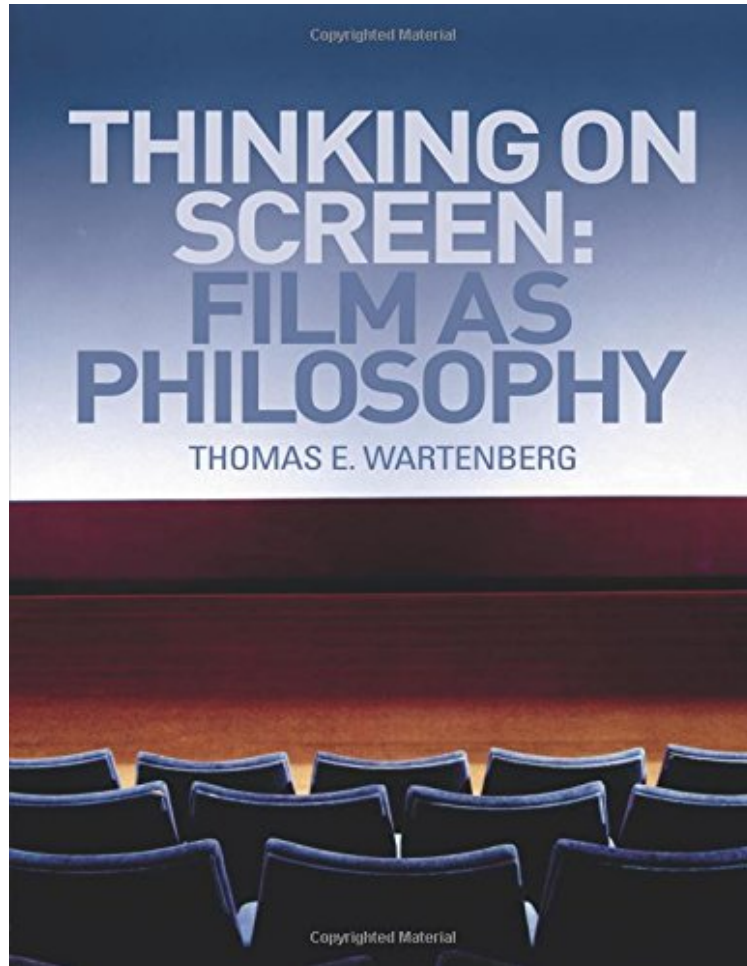


(Free download) Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy

## Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy

Thomas E. Wartenberg  
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**Thomas E. Wartenberg : Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A very readable, joyful and clearly argued philosophy of movies. By Fade Up Wartenberg clearly examines some thinking tools that he uses to open up movies as philosophical thinking. He employs different philosophical lenses to think about Chaplin's "Modern Times", "The Matrix", "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" and Graham Greene's classic, "The Third Man." One of these lenses, these ways of re-imagining movies, is philosophy's argument by counter-example. Having worked for many years in the movie business, I find Wartenberg's love of movies refreshing and very down to earth. This philosopher does not distance himself from the joy of movies. Joy and respect come though, while he shows us how to think clearly in new ways. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A modest, but generally clear and illuminating, introduction to the question whether films can "do" philosophy. By Nate Wartenberg's little book offers a modest response to a question that has lately

become controversial among philosophers interested in movies: "can film do philosophy?" The way this question is usually posed is by contrasting "film as illustration or example" with "film as philosophy." It's easy enough to see how a film like, say, *The Matrix* offers an updated illustration of something like the evil demon hypothesis that motivated Cartesian hyperbolic doubt, and it's easy to see why the scenario of a film like *Gone Baby Gone* could provide a useful example for someone considering the merits of utilitarian ethics. Still, most philosophers who've argued for the idea that film can do philosophy want to say that at least some films can do more than merely illustrate or offer examples that help to clarify and consider views first formulated apart from film. They want to say that some films at least ought to be considered as offering something new to philosophy, something uniquely cinematic that also counts as a serious contribution to philosophical discourse. Wartenberg wonders why we really need that in order to see the importance of film for philosophy. His modest response to all of this is to reject the dichotomy of "film as illustration or example" and "film as philosophy." He argues that film can be philosophical precisely because it is good at illustrating ideas in such a way as to make their implications clear, and because it is able to present vivid scenarios that serve as thought experiments to test those implications, and because it can also provide counterexamples that help to show that certain philosophical theories are false. When a film does philosophical work, Wartenberg likes to say that those philosophical notions have been "screened." It's a helpful terminology, aimed at suggesting that the philosophical contribution of those films is somehow uniquely cinematic, and couldn't be translated without loss into some other medium such as text. He attempts to make the case that his examples are uniquely cinematic in a "local and empirical" fashion - meaning he doesn't want to make grand claims about the nature of cinema as such and its inherent connection with philosophical concerns, but only wants to claim that this or that film has philosophical import that draws its effectiveness from the resources of film. Some of his examples are more successful than others at suggesting a uniquely cinematic connection. He argues, for example, that *The Matrix* illustrates Cartesian skepticism, not only by presenting a fictional scenario in which artificially intelligent robots play a role like Descartes' "evil demon," but also by enacting its deception and tricking the audience into accepting as the "real world of the fiction" what turns out to be the fake world according to the fiction. Film is able to achieve a level of identification and empathy with the audience that narrated thought experiments rarely achieve - and even if literature can achieve something similar, Wartenberg's interest is not so much to identify features that film alone possesses but that manifest themselves in film distinctly and give it resources that aren't usually found in philosophical texts. As mentioned, the resources that Wartenberg identifies as distinctive to film are the ability to clarify abstract philosophical theses by way of illustration, to gel intuitions by presenting thought experiments, to present arguments by posing a thesis and presenting a counter-example, and to clarify the nature of film as a contribution to the philosophy of film itself by means of self-reflexive cinematic techniques. It should be clear that none of these really satisfy the desire of some philosophers and film theorists for a radically new cinematic way of thinking and posing philosophical questions (what Daniel Frampton calls "filmosophy" and Deleuze identifies as the creation of new concepts). Still, it's an impressive range of possibilities, if all of those philosophical "moves" can really be attributable to film directly and not merely to what clever philosophers might be able to tease out of film. Wartenberg attempts to address various criticisms that might be posed against his account and have been posed against similar accounts - such as the objection that philosophical interpretations are imposed on rather than drawn from films, or the objection that films aren't able to formulate precise positions because narrative scenarios always have a degree of ambiguity that is undesirable in philosophy. In general, his response to such objections is to turn them around into principles for good philosophical interpretations of film: they should be specific, and they should be faithful to the details of the film, and they shouldn't impute any "views" to the film that the filmmakers couldn't be aware of (note that here he basically assumes something like auteur theory - that there is an artist who can be held largely responsible for the film - and when he says a film is "doing philosophy" he means that its filmmaker can be plausibly construed to be doing philosophy in or through the medium of film). I found his account of how narrative fiction films can pose arguments to be the weakest case. He claims that *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* offers to begin with something like a prima facie case that memory erasure is justified on utilitarian grounds - because one character suggested that the procedure was a benefit to mankind - and then goes on to show that memory erasure is bad on grounds other than utilitarianism, which he takes to mean that the film is arguing against utilitarianism. If the film is arguing that, it's a very weak argument; more likely, the interpretation imposes a set of concerns on the film that aren't really as central as the author would like to think. In general, also, I found it puzzling that Wartenberg insisted on connecting the philosophical import of each of the films he discussed to some very specific philosophical position held by a major philosopher, rather than focusing on the way these films clarified or challenged themes in terms more directly tied to their narratives. Why, for example, does *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* have to be about Hegel versus Nietzsche and not the demands of law and order and the value of "progress" versus the "Western" code of honor, which is still a philosophical issue but more directly the concern of the film? In spite of several points of disagreement over both content and emphasis, I found Wartenberg's study to be clear and engaging throughout. It would make a very nice introduction to a question which has engaged nearly every philosopher who has thought seriously about film in the past decade or so.

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Intelligent and thorough  
By Iman Loves Reading  
Author was thorough, insightful, and thought provoking. You

leave with a more philosophically inclined interpretation on films that "do" philosophy.

*Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* is an accessible and thought-provoking examination of the way films raise and explore complex philosophical ideas. Written in a clear and engaging style, Thomas Wartenberg examines films' ability to discuss, and even criticize ideas that have intrigued and puzzled philosophers over the centuries such as the nature of personhood, the basis of morality, and epistemological skepticism. Beginning with a demonstration of how specific forms of philosophical discourse are presented cinematically, Wartenberg moves on to offer a systematic account of the ways in which specific films undertake the task of philosophy. Focusing on the films *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Modern Times*, *The Matrix*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Third Man*, *The Flicker*, and *Empire*, Wartenberg shows how these films express meaningful and pertinent philosophical ideas. This book is essential reading for students of philosophy with an interest in film, aesthetics, and film theory. It will also be of interest to film enthusiasts intrigued by the philosophical implications of film.

'A powerful defense of the view that films can philosophize. Characterized by its clear and lively presentation, and by its intertwining of philosophical argument with detailed discussion of several important films, it will be of interest not just to those studying philosophy and film but to everyone who believes in the importance of film to our cognitive life.'

Berys Gaut, University of St Andrews, UK

About the Author: Thomas E. Wartenberg is Professor at Mount Holyoke College and author of *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism*. He has edited five anthologies of philosophy and film and is film editor for *Philosophy Now*.