

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## With Friends Like These ... or: How Not to Respond to the Imposition Objection

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**Abstract:** Many analytically trained philosophers argue that for a movie to do philosophy it must contain arguments, or develop thought experiments, or provide counterexamples, otherwise whatever philosophy might seem to be in it is just the viewer's projection. Most of the analytic responses to what Tom Wartenburg calls 'the imposition objection' (IO), including his own, share an assumption I argue is unfounded, namely, that the traditional philosophical text is the standard by which we should judge the philosophical status of anything, including movies. I argue that tethering movies' philosophy *bona fides* to standard philosophical works actually invites IO, absent a known philosophically minded creator behind the production. Accepting the argument-centric written text as the standard also begs the question

about the nature of philosophy, and discounts (or worse) the philosophical powers of movies and other media; such a position also impoverishes the many and complex ways philosophy deepens our understanding of the world, of others, and of ourselves. I offer a liberating example in my account of Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* on its own philosophical terms.

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Readers will soon see that I take seriously the 'without theory' in the special issue journal title.

Many philosophers outside the Anglo-American analytic tradition are likely to find questions about *whether* movies can do philosophy puzzling; they might start instead with questions about *how* a particular movie does some particular philosophy. I will use the word 'movies' throughout because what I argue applies to film or digital productions, (and indeed much of what I have argued could also apply to some TV). Analytically trained philosophers worry that when it comes to mainstream Hollywood movies at least the viewer is the main or only source of whatever philosophy might be found in them, a variation of what Thomas Wartenberg calls the Imposition Objection (IO) in his seminal 2007 book *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wartenberg is the friend in question, and he is not alone. While I do not think that Wartenberg is an enemy of the view that movies can screen philosophy – on the contrary – I do think, and I will argue that, the way he responds to IO concedes too much to the enemy in question, those who think movies cannot and do not screen philosophy.

Wartenberg agrees with Imposition Objectors who specify that only creator-oriented interpretations of a film can justify the claim that the film itself is philosophical.<sup>2</sup> And he tries to show that viewers can provide creator-oriented interpretations of films without attributing philosophical knowledge or intention directly to the filmmakers. Still, to avoid the philosophical disenfranchisement of film *someone* has to have that philosophical knowledge to attribute to its creators.

Wartenberg argues elegantly that, to take just a few examples from the book, John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* presents its own version of Nietzsche's criticism of Hegel's conception of history by examining one small slice of history through a fictional story about the so-called Wild West.<sup>3</sup> And that *The Third Man* supplements the Aristotelian notion of *phronêsis* by showing the role that moral vicissitudes play in Holly Martins' moral development; that these and other films, in short, to use Wartenberg's preferred verb, screen philosophy.<sup>4</sup> But to show that a movie can meet IO this way is not to dispose of the objection; one even could say that responses like these give life to the objection by implicitly accepting that one must justify the view that movies can screen philosophy, rather than the other way around,

and by giving accounts of the movies that in every case liberally draw on professional philosophical knowledge few viewers have. Wartenberg consistently tethers movies' philosophical merits rather narrowly to well-known texts and ideas, so much so that – I hate to say it – his own analyses thus often seem to invite IO. Though he rejects the view that any of the movies' makers knew or had to have known about the sources, still, the implication is that the way to establish that the philosophy is IN the movies, rather than projected ON TO the movies by the trained viewer – us – is to identify known and text-based philosophical arguments, concepts, figures, or lines of thought in them. The implication is that if we *cannot* make a compelling link between what is in the movie to what is in a canonical text then we must simply be projecting the philosophical content, and the movie is not screening philosophy. Wartenberg's dilemma, in short, is that the most natural way to show that a movie is genuinely philosophical is to talk about it in a way that invites IO. First, he tacitly accepts the presumption that if we cannot identify a philosophical agent behind a work, intentionally doing philosophy, then there is a problem with taking the work to be properly philosophical. What Wartenberg offers as an alternative to positing a philosopher behind – or in front of – the camera is the next best thing: a philosophically sophisticated account of what is in the contested work that matches up with the philosophical work we find in the great works of philosophy. But this method of certifying movies' philosophical *bona fides* ends up circling the wagons around the traditional disciplinary boundaries of philosophy rather than expanding our notions about how philosophy can be done, where it can be found, and by whom.

Wartenberg's interpretations are what you might call weakly creator-oriented – they posit a meaning that the filmmaker(s) could have intended.<sup>5</sup> But what is the force of that 'could'? '... this does not entail that John Ford actually had to have had Hegel or Nietzsche in mind. All that is necessary *is that he was thinking about the philosophical view that we can trace back to these great philosophers and that it makes sense to think of him as attempting to respond to one and defend another in the specific context of the Hollywood western.*'<sup>6</sup>

*All that is necessary?* This strikes me as going about the task of responding to IO exactly backwards. The 'we' refers to philosophers and students of philosophy, so on Wartenberg's view the philosophical character of a film is likely to be understandable only by an audience of trained philosophers, a troubling and surely false view. Second, and equally problematic, is Wartenberg's identification of philosophy with (the) great philosophers of the canon, and a narrow conception of their methodology: it is okay if Ford did not have Nietzsche or Nietzschean lines of argument in mind, as long as some viewer did and can imagine that Ford might have. Put a crowd of smart, ordinary people in the theater who are ignorant about the history of philosophy and

they are unlikely to come up with readings of the film that can be traced to the great philosophers or the great philosophical lines of argument.

Wartenberg's analyses show that he accepts the terms of the objector. But why concede the necessary condition that *someone* has to provide a creator-oriented interpretation – if only by contingent attribution to the filmmaker(s) – of a movie in order to certify it as philosophical? And why think that the contingent attribution has to be linked to great philosophers or great works of philosophy? At the very least to start with even a conditional link to the creators' mental states begs many interesting questions about the nature of philosophy, what methodologies we might pursue and how and who might engage in the practice.

I do not tie movies' philosophical power to their ability to advance arguments by familiar figures, rather to their capacity to *show* us, in often gripping ways, things about the world, other people, and ourselves – and the many metaphysical, ethical, and epistemological problems in our relations to them, in complex and nuanced ways. The philosophical work in them need not be original, or unique to the work or genre, two requirements we surely do not impose on traditional philosophical work. It need not be argument driven. It is sufficient that the reasonably thoughtful viewer can plausibly reconstruct a compelling account of what the movie is doing philosophically. The evidence is on the screen.<sup>7</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that the anxieties about the question of where the philosophical themes come from are not legitimate. But it is a mistake to try to answer those worries at the expense of what is distinctively interesting and powerful about the way movies do what they do with ideas. And let us also not just focus on movies that deliver arguments in neat packages tied up in a bow. We should instead begin by asking what we want the practice of philosophy to do for us. Catherine Elgin has argued powerfully that other artistic genres such as fiction, models, paintings, and works of music can, among other things, move us to appreciate multiple points of view, chronicle moral development (including decline), signal shifting allegiances, effect refinements in sensory discrimination, activate dormant systems of categories, provoke discovery, incite investigation, and aid self-knowledge by disclosing unexamined assumptions.<sup>8</sup> Surely movies can deliver amply these rich philosophical goods.

I turn now hopefully to Christopher Nolan's 2002 taut noir thriller *Insomnia*. How does it stack up philosophically? How I answer that question will matter to my case, and whether my account can be philosophically adequate without relying on philosophically mainstream figures or schools of thought. I chose a popular movie by a well-known director (though most of Nolan's fame followed this, his second, feature, a remake of a 1997 Norwegian movie) because I am also interested in exploring the role movies play in our wider philosophical culture – philosophical work being done and consumed outside the academy.

It is a murder mystery, so it is hardly original to say that it depicts a search for knowledge – whodunit? – including stumbling blocks and twists and turns and a fair amount of blood along the way. But in a sharp Nolan move, before long two other deaths become part of the primary murder mystery, and several related quests for knowledge are superimposed on the main one unfolding.

The movie opens with a thrilling, genuinely awesome, tracking shot from a helicopter flying over some jagged snowy mountains in what we later learn is a remote part of Alaska. The music is also darkly majestic, one of the many interesting inversions the movie plays with, including not least the stark and glaring daylight in which the noir themes unfold, and the casting of Robin Williams in his first role as a tightly wound, deranged miscreant. The shot cuts to the protagonist, legendary detective Will Dormer (Al Pacino) – already looking exhausted – and his partner Hap (Martin Donovan) on their way to a backwater town, Nightmute, to investigate the murder of a teenage girl, Kay Connell (death #1). They're met at the station by a local rookie cop Ellie Burr (Hilary Swank) who has long idolised Dormer, and who knows every detail about his high profile, much vaunted career. Dormer and Hap have been shipped out of their home base in Los Angeles because a murder case they had closed there (death #2) some years earlier is under investigation by Internal Affairs for evidence tampering, which we are given reason to believe Dormer at least is indeed guilty of (as Hap knows) as early as in the opening credits, which it is fair to say echoes *Macbeth*. Throughout the movie, we hear Dormer's rationalisations in fragments about evidence tampering built around the conviction that they had put away a certainly guilty, vicious man who posed an ongoing horrifying threat to children. But on their first night in Nightmute, Hap reveals to Dormer that he has let Internal Affairs know that he was ready to cut a deal and come clean about his knowledge of the cover up of the evidence tampering. If Hap does so, all their cases will be investigated and likely overturned: thus all of Dormer's life's work is on the line, along with his ego and his reputation, not to mention the likelihood that convictions of the vicious criminals they had captured and had tried and convicted would be overturned.

Back to death #1: quite early on the investigators figured out (by good old fashioned, if urban and sophisticated, detective work) who murdered the young woman: Walter Finch, a sinister obsessive played by Robin Williams. The cops and detectives lure him to a remote area near where they think the murder occurred by planting some of the murdered girl's belongings, and in a frantic chase scene through dense mist and fog Finch (we rightly presume) fires a shot in Dormer's direction, a local cop beside him is hit (but not mortally wounded), and Dormer rushes out into the fog in the direction the shot came from, sees a shape and returns fire, using a backup personal weapon when his duty malfunctions, only to discover when he gets closer to the victim that he has shot the now dying Hap (death #3). Hap is alive long enough to express

dumb horror at Dormer's having shot him, and though Dormer denies that he did it intentionally, Hap dies not believing him.

When the local cops get to Dormer and Hap they also assume that Finch shot Hap, and Dormer says nothing to set them straight (before they got there, we saw Dormer struggling mightily to figure out what to do). Even though we viewers had seen, that is, been shown, what Dormer sees when he shot, namely, a shape in the fog with no visible identifying features, Dormer realises that because the evidence for evidence tampering in Los Angeles is high, and especially because Internal Affairs knows that Hap was about to implicate Dormer by confessing to the cover up of evidence tampering, this shooting will look very bad indeed.

Later that night we see Dormer gruesomely (by shooting an animal carcass), again tampering with evidence by replacing the bullet currently in evidence (from his personal weapon) with the newly shot one (that Finch might have fired), so the bullets will confirm the story that Finch was Hap's shooter.

While the most urgent pursuit on the ground is still to capture Finch, as Dormer closes in on that goal, his other goals of figuring out whether the tampering was justified, and, especially, in what ways he was responsible for Hap's death, both increase in intensity and recede further from his grasp. The more he introspects the more elusive his own motives become. Finch has figured this out; he also knows what a toll the endless days – and glaringly white nights – have taken on Dormer, and he starts to call him in his hotel room in the middle of the night to have creepily companionable talks. While we are in a position to judge Finch as an insane killer and Dormer as merely disturbed, Finch's conviction that they are in some ways relevantly alike stirs up an ember of fear and doubt in Dormer, fed in part by his insomnia (which we have reason to believe from the opening shot predates the time in *Nightmute*), and in part by the cumulative weight of guilt over Hap's death and the circumstances leading up to it. Finch's insistence on their moral equivalence has confounded him about almost everything, including his own culpability in the Los Angeles case, and in Hap's death.

In the meantime, Ellie has figured out that Finch could not have shot Hap and that Dormer must have. But she trusts his judgement and experience enough to assume that it was an accident by inference to the best, and in this case correct, explanation of why he covered it up. From the moment Dormer shoots Hap – we are at around 26 minutes into the two hour film – the police procedural questions about what anyone knows are overtaken by an investigation into the sub-theme of what kind of cop Dormer really is, whether he has been rationalising the evidence tampering all along, whether there is a difference between his justifications and Finch's, and most importantly, whether there is any hope for knowledge of his own motives that will distinguish them from Finch's. (And certainly also the question whether the ends do justify the means, a crude consequentialism about which the movie takes

an increasingly dim view, showing Dormer's own rationalisations to steadily decline in plausibility even to himself.)

The movie has not only bombarded us with an inventory of the many threats to achieving knowledge even when we are clever, conscientious, highly trained and experienced, and the stakes could not be higher, but it also treats us to a startling discovery about the inaccessibility of some things intuitive common sense might suggest we, of all people, should know: our own motives.

Because Finch knows that Dormer shot Hap, he is also now in a position to end Dormer's career by exposing him, the perfect tool to blackmail Dormer into framing Kay Connell's high school boyfriend for her murder by planting the gun in his house. Dormer instead tries to plant the gun in Finch's apartment, but Finch is one step ahead of him: he retrieves the hidden gun, and carries out the original framing plan himself. With the murderer apparently caught and Dormer unwilling to sacrifice his career to apprehend Finch, Dormer is free to get out of Nightmute. But no amount of rationalisation can justify that tradeoff, and when on his way out of town Dormer gets the news that Ellie is on her way to collect some of the dead girl's letters at Finch's lakeside property, he changes course literally and radically to go to try to prevent Ellie from meeting the same end.

During the gripping battle of wits and shots (and angles) that ensues, Ellie finally asks Dormer if he meant to shoot Hap. He answers that he just doesn't know any more, a stunning revelation.

Dormer and Finch ultimately end up shooting each other at the same time, Finch dies, and Dormer staggers out into the light on the dock where Ellie now has the chance to confront him with the bullet that reveals the truth about who shot Hap, and makes him a death bed offer to get rid of it. His answer: 'Don't lose your way.'

This movie provides us with a case in point of what a movie can do to advance anyone's understanding of several philosophical questions and issues. First, it shows viewers arcs of moral development, both advances and declines in integrity of several of the characters. Second, it plausibly shows viewers that luck can play a morally significant role in our decision making. Third, it indicts means/ends reasoning by showing its inevitable insidious corrupting effects. And finally, it shows us how fragile we agents are in our pursuit of knowledge: everything from acts of nature interfering with our vision (and other senses), to the threat of the distortions from insomnia, to our own complicated motives becoming hard to distinguish from those of an insane, evil killer. It shows how the best possible evidence we have available about what is the case about ourselves and the world, and about what we believe is the case, remains equivocal.

You will notice that in my exposition of the movie never once did I mention 'Descartes', or even try to sneak up on it by uttering 'demons, dreamers, or madmen', all of which play a robust role in the tale. Nor did I link the interpretation to a particular welter of other well-known philosophical views.

I could have. But the point is that I did not have to. They are clear enough in the work to viewers who have never even heard of Descartes. Besides, the movie does more than pursue a Cartesian project with feverish intensity. It takes a different tack by upending Descartes' one sure conclusion about the *cogito* by showing us in many entirely plausible ways how even our own agency can be opaque to us. It also suggests that close third parties (Hap and Ellie) might know us better than we know ourselves. At a larger thematic level the movie is deliberately ambiguous about whether Dormer has gone so far over to the dark side of his rationalisations that he would collude with Finch and sacrifice the murder investigation for the sake of preserving his career. This ambiguity is consistent with what we see of how Dormer comes up with regarding the scheme of planting and concealing evidence: it is not exactly premeditated, but rather fluid and opportunistic, and relies on luck too, a series of reactions to circumstances: we are invited to believe Dormer's manipulation of Finch would have evolved the same way. This series of off-the-cuff reactions eroding moral and professional principles helps dramatise how one's choices can seem to be responses to a maze created by forces outside the self rather than choices that originate wholly in the self.

So what does my reading of *Insomnia* tell us about IO? I hope it reveals that there are a variety of ways to establish whether a movie can do philosophy. It provides a way to go through the horns of the IO objection or Wartenberg's IO-ish response to it by asking instead whether a movie can advance reasonably reflective viewers' understanding of philosophical issues: don't think but look.<sup>9</sup> And I trust my analysis has shown that *Insomnia* takes up with subtlety and sophistication several genuine philosophical questions, and in due course provides a variety of answers to them. Someone might still ask why the things I have pointed out about the movie are to be understood as philosophical. In the spirit of G.E. Moore, I would reply that at this stage of the exchange the critic has the burden of proof backwards and is the one who needs to provide an argument for thinking they are not. On my view philosophy can be brought to us to be considered and practiced in our living rooms, in theaters, in the popular press and social media, and so on, all of which make up something like the modern equivalent of the agora.

We philosophical sophisticates could say that, even so, the philosophical work *Insomnia* does is well trodden ground. I do not think so, not in this interesting, engaging combination, but even if it were, so what? There is freshness and originality here in the expression of the ideas, and while part of their force comes from the particularity of the characters and their circumstances, viewers can nonetheless leave the movie thinking more generally about the intertwining of metaphysical, ethical and epistemological matters, even if they don't know a single one of those terms.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Wartenberg 2007.  
<sup>2</sup>Wartenberg 2007, 26.  
<sup>3</sup>Wartenberg 2007, 5.  
<sup>4</sup>Wartenberg 2007, 84-85.  
<sup>5</sup>Wartenberg 2007, 26.  
<sup>6</sup>Wartenberg 2007, 9.  
<sup>7</sup>Nunan 2017. I once thought that Wartenbergian analyses could be sufficient

to establish that a movie was philosophical; I am now less sure that they are. Their very aggressive ‘translation’ of the cinematic medium into an essentially different genre, text based and rational, leaves out too much of what is distinctively interesting about what movies do.

<sup>8</sup>Elgin 1999, 146-169. Chapter V, ‘The Heart Has its Reasons’.

<sup>9</sup>Wittgenstein 2009.

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