmers, but to do so he must step beyond the boundaries of the society he saves; he is, therefore, unable to remain with the farmers and, in the end, rides away, wounded physically, possibly fatally, and, we surmise, emotionally. The intended message would seem to be that although justice is on the side of civilization, the latter lacks the ability to defend itself and needs to resort to decidedly uncivilized means. But the film is also about reality, for it is the structure and organization of the community, its law, and its ordered family life that give the farmers their identity and the community its reality. By way of contrast, the ranchers are more loosely associated with each other and have little individual identity. Artistically and rhetorically, the film can be seen to make a compelling case for this view of reality, but it does not take much reflection to see how dubious and, indeed, implausible the case is. For it is just because the farmers are law abiding and capable of working together that they constitute a society; that gives them a degree of reality that the ranchers lack, and it should make them the more formidable force. To avoid this conceptual problem the film is set in a frontier community, but that limits the applicability of its central claim. Even worse, the film downplays the value of the community in order to glorify the individual who chooses to fight for it; but his action is only valuable because of value of the community he saves. It is, ultimately, order or organization that is the source of reality here. The metaphysical issue at stake is whether the order that makes the community a reality is also able to preserve it.

The Thirteenth Floor also understands order and organization as the source of reality, only here, like the more popular *The Matrix*, reality consists of numbers that digitally create the appearance of matter. The characters in this film protect the secret that it is, indeed, *only* the simulation that is real, that the same simulation could reappear, and

that characters from one simulation could, by recognizing the formulae at work in a simulation, enter another. Whereas *Shane* took reality as an organization imposed upon an unruly matter, *The Thirteenth Floor* leaves out the matter.

My Dinner with André is a kind of inverse of *Shane*. Nearly the entire film takes place in a restaurant and consists of the title character recounting to the film's narrator his efforts to rid himself and the actors he directs of masks and roles and arrive as some authentic being. It soon emerges that not only theater people but everyone gives themselves roles and that those roles create an artificial distance between people. Heidegger is mentioned in the film as someone who is also trying to arrive at what is authentic. The intended message is that reality lies not in the order or structure we give to ourselves, but in whatever it is that underlies these masks. Such a reality looks like prime matter. Indeed, it is not clear what would remain if all roles, structures, and organizations were removed from human life—how could anyone have any identity without these? But the film nicely shows the transformation that André effects in the narrator as the latter gradually loses the masks he has brought with him until, riding home afterwards; he sees the world in a new way.

Pi returns to the idea that reality consists of form, role, or pattern rather than matter. If the patterns are all mathematical, there may be some pattern that is the key to the universe. This is what Max Cohen is seeking and, the film suggests, close to attaining. A central incident from Max's youth that is recalled repeatedly is his having tried to look directly at the sun and his recoiling in pain. The incident brings to mind the plight of those who dwell in Plato's cave; when they ultimately emerge, they are blinded by the sun. So, too, as Max gets closer to the ultimate string of numbers, he is besieged by stock market analysts, Hasidic Jews, and his own terrible headaches. By the end of the film, it is not clear that attaining the real truth, the ultimate structure, is either possible or worth the sacrifice. The notion that there should be a principle of all structure and, thereby, of all reality and the problem of whether that would itself be a structure is an important problem in classical metaphysics.

The central character in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* is also looking for ultimate answers. Antonius Block, a knight returning from the Crusades during the time of the plague, with his squire but without his faith, meets with Death, whom he deters temporarily by challenging to a game of chess. During the game, Block anxiously questions Death about God and human existence, but these philosophical questions remain unanswered. In a second story line, an actor, his wife, and their young child seem at first as comic figures; but the actor has visions of the Madonna and Child, and the family itself is compared to the Holy Family. Much has been written about this film, particularly about

Block's struggles, but I think that it is the family's joy and love that Bergman wants us to focus on. In the end, the mind cannot get over the intellectual problems of God, Death, and human existence; what we can do in the brief time allotted us is love each other as the family so clearly does. In the context of this course, this film represents a rejection of form and structure along with all such *intellectual* principles and an endorsement of what underlies them as the first principle.

Rashomon consists of four inconsistent accounts of a murder and rape. Kurosawa aims to leave viewers puzzled about what the truth is and, even more so, puzzled about the possibility of ever finding the truth. All four narrators base their narrations on their expectations of the behaviors that characters in the extreme circumstances of the story would display. Although we cannot say what actually transpired, it is clear that no one's expectations have been met. What we see here is a world where form or role defines a person, but also one in which the real people who take up these roles fail to live up to them. As in *Shane*, both the formed and the formless are recognized as aspects of reality. But whereas form ultimately triumphs in *Shane*, in *Rashomon* the imperfect connection of form and formless makes reality indeterminable and unknowable. In the context of this course, Truffaut's *The Wild Child* represents an attempt to impose the order of society on a boy who had, until then, lived alone in the forest. The film makes it clear that this requires that the boy give up some of the freedom he enjoyed in the wild in exchange for benefits gained from living an ordered social existence, benefits like love and friendship. As in *Rashomon*, both order and what receives it are present; but here, unlike *Rashomon* where the incommensurability of their mixture is stressed, this film holds out the possibility of some dynamic harmony because it values what receives order as well as what is ordered. Whereas the characters in *Rashomon* fall sadly short of their assigned roles, the structured existence that makes them what they should be, and must settle for some imperfect human existence; the boy in *Wild Child* would, and should, choose to retain as much of his indeterminateness as society will allow when he assumes his role in it.

In *Blade Runner*, the robots are nearly indistinguishable from the humans they were built to serve. Despite or, perhaps, because they are designed with a limited life-span and high intelligence, they seek to prolong their lives, and they thereby pose a threat to human society. The title refers to a kind of policeman whose job is to detect and eliminate renegade robots. What is really interesting here is the supposition that a longing for immortality and, by the end of the film, even the capacity for love are consequences of the robots' structure. This would mean that, first, we ourselves are robots of some sort, made by the being we call God and, second, that the distinction fundamental to the course, the distinction between, on one hand, structure, intelligence,

order, number, and form, and, on the other, whatever it is that receives form—here, namely, life, passion, love, and longing—may ultimately collapse into form.

Exactly the opposite sort of collapse occurs in the last film, *Being There*; for here what lacks all form seems somehow to take on the functions of form. The film's central character does not have an internal principle of order: he is so immediate that he lacks all ability for intelligent reflection. The irony of the film is that because he is always all there, he is never all there. That is to say, since thought is a reflection on experience, it requires distance from experience. Lacking that distance, the main character is unable to think: he lives totally in experience and is, therefore, never even able to imagine anything else. Of course, he has no history or future; he does not even have a name. We know only that he has lived in someone's house; when that person dies, he leaves the house without any plan for the future or even any conception of it. Because his speech is so concrete, everyone he meets needs to interpret it to make sense of it. The running joke is that nearly everyone takes him to be making brilliant metaphors. Eventually, he becomes an adviser to the President and is himself considered Presidential material. The film is quite funny, and it may evoke comparisons with our current President. We see here a case of someone who has, as *My Dinner with André* imagines, thrown off all roles and structures. Ironically, though, it seems that that very immediacy makes him brilliant. Whereas in *Blade Runner* intelligence gives the robots immediacy, in *Being There* it is immediacy that somehow makes the main character possess a kind of intelligence that others lack.

In short, these highly diverse films can be understood to address, in complementary and contrary ways, the same theme. In other contexts, the films could have been interpreted differently, but the aim here is ultimately not to understand the films but to use them as vehicles to make concrete a problem of classical metaphysics, the range of options for solution, and what might be construed as rhetorical arguments for various options. Appreciating the metaphysical issue also enriches the films and helps students to appreciate them more, but that is secondary. Had the course asked the students to read metaphysical works of Plato, Aristotle, and Lucretius, they would surely have gotten a better handle on the same metaphysical theme. But such a course would have suited a far more sophisticated group of students. Under the circumstances, these films served well to present a difficult metaphysical issue in terms that freshmen appreciated. Moreover, it made this abstract metaphysical issue alive for the students in a way that the philosophical readings could not have done. If the students had seen only one of the films, they would have had a hard time grasping the issue. It was the opportunity to see the different approaches to reality that allowed

the metaphysical issue to become apparent. Not surprisingly, students who were reading material in other courses on this theme were most excited about the films, but the entire class seemed to grapple seriously with the issue.

Syllabus for Course 2: Man in the State of Nature

[Portions of the syllabus that also appear in the first course have been omitted.]

Description and Objective: The theme of the course is man in a state of nature. Philosophers, especially those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, sought to know the nature of man in order to determine appropriate types of social institutions. To understand human nature they tried to imagine what man would be like without society, in a state of nature. They thought they could use this understanding of man to grasp how best to structure society. Social institutions contrary to man's basic nature would be constrictive and, likely, short lived. Institutions designed to be consonant with our nature could also serve to extend our power and enhance our lives. In short, they hoped to use the nature they supposed man to have before entering society as a kind of standard to evaluate present society. Man in a state of nature is also an important theme in literature where it sometimes serves the same end but is also put to other uses.

Schedule:

Stagecoach
Swept Away (dir. Lina Wertmüller)
The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser
The Wild Child
The Last Wave
Instinct
Voyager
Walk Like a Man

In the first two films, people leave society and enter what is supposed to be a state of nature. The point of each film is the new relationships that develop in the state of nature. In *Stagecoach*, there is a clear social hierarchy among the riders as the stagecoach leaves on its journey to Lordsburg. At its top are a banker and a lady (who is pregnant); at bottom, a prostitute and an escaped convict who gets on board after the stage has left town, the Ringo Kid (John Wayne). The riders face the wildness of nature, represented in the film by difficult childbirth and, mostly, by attacking Indians. (The latter metaphor is no longer politically correct and proved surprisingly troubling to some students.) Confronted by harsh nature, the social hierarchy collapses and a new, *natural* order emerges. The two people who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy prove themselves necessary to the survival of the others, whereas some who were respectable, especially the banker, turn out to be less than worthless. In *Swept Away*, a wealthy

and abusive yacht owner and her deck hand/cook set out on a rubber dinghy for a short trip, but a storm blows them far from the yacht. Eventually, they reach a deserted island, and the lady comes to realize that her survival there is entirely dependent upon the deck hand with whom she begins a steamy relationship. The roles in nature turn out to be entirely the reverse of what they were in society; and the deck hand becomes as abusive to the woman as she had been to him. Whereas in *Stagecoach*, the roles the characters play in nature are better and more fitting than their social roles, and the suggestion is that an ideal society, "Lordsburg," would be in accordance with nature, in *Swept Away* nature contains the same type of abuse as society and cannot provide a model for social transformation.

Both *The Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* and *The Wild Child* tell essentially the same story: a child who has lived his life outside of society is found and brought to society, where he faces a difficult adjustment. In *Kaspar Hauser*, the child was confined in a room; in *The Wild Child* he lived in nature. The emphasis in the former film is on how bizarre Kaspar finds civilization. Though he is highly intelligent and learns quickly, he is assaulted by people who want to use him to prove contentions in philosophy or theology. In a parallel way, he is assaulted physically, possibly by his captor, and eventually succumbs to an attack. Before he dies, he expresses a vision of a future ideal society where there is cooperation and no pretense. In contrast, we get a much more positive view of current society in *The Wild Child*. Here the emphasis is on the laborious process through which the boy learns language, awareness of other people, and law. Truffaut has the boy's teacher say that to live in society he must give up some of the freedom he enjoyed in the wild, but that he gets, in return, opportunities for love and friendship. The film dwells on the difficulties of his adjustment, but the boy eventually chooses to remain in society. Where *Kaspar Hauser* sees society providing the opportunity for knowledge and culture and, thereby for freedom, *Wild Child* emphasizes its providing opportunities for love and friendship at the expense of freedom. Clearly, different notions of freedom are in play in the two films, freedom as the possibility self-initiated action and freedom as lack of external restriction; and the films provide an opportunity to explain this important distinction.

In these first four films, nature and society are physically and temporally distinct. In the next three, nature and society are somehow concurrent. Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* is about an Australian lawyer who has his first contact with the Aborigines when he defends one in a murder case. He comes to see that there is a natural world that exists, literally, as well as figuratively, beneath his city, a world that is governed by its own eternal natural laws. This world and its laws cannot

be grasped through reason or any of our normal ways of perception; the Aborigines call it "Dreamtime," and access it through magic. Nonetheless, it is far more powerful than our society and what we take to be real. A final cataclysmic scene suggests the consequences of our living removed from this reality, but Weir does not indicate how we might reform society to make it accord with nature and avoid doom. He seems to think that rational thinking itself removes us from reality (nature), and he implicitly recommends relying on intuition and feeling. Of course, he would be contradicting himself if he gave rational instructions on how to do so, but this difficulty itself serves to show why reason has seemed necessary for social reconstructions. The film provides the occasion to discuss ideas that are important to eastern philosophy.

In *Instinct*, Anthony Hopkins plays an anthropologist who lives among the apes in Africa and learns from them how to care for others. When rangers, apparently searching for him, kill an ape, Hopkins kills some rangers to protect his new "family." He is imprisoned and eventually returned to America. The film consists of a psychiatrist (Cuba Gooding Jr.) gradually uncovering Hopkins's story and reconciling Hopkins with his human family, which he, oddly, has little compunction about having abandoned. The apes here represent the beginning of human nature; they live an idyllic life of mutual caring. The theme of the film is how modern society is corrupt because people are advancing their careers (tritely called here "playing the game") instead of living naturally. Although the film is well-acted, it is hard to take seriously the notion of apes living idyllically in the jungle, and we scarcely need the apes to teach us the value of others. *Voyager*, based on Max Frisch's novel, *Homo Faber*, tells a story of an engineer (Faber) who meets and falls in love with a girl whom he eventually discovers to be his daughter; yet, it is no more a story about incest than *Oedipus Rex*. As an engineer, Faber's life is devoted to the control of nature, and Faber takes his role so seriously that, years before the film begins, he was so indifferent to his fiancée that she refused to marry him. She was, unbeknownst to Faber, pregnant. In the film's present time, this woman is an archaeologist devoted to classical art, and their daughter displays her mother's interest in art. The film thus presents us with two ways that we deal with nature, controlling it and admiring its beauty through artistic representation. The incestuous relationship and the events surrounding it—Faber insists they could not have been accidental—seem to undermine both approaches: ultimately our efforts to control nature will fail, and there is a dark side of nature that artistic representations cannot do justice to. Incest here symbolizes that dark side of nature that makes it amenable to neither reason nor emotion. Man in the state of nature cannot be overcome, nor is he to be exalted.

The final film, *Walk Like a Man*, is a comedy about a man who, having been raised by wolves in the forest, is discovered and brought to society. Because he turns out to be an heir to a large family fortune, there is a great deal of interest in teaching him how to write his name so that he can sign over his share to other family members. Although the theme is the same as *Kaspar Hauser* and *The Wild Child*, the critique of society offered here is that of *Instinct* and *The Last Wave*: all three take the values in nature to include (implausibly) a sincere concern for others, and they all want to bring this value into society. The sharpest contrast is with *Wild Child* where nature affords no opportunities for concern for others, and one is willing to endure society just because it offers the prospect of love and friendship. The notion of *Walk Like a Man*, as well as *Instinct*, that life outside of society would still somehow be social is implausible and inconsistent in itself, and it contrasts with accounts Rousseau and other philosophers give of the individual in the state of nature. I had hoped that *Walk Like a Man* would provide a bit of comic relief, but the students found it trite, dated—it came out in 1987—and not funny.

Man in a state of nature was a central theme for political philosophy in the eighteenth century, and it has been treated extensively by films that refer to nature to make a social critique. However, the really interesting film treatments are in the foreign language films that many students have trouble appreciating, whereas the more accessible recent films in English often have the same trite message. The repetition did help students to appreciate how each film served as a rhetorical argument, but it did not give them a deeper appreciation of the issue. Even so, by viewing these films together, the students became aware of the range of possible interpretations of man in nature and how man's natural state might be enhanced or repressed by society. Although they would certainly get a better handle on this issue through close study of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, a teacher familiar with these latter can use a discussion of these films to convey some of the same ideas, and, again, the films have the advantage of immediacy and accessibility that the texts lack. As in the first course, students taking other courses whose readings treated the same theme seemed to get the most from the class. Still, all the students came away from the course with an understanding of an important and substantial philosophical issue.

Finally, let me mention briefly a third Freshman Film Seminar that I taught jointly with a colleague of Polish origin from comparative literature. We showed, over the semester, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue*. Each of the ten films in this series, originally aired on Polish television, takes a single commandment and presents a story in which a heterodox version of the commandment figures in. The first film, for example, questions whether someone who relies on science violates the

commandment to have no other gods before one; another film questions whether capital punishment is not a form of murder. The films are artistically very satisfying, and they raise philosophical questions about morality in a way that provokes student interest and discussion. The idea that the content of the commandments might be a matter of interpretation came as a surprise to students, and the films worked well to open them to reflecting on the meaning of the commandments. Indeed, most were surprised to learn that the Catholic numbering of the commandments differs from the Protestant and Jewish numberings.

In courses, like these Freshman Film Seminars, where there are no written assignments, it is hard to assess the students' progress. Some students will participate actively, and a teacher can sense their improvement; but many others are more reticent. After most class sessions, some students would remain to continue to talk about the film or about other matters—usually a positive sign. Perhaps more than the themes and the particular ideas explored in the courses, more than anything that can be measured, what the students may take away is what we usually just take for granted: the recognition that a film has something to convey and something like an argument to support its thesis, that we can discover what it is by analysis and reflection, that these latter are skills that can be developed, that developing these skills is likely to increase our appreciation and enjoyment of the film, and that the ideas presented dramatically in the film might be interesting and important in their own right. To see these points is to see that philosophy and, indeed, a university education, can have a profound impact on how one experiences the world. This is a most important lesson for freshmen. To conclude, Freshmen Seminar film courses can be a level-appropriate vehicle to teach students philosophical ideas that are important in their own right and to make students alive to the possibility that education can transform their lives.

Notes

I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

1. Two helpful resources are Christopher Falzon's *Philosophy Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 2002) and Mary M. Litch's *Philosophy Through Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Litch has detailed discussions of a few films, each on a separate topic, and Falzon brief discussions of many films. However, because both books are organized topically, they provide only limited assistance in designing a course that focuses on a theme, like those discussed here. The journal *Film and Philosophy* is also a good source for philosophical discussions of films. Potentially useful is a database maintained by Christopher Falzon that allows users to browse by area or theme: <http://arts.anu.edu.au/PhilosophyandFilm/videodata/>. This latter includes about 500 films, but entering the themes discussed in the two courses to be described in detail here did not produce any of the films used in these courses.

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