

Mulhall, Film, and the Importance of Self-Reflexivity

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In *On Film*, Stephen Mulhall examines whether and in what sense film can be understood as being a form of philosophy. Mulhall grounds his exploration of the relevant issues in the ideas and approach of Ludwig Wittgenstein, examines the *Alien* series of films with this approach, and explains how they exemplify the ways in which film can be understood as doing philosophy. Specifically, he argues that the degree to which a particular film is self-reflexively engaged with the contextual conditions of its own existence—genre, place in film history or director’s filmography, etc.—determines whether a film can be said to be doing philosophy. Thomas Wartenberg and other philosophers of film have objected to Mulhall’s conception, arguing that it is too limited and is essentialist, in seeming contradiction to Wittgensteinian ideas. I will show that these concerns are justified, and will argue that Mulhall misconceives of the nature and importance of self-reflexivity in film and philosophy and that, in doing so, he creates a confused picture of the philosophical status and possibilities of film.

First, important to note is that he differentiates himself from other philosophers of film by rejecting the notion that the principal contribution of film to philosophy is that it has the capacity to illustrate certain philosophical issues and texts. Philosophers who hold the latter view include Thomas Wartenberg and Christopher Falzon, both of which defend the philosophical significance of film as being a function of its ability to illuminate, illustrate, and argue for various ideas and perspectives through visual images (Falzon, 1-12). On Mulhall’s view, such a conception diminishes what he sees as film’s capacity to truly do philosophy, to “reflect upon and evaluate views and arguments” in a serious and systematic manner “in just the ways that philosophers do” (4). From his perspective, for film to merely illustrate philosophical ideas is simply not enough to understand it as doing the kind of rigorous, original philosophical work which he sees film as being capable of accomplishing.

Such a discussion of the philosophical capabilities of film naturally leads into questions about the nature of film as a kind of text, and of possible methodologies and theoretical systems by which we should go about reading films and deriving philosophical ideas and arguments from them. Mulhall's basic understanding of these issues is heavily influenced by the philosopher of film Stanley Cavell, who himself was greatly influenced by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. One of the most important aspects of Mulhall's approach influenced by Wittgenstein is his rejection of rigid theoretical systems that determine our understanding of a film's significance. He sees such film theories as simplifying the meaning of specific films and serving only to confirm the theory under which the film was viewed and interpreted; such an approach effectively suggests that "the film itself has no say in what we are to make of it" (8). Instead, Mulhall advocates Wittgenstein's idea of "looking, not thinking," that is, of attending to particular details of specific films in order to understand what, if any, philosophical ideas a film may be representing.

Given that a focus upon reading the significance of specific details of particular films is the core of Mulhall's approach, the next question to consider concerns the way in which we should evaluate the strength of particular readings of films. Mulhall is sensitive to the fear that philosophers can misconstrue a film as saying and arguing for complex ideas that are not actually present in the content of a film, a misrepresentation which could be accomplished through clever, over-intellectualized interpretations. He counters these initial objections by explaining that the strength of his claims about particular films should be based upon whether his readings of the meaning of specific details accords with our own experience of the film. For instance, the reasonableness of his reading of the Voight-Kampff machine in the film *Blade Runner* as a symbolic representation of a movie camera should stand or fall based upon whether the machine

figures into the “structures of significance” established throughout the film in such a way that it makes sense to see it as a representation of a movie camera (134). Mulhall’s emphasis on these “structures of significance,” the contexts established in the film, draws attention to the central Wittgensteinian notion that meaning must be understood within a particular context. Such a context within which meaning can be found is created by a film’s handling of plot, dialogue, visual composition, editing, etc. Therefore, any reading that accurately approaches the truth of a film’s actual philosophical claims must, according to Mulhall, consider the way particular details acquire meaning within the contexts established within the film.

Thus, the common thread that emerges in Mulhall’s conception of film as philosophy is his emphasis on the importance of context, which brings us to his controversial understanding of the nature and importance of self-reflexivity. Self-reflexive qualities include any aspect of a film which seems to comment upon the conditions of that film’s existence, i.e., any of the contexts within which a film exists. These possible contexts include (but are not limited to) a film’s genre, series, place in film history, or place in a particular writer or director’s career. Mulhall believes that a film’s reflection upon these conditions of its existence is “particularly demanded of any art within the condition of modernism—in which its own history (its inheritance of conventions, techniques and resources) has become an undismissible problem for it” (7). To clarify, modernism is a broad term that is used by such writers as Mulhall and Peter Childs to describe the movements in literature, history, science, art, and philosophy that began roughly in the late nineteenth century and have continued up to the present day (Childs 1-5); figures typically said to be representative of modernism include Darwin, Freud, Joyce, Marx, and Einstein (37). Importantly, modernist art is characterized by its awareness of the form in which content is conveyed, and of the context in which it is created. For Mulhall, then, film’s existence within the

broadly defined modernist context necessitates that films critically consider the contexts within which they operate when representing philosophical ideas.

Indeed, Mulhall argues that it is precisely this reflection upon the contextual conditions of film's possibility that defines "the way any truly rigorous philosophy must proceed" (7). Mulhall claims that, if philosophy fails to engage self-reflexively with its conditions of possibility, then it would also "fail to demand of itself what it makes it its business to demand of any other discipline with which it presumes to engage" (7); from this perspective, to neglect to critique the structures within which a film puts forth significant ideas is to neglect to understand what must be necessarily understood in any modernist philosophical endeavor, namely, the form in which content is conveyed. That is, given that form and content is inseparable for art produced in a modernist context (Childs 6)—in which film finds itself—Mulhall argues similarly that film must engage self-reflexively with the particular cinematic form (context) in which its content (philosophical ideas) is conveyed.

Considering Mulhall's emphasis on the importance of particular readings of films, we should now turn our attention to the *Alien* films, the discussion of which constitutes his main argument. These four films include *Alien* (1979), *Aliens* (1986), *Alien<sup>3</sup>* (1992), and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), and all center upon a monstrous, virtually indestructible alien species pitted against human beings who attempt to survive against it.

Mulhall sees the bodily features and parasitic mode of reproduction of the alien as being central to understanding the main philosophical idea of these films, which is their exploration of the relation of human identity to embodiment. For instance, Mulhall sees the alien in its exercise of penetrative violence as a representation of masculinity (20). Further, the alien's mode of reproduction can be seen as enacting a sort of horrific forced feminization, of potentially

subjecting everyone to a nightmarish form of intercourse, pregnancy, and birth (20-22). The alien's basic mode of being could thus be understood as raising questions about the nature of sexual identity and, by extension, human identity.

In another sense, the alien and androids in the *Alien* series seem to function as a commentary upon the ways in which scientific and technological advancement alters our understanding of what it means to be human. In these films, human beings are portrayed as dependent upon their various machines and technologies in order to defend themselves and sustain their existence. In this dependence, they have an uneasy and unnatural relationship with these machines that are essentially distinct from their own biological mode of being. In contrast, the alien's silicon body armor and blood that functions as a weapon negates any need for external technologies, and in effect renders its own body as its only essential technology (20). Further, the alien seems to be a perfection of the Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce, disconnected from any need for moral valuation or emotional fulfillment; as Mulhall explains, "The alien's form of life is (just, merely, simply) life, life as such: it is not so much a particular species as the essence of what it means to be a species" (18).

The alien's pure amorality and natural synthesis of biology with technology is mirrored in the android Ash. A scientist who appeared to be human like everyone else, Ash is the perfect model of the scientist as purely rational, objective, and unemotional, "encapsulating a vision of science as essentially amoral or inhuman" (26). As such a human-created product of technological and scientific advancement, Ash poses several questions about the nature of our own sense of what makes us human. That is, both the alien and the android Ash ask us what specific features of our identity make us human: is it our rationality, our ingrained sense of morality and values, our external appearance, our biological constitution?

For Mulhall's argument, what is important to note is that in each subsequent *Alien* film the role of the android changes, indicating one type of self-reflexive engagement evident in the series. For instance, the android heroically helps Ripley destroy the aliens in the climax to *Aliens*, emotionally attaching us to the android character that continues into *Alien<sup>3</sup>*, and in *Alien: Resurrection* the android is a woman. Such an element is but one of many that points to the nature of these films as a series of sequels, and it is precisely this quality of being a series of sequels that is one of the main reasons why Mulhall chose the *Alien* films as his primary subject, explaining that they are an "exemplary instance of cinematic modernism," in that they make philosophical progress by self-reflexively questioning the conditions of their existence from sequel to sequel (7). Other types of self-reflexive commentary present in the series include the way each director (Ridley Scott, James Cameron, David Fincher, Jean-Pierre Jeunet) self-consciously alters expectations in relation to film genre, and the way each film is thematically linked to other works in each director's career. Mulhall's argument is that each film's treatment of the philosophical relation of human identity to embodiment is developed by such self-reflexive engagement with these contextual conditions of its existence.

In order to evaluate the status of Mulhall's claims, it is necessary to distinguish between two questions: 1) Does Mulhall's reading of the *Alien* films accurately depict the philosophy of the films?, and 2) Is his reading convincing in arguing for the validity of his idea that self-reflexivity is of prime importance for a film to make serious, systematic philosophical progress? First, as to whether or not his reading of the series is accurate, I would argue that his analysis of the *Alien* films is the strongest portion of Mulhall's book. Though certain specific details of his reading are questionable, in general he has shown that the *Alien* films demonstrate a sustained, philosophically significant discussion of what it is that makes us human. His argument succeeds

in large part due to his sustained emphasis on looking at specific details and considering how they acquire significance within each film as a whole. For the most part, he stays within the Wittgensteinian approach that he outlines early in the argument and, in this sense, his argument is strong by virtue of being internally consistent, staying within the framework within which he explains that his argument should be evaluated.

With regards to the second goal, however, I would argue that Mulhall has not successfully shown that self-reflexivity is a necessary feature a film must have in order to make a strong, rigorous, serious contribution to philosophy. First, he never seems to address explicitly what it is that makes a given self-reflexive work of philosophy “serious,” in distinction from philosophy or film that does not comment upon the contextual conditions of its existence. That is, he does not adequately explain why it is necessary for a film to self-reflexively engage with context in order for it to develop a philosophical idea in a sustained, rigorous fashion. On the contrary, it seems fairly evident that many important works of philosophy are not actively engaged with the contextual conditions of their existence, yet we still consider them to have made meaningful, serious contributions to philosophy.

Some philosophers of film, like Thomas Wartenberg, have critiqued Mulhall on the grounds that his conception of film as philosophy is too limited, and is essentialist in nature (Wartenberg 38). I would agree, as he seems to posit self-reflexive film as the only adequate way in which we can evaluate film as doing the “kind of serious work philosophers do.” In doing so, Mulhall seems to have defined an essential, necessary condition for a film to be considered truly philosophical.

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(Wartenberg 38). I would agree, as he seems to posit self-reflexive film as the only adequate way in which we can evaluate film as doing the “kind of serious work philosophers do.” In doing so, Mulhall seems to have defined an essential, necessary condition for a film to be considered truly philosophical; in turn, such an essentialist perspective contradicts Wittgenstein’s core concept of “family-resemblances,” an idea which is intertwined with his notion that meaning must be understood in context (Wittgenstein 67). That is, Wittgenstein’s argument for deriving meaning from within specific contexts follows from his idea of “language-games,” which is that the meaning of a word is dependent upon its use in particular contexts, rather than by reference to some metaphysical “essence” that defines its absolute meaning independent of context (23). Thus, such an essentialist view is inconsistent with the Wittgensteinian foundation upon which many of Mulhall’s ideas rely.

A third issue is that Mulhall creates a narrow conception of film as philosophy. This narrow view results in his dismissal of the philosophically significant power of films to illustrate ideas, create thought experiments, and make philosophical arguments apart from self-reflexive engagement. He particularly seems to downgrade the philosophical worth of illustration. As Wartenberg argues, illustration is often an integral feature to philosophical argumentation and should not be assumed to play a weak, secondary role in every philosophical argument (41-43). Two prominent examples of this in the history of philosophy would be Plato’s cave, which greatly aids our ability to comprehend and conceptualize his argument for the existence of the Forms, and Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, which enables us to understand what exactly Wittgenstein means by “ways of seeing” (Wartenberg 36). Thus, it is clearly misguided to dismiss illustrations in film as not being a serious philosophical activity.

Since Mulhall believes that the strength of his claims is really seen in readings of particular films, let us now turn our attention to the film *Se7en* in order to show that a film can be clearly philosophical without being particularly self-reflexive. *Se7en* centers upon two detectives, the rookie Mills and the veteran Somerset, and their pursuit of a serial killer who murders his victims as a way of punishing each of the seven deadly sins. Mills dismisses this killer, self-named John Doe, as “a nutcase,” but Somerset is quick to find in his killings a sense of purpose, a meaning, a message that he is preaching. One by one they discover his grisly “sermons,” which include: an obese man forced to eat himself to death (gluttony), a lawyer forced to remove a pound of flesh (greed), and a drug-addicted pedophile forced to stay in his bed for a whole year (sloth).

One possible way of understanding the philosophical significance of *Se7en* is to see it as an extended illustration of the kind of world depicted by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, one in which people no longer live in a real sense by Christian beliefs and valuations. In such a world belief in God is stripped of its significance and power to guide our lives, and thus the majority of people live in such a way that seems to affirm Nietzsche’s diagnosis of modern Western society that “God is dead”. That is, regardless of what we may verbally proclaim as our beliefs, we do not actually live as though those beliefs are true. I will now show how these ideas can be seen in *Se7en* through a close attention to the characters of Mills and Somerset, the portrayal of the attitudes of policemen, and their relation to John Doe and his actions.

Detective Mills is essentially the ultimate man of passion, someone whose every action displays a strong, concerned commitment to the ideal of justice, truly believing in what he does; however, his emotional and impassioned beliefs often lead him to behave recklessly. In contrast, Detective Somerset is a man whose passion has slowly eroded over time, lulled into the attitude

that nothing he can do will be of any major effect in the cause of justice. In opposition to the two detectives, all the other cops in the movie seem to have neither the passion of Mills nor the reason and grasp of value and significance of Somerset. Instead, they are profoundly apathetic about what they do.

As a sort of synthesis of Mills and Somerset, Doe—in his murders—displays an impressive rational attention to detail and precise planning characteristic of Somerset, combined with the kind of impassioned sense of the value of his “work” that defines Mills. Unlike Mills and Somerset, however, his passionate feeling and coldly rational response to the apathetic attitude people have towards sin or wrongdoing is put into action in the form of gruesome killing. The significance of his killings is found in the fact that, though he is a man who believes he is performing a righteous service for the God of Christianity, in reality it could be argued that he has redefined the God of Christianity, such that he ironically reverses the biblically defined values and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In a Nietzschean sense, he has revalued the values of Christianity such that the idea of God’s grace as a sacrificial act of love and forgiveness for sinners through Jesus Christ has been inverted, with the result that “sacrificial love” has been redefined to mean brutally murdering at the cost (to Doe) of his own life and with the benefit of drawing the attention of his (Doe’s) potential followers to the pervasiveness of sin.

If Doe can be seen as representing the perversion of true Christian valuation, one could see *Se7en* as arguing for the idea that the development of a person into such a killer with these distorted values is made possible by the kind of apathetic, largely value-less world that is portrayed in the film. That is, the film seems to suggest that an apathetic neglect of ethical principles leads to a sort of “value vacuum” that must be filled by something, whether that be a revaluation proposed by Nietzsche, a renewed commitment to Christian values as advocated by

Kierkegaard, or the redefinition of Christian values as enacted by Doe. One could further argue that the film suggests a solution to this problem in the form of a recommitment to the value of sacrificial love. In summary, what this analysis of *Se7en* shows is that a film can have a well-developed philosophical perspective and argument without the inclusion of self-reflexive elements.

Mulhall might reply to these criticisms by arguing that it is a mistake to see him as advocating the idea that self-reflexivity is an essential condition for a film to be a serious work of philosophy. What he might actually mean to suggest is that *all* film and philosophy is self-reflexive to some extent or other, as everything necessarily exists within a variety of contexts and must, by its very existence within these contexts, reflect in some way on the contextual conditions of its existence. Because film exists in the condition of modernism, in which form and content come to be inseparable, the degree to which a film engages self-reflexively with its conditions of existence determines the extent to which it can make rigorous philosophical progress.

Similarly, Mulhall might respond to the objection that his conception of film as philosophy is limited by arguing that it only appears so if you have misunderstood him as suggesting that self-reflexivity is an essential condition for true philosophy. Again, the importance of self-reflexivity from his perspective is that it determines the philosophical rigor of a given film, rather than the misunderstood idea that it limits what “true philosophy” is by imposing an essential condition upon it. Instead, he argues that to illustrate without an active self-reflexive engagement is not sufficient for a film to contribute a worthwhile contribution to philosophy. Thus, if a film lacks reflection on the nature of the film medium, genre, or any other contextual condition, then it merely illustrates ideas and disregards the contextual structures, its

form, that is necessarily intertwined with its ideas given its existence in the condition of modernism.

Mulhall might also note Wartenberg's discussion of the three different conceptions of philosophy in order to defend himself against the charge that his ideas about the importance of self-reflexivity entail a limited view of film as philosophy. These three conceptions include: 1) The idea that philosophy is a discipline which attempts to understand a small number of "eternal questions," examples of which include inquiries into the nature of reality, ethics, our ability to gain true knowledge, etc.; 2) The idea of philosophy as a sort of "meta-science" that asks questions of other academic disciplines, examining their various presuppositions and assumptions; and 3) The notion of philosophy as methodological, which resists defining philosophy by its subject matter but rather emphasizes the methods of philosophy, such as the argument, counterexample, and thought experiment (Wartenberg 30). In contrast to Wartenberg's view that Mulhall's conception of film as philosophy is limited, these three different conceptions of philosophy actually illuminate the fact that Mulhall's position is the most comprehensive. To explain, one could understand Mulhall's conception of film as philosophy as uniting Wartenberg's three conceptions of philosophy by virtue of the way in which self-reflexivity figures into his account. That is, Mulhall argues that film's capacity to tackle "eternal questions" –like the relation of human identity to embodiment—(1) is directly tied to the degree to which a film is self-reflexive, the degree to which it considers the contextual conditions of its own existence (2); in reflecting upon the conditions of their own existence, films locate themselves within particular contexts, one of which is a methodological context (3). The idea here is that each of these conceptions of philosophy is united by virtue of the role context can be seen to play. To clarify, the eternal questions of conception 1) must be asked and

answered by a consideration of the relevant contexts within which meaningful answers can be found, the kind of consideration that constitutes the task of self-reflection; conception 2) is specifically concerned with asking questions about underlying assumptions and guiding methodologies of ways of thinking, which is the very definition of self-reflexive questioning of contextual conditions; and conception 3) puts the focus upon considering philosophy as a method, and in doing so highlights the importance of understanding a methodological context, an understanding of which is made clear by self-reflexive examination. Thus, Mulhall would argue that his emphasis on self-reflexivity actually unites these three conceptions, resulting in a holistic vision of philosophy, rather than a limited one.

In *Se7en*, Mulhall might counter my argument that it is not particularly self-reflexive—and need not be self-reflexive in order to convey ideas strongly—by drawing attention to the importance of understanding its place in the filmography of director David Fincher, particularly with regard to the thematic links between his films, and of its place within the horror, neo-noir, and thriller genres. First, from a consideration of Fincher's 90's films, those being *Alien*<sup>3</sup> (1992), *Se7en* (1995), *The Game* (1997), and *Fight Club* (1999), a central concern that emerges is the role of religious belief and its relationship with ethical valuation and meaning formation in the modern world: In *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, prisoners are preached a form of Christian fundamentalism on their prison planet, which seems to function as a way in which they can believe their lives have a purpose; in *The Game*, a depressed, wealthy businessman discovers purpose in his empty life when he plays an elaborate game, in which he is forced to confront painful memories of his father's suicide; in *Fight Club*, men said to be part of a father-less "generation raised by women" revolt against their meaningless consumer-culture-driven lives, and in doing so find a uniting sense of purpose (Mulhall 94-103). Though it seems as if these characters feel as though "God is

dead,” there seems to be in each of these films a fundamental yearning for purpose and meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, suggesting that the search for God remains a central feature of the modern world. What this shows is that Fincher’s films display a unity of thematic content and ideas that are developed through self-reflexive commentary from film to film.

Second, Mulhall might also wish to draw our attention to another contextual condition in which *Se7en* exists, namely that of its being a neo-noir detective thriller, with occasional forays into the horror genre. When viewing *Se7en* as an exercise in these genres, one can see the important ways in which it seems to comment upon this contextual condition. In particular, we might see *Se7en* as self-reflexively responding to its major precursor within the noir and horror genres, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Like *Se7en*, *Lambs* also features a highly intelligent serial killer, the cannibal psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter, whose mind and perspective we are invited into. As in *Se7en*, the lines between and the very definition of good and evil are blurred, as Lecter aids an F.B.I. trainee, Clarice Starling, in the hunt for another serial killer, known as Buffalo Bill for taking the skins of his female victims. Not only is Lecter instrumental in the ultimate capture of Buffalo Bill and saving a potential victim, but he is presented in a sympathetic light as the victim of the generally despicable Dr. Chilton, a man who, as the esteemed head of the mental institution holding Lecter, tries to take credit for Starling’s insights into the Buffalo Bill case that she gains through Lecter. Among these insights Lecter shares with Starling is that the fundamental thing which drives Buffalo Bill to his murders is that he covets, he envies—also John Doe’s sin—and this revelation ultimately leads Starling to the killer. Buffalo Bill’s envy is grounded in his desire for bodily transformation into a woman, which ultimately comes to be seen as a metaphor for the desire for spiritual transformation in a Christian sense, suggested through the employment of religious symbols and imagery. What is

important to derive from this brief look at *The Silence of the Lambs* is that it shares with *Se7en* an interest in examining the status of Christian moral valuations in the modern world. By understanding the nature of this shared concern, we can understand the ways in which the two films are similar and different in this regard, and we will have a better grasp on the philosophical significance of each film.

In summary, it is clear that the philosophy of *Se7en* cannot be evaluated in isolation from its self-reflexive qualities, and Mulhall's position could be defended as being a comprehensive view of film as philosophy, one which only appears to be essentialist and limited if his notion of self-reflexivity is misunderstood.

Although the above defense of Mulhall seems to have answered the objection that his view is essentialist in nature, I would argue that it has merely reconstructed his position so as to be essentialist in a different manner. That is, in his argument that self-reflexivity is a necessity for a given film to be strong and rigorous, he simply asserts self-reflexivity as being an essential condition for philosophical strength and rigor. At the heart of this mistake seems to be a fundamentally confused view of self-reflexivity, one in which Mulhall has conflated a film's necessary existence within particular contexts with a film's actively commenting upon and illuminating the nature of its contextual conditions. This leads to his mistaken idea that every film actively reflects upon its context to some degree or other, and that by reflecting in this way the philosophical ideas in a film gain in potency. This is simply not the case, since many films, arguably including *Se7en*, are not actively engaged with self-reflexive commentary on their contextual conditions.

Two questions should be considered to evaluate this reading of *Se7en*: 1) Is the film self-reflexive in the ways in which it has been understood it to be?; and 2) Do these self-reflexive



qualities determine the philosophical rigor of the film's possible ideas and arguments? First, I would argue that what this Mulhallian reading of *Se7en* identifies as instances of self-reflexivity is questionable. Specifically, this reading seems to conflate *Se7en*'s featuring of elements and themes from *The Silence of the Lambs* and other David Fincher films with its actively, self-reflexively commenting upon the contextual conditions of genre and place within a filmography. The example given surely shows that Fincher understands the thematic and generic content of his films in a precise way, and may also demonstrate that he was aware of and inspired by *Se7en*'s precursor, *The Silence of the Lambs*. There is a difference, however, between demonstrating a consciousness of generic conventions and actively, self-reflexively commenting upon those conditions in a meaningful sense, a commentary significant enough to warrant the idea that it is a necessary condition for the film to be considered philosophically rigorous.

The second question that must be considered is whether the consideration of these supposedly self-reflexive features of *Se7en* yields insights that are necessary for evaluating its philosophical rigor, and whether such possibly self-reflexive elements are what determine the degree to which a film such as this can be considered philosophically rigorous. If we consider the "self-reflexive" qualities of *Se7en* to be the ways in which it locates itself in and plays with the various contexts in which it exists, then such a consideration of context is indeed necessary for understanding the precise nature of its philosophical perspective. However, though this reading of *Se7en* illuminates the subtleties and true complexity of the film's perspective, it does not successfully show that the film should be evaluated as philosophically rigorous or weakly reasoned based upon whether it demonstrates a consciousness of context or is actually self-reflexive.

To explain this distinction between a film's demonstrating "contextual consciousness," as in *Se7en*, and a film's being truly self-reflexive as Mulhall wishes to assert, let's consider *Unforgiven* (1992), a film that does seem to be self-reflexive. *Unforgiven* is a Western in which a man named William Munny is hired by a group of prostitutes to kill the men who raped and cut one of them. Accompanying him is a brash young man who claims to have killed many people before without batting an eye, but who in fact, after killing one of the men, reveals how disturbed he is at killing someone for the first time. Also accompanying him is a longtime friend who, in the course of their mission, is brutally beaten and killed. What is important is that the central idea of *Unforgiven*, the basic reason for just about every story point and execution of each scene, is to comment upon the Western genre and the values it typically highlights. As is evident both from watching the film and from director Clint Eastwood's public comments about the movie, *Unforgiven* is meant to subvert Western genre conventions of heroism and casual/unaffected violence, such that the actions of William Munny—vengeance that might have been portrayed as heroic in traditional westerns—are revealed to be ugly and damaging for himself spiritually, and unredeemably destructive to those whom he kills. In short, *Unforgiven* is a film that exists to self-reflexively comment upon the Western genre.

In contrast, *Se7en* is a film that features elements from other neo-noir, thriller, and horror genre films, but unlike *Unforgiven*, *Se7en* neither subverts genre conventions at its every plot point, nor does understanding it depend on an understanding of the genres in which it exists. That is, a basic understanding of prior western films seems to be necessary for the significance of what Eastwood is attempting to convey in *Unforgiven*, whereas in *Se7en* there does not seem to be a need for any prior knowledge of noir or horror film history to understand the way in which the actions of Doe could be seen as reflecting ideas in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Of course, eventually such an analysis of each film breaks down, and whether *Se7en* should be considered as being merely “contextually conscious” or truly “self-reflexive” could ultimately be understood as being a matter of degree, with the extent to which it is one or the other being a function of the success of a more specific reading of each film. This is debatable, but such debate is ultimately beside the point. What is important is that the degree to which the film’s philosophical perspective is well-developed and rigorous is not dependent upon its self-reflexive aspects, upon its being self-reflexive to any degree. In order to understand why such a notion is wrong, consider the way in which we would evaluate the argumentative strength of a newspaper editorial. It seems obvious that our evaluation of its logical or philosophical strength should be determined by the rigor of the argument it makes, rather than by the degree to which it demonstrates a consciousness or active reflection upon its contextual conditions (readership, its nature as an editorial, etc.). Like this article, *Se7en*, or any other text, the success of argumentation and significance of ideas put forth does not hinge upon an active—or passive—exercise of self-reflexivity as Mulhall seems to assert.

We might see one source of Mulhall’s mistake as being his attachment to the notion that film is a necessarily modernist form of art, and that its being modernist requires it to engage with its contextual conditions or form. One might respond that it is just a given that film exists in what is understood to be the roughly defined modernist period, and thus by that token film is necessarily modernist and as a result inherits the need to reflect upon historical conventions and contexts. On the one hand this view is unproblematic, reflecting a generally accepted assumption. On the other hand, however, if film’s being modernist—with all of the trappings that go with being modernist—is as essential for Mulhall’s argument as I am understanding it to be, then he should explain in a more clear fashion the fact that he is making this assumption. Even if

he acknowledges the assumption that film is modernist, however, there still remains the issue that his understanding of film as philosophy is so strictly wedded to and defined by its existence within a contextual condition (modernism) that cannot itself be strictly defined. Thus, if Mulhall's argument rests upon the idea that film is modernist, which assumes particular essential qualities that define modernism, then it seems he is just making the mistake of supporting yet another form of essentialism.

We might see his derivation of the approach of Wittgenstein as another way in which we might further explain Mulhall's error, in that he finds Wittgenstein's self-reflexive commentary on the history of philosophical progress as the model for meaningful philosophy. That is, in his elevation of the importance of self-reflexivity, it seems that he has implicitly suggested that the self-reflexive approach of such philosophers as Wittgenstein and Nietzsche is the best for making philosophical progress. To explain, consider the nature of the contrast between a philosopher like John Searle and his development of the "Chinese Room" argument, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In this comparison one might see the *Philosophical Investigations* as the ultimate self-reflexive work of philosophy, given its unceasing preoccupation with the nature of philosophizing itself, its obsession with diagnosing the conditions of philosophical error; in this sense, the *Investigations* is a particularly modernist work of philosophy, given its focus upon the method or form in which philosophy is done. In contrast, one can see from John Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment, in which he argues that our brains do not operate like digital computers because they have semantics as well as a syntax, that John Searle does not engage self-reflexively with the form of his argumentation; despite this lack of engagement, however, many have found his argument to be a rigorous, well-developed, important contribution to philosophy. Thus, Mulhall's misunderstanding of the

importance of self-reflexivity seems to be rooted in assumptions about film as being necessarily modernist, and about the value of the kind of self-reflexive philosophy practiced by Wittgenstein, on whom he bases his own philosophical approach.

Despite these problems, Mulhall certainly has made many contributions to the ongoing discussion as to the precise nature of film as a kind of philosophy. In particular, his readings of *Alien* and other films demonstrate an astute attention to detail and illuminate the ideas of these films in a way that emphasizes their philosophical complexity. Further, his work manages to put forward many useful insights into the nature of philosophizing, and into the ways in which philosophical meaning can be communicated through films. And though he misunderstands self-reflexivity and accords it too much importance, there is no doubt that the contextual considerations Mulhall has highlighted are highly valuable to the study of film as philosophy.

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