

**CINEMATIC PHILOSOPHY:
EXPERIENTIAL AFFIRMATION IN *MEMENTO***

Rafe McGregor

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) meets both conditions of Paisley Livingston's bold thesis of cinema as philosophy. I introduce the bold thesis and delineate my argument in terms of Aaron Smuts' clarifications of Livingston's conditions in §1. §2 explains how *Memento* meets the results condition, which is concerned with the nature of the philosophical content, by employing a development of Berys Gaut's conception of narrational confirmation that I designate *experiential affirmation*. In §3, I show that experiential affirmation is a function of cinematic depiction and therefore meets Livingston's means condition, which is concerned with the capacities of the medium or art form. I address two objections to my argument in §4: that it collapses into Thomas Wartenberg's moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position; and Smuts' claim that the audience enacts the philosophy, not the film. I conclude with a brief commentary on the implications of my discussion of *Memento* for the broader relationship between film and philosophy.

1. Introduction

There is a bewildering array of topics at the intersection of cinematic art and philosophical inquiry, and a variety of approaches within each topic. The confusion arising from the multitude of approaches to a multitude of issues is reflected in the nomenclature employed to link philosophy and film: philosophy *of* film, philosophy *in* film, philosophy *on* film,

philosophy *through* film, film *as* philosophy, *film-philosophy*, and *filmosophy* – amongst others. The issue is further complicated by the different meanings attached to both “film” and “philosophy” in the context of the exploration of the relationship between them. I shall take *film* to refer to the art form of moving photorealistic pictures (whether photochemical or digital in origin), *a film* to be a work of cinema, and *cinematic art* as synonymous with the art form of film;¹ and my claim is that *Memento* can meet both criteria of cinema as *analytic* philosophy in the bold thesis.² Livingston states:

What I am calling the bold thesis is a conjunction of strong claims with regard to the means and results conditions – namely, the idea that some films can make historically innovative and independent contributions to philosophy by means exclusive to the cinematic medium or art form.³

He identifies the two conditions as follows:

(1) a conception of which sorts of *exclusive* capacities of the cinematic medium (or, alternatively, the cinematic art form)⁴ are said to make a special contribution to philosophy, and (2) claims about the nature of the latter contribution (such as strong contention about its originality, significance, or independence). As (1) pertains to means and (2) pertains to the end product, we can call these the *means* and *results* conditions, respectively.⁵

Smuts makes the following observation on the means condition:⁶

the general spirit of this qualification is to distinguish between filmed presentations of philosophical debates, discussions, or arguments, and other more interesting candidates.⁷

Smuts warns against the ‘*super bold*’ thesis, which holds that film can make a unique – rather than original – contribution to philosophical inquiry, such as Gilles Deleuze’s notion of

cinema's ability to re-conceptualize time and movement.⁸ Although the features of *Memento* which I discuss suggest that the film does indeed do philosophy in a unique manner, I shall argue for the weaker thesis presented by Smuts: 'that some films can make philosophical contributions by paradigmatic cinematic means.'⁹ Smuts notes that the purpose of the results condition 'is to help distinguish between the mere illustration of a preexisting philosophical concept and the presentation of a new idea.'¹⁰ The results condition has two elements, innovation and independence, and Smuts is once again wary of setting standards which are too demanding: the innovation requirement is not that 'all philosophical contributions made by films must be innovative, but that in principle films should be capable of innovation.'¹¹ Most philosophy lacks innovation in the sense of making an original contribution to the discipline and there is thus no need to demand this feature of film, as long as film has the potential to make such a contribution. The independence element of Livingston's thesis is a requirement that the philosophical contribution is not dependent upon a particular interpretation or philosophical context, i.e. imported into the film by the audience.¹² I could, e.g., offer an interpretation of George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) based on Martin Heidegger's conception of authenticity, particularly *being-towards-death*. Even if my interpretation provided fresh insights into the film, I would clearly be imposing Heidegger's philosophy on the work, whereas a similar interpretation of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is less likely to be regarded as importation and more likely exegesis.¹³ I shall argue that *Memento* makes an innovative and independent contribution to philosophical knowledge by experiential affirmation, a means which is paradigmatic of the cinematic art form.

2. Experiential Affirmation

In “Telling Stories: Narration, Emotion, and Insight in *Memento*”,¹⁴ Gaut sets out to show how *Memento*'s narration conditions cognitive and emotional responses. He does not explicitly enter the cinematic philosophy debate as his concern is with the power of narration, and his paper an examination of the artistic properties of *Memento*'s narration. Nonetheless, the notion of *experiential confirmation* which he advances indicates the manner in which at least one film can meet both the means and results condition of Livingston's bold thesis. Gaut distinguishes between narrative (what is presented) and narration (how it is presented),¹⁵ and selects *Memento* as his example for two reasons. First, its narration is extremely complex. I do not have space to explain the narrative structure of the film, suffice to say that it is far more intricate than reversed chronology.¹⁶ Despite this complexity, however, the attempt to structure the events in the correct sequence is ultimately rewarding and enlightening, unlike a film such as Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).¹⁷

Second, the DVD release of the film contains an Easter Egg, which allows the work to be viewed in chronological order. Gaut employs the contrast between the original and chronological versions – which have the same narrative, but different narration – in order to focus on the artistic properties of *Memento*'s narration.¹⁸ In the course of discussing these properties, Gaut mentions *partial confirmation*: the narration of *Memento* conditions responses

by providing partial confirmation of the cognitive claims about the actual world that are explicit or implicit in the narrative, and thereby also providing partial justification for the emotional responses grounded on those claims.¹⁹

Gaut maintains that assertions about the real world are embedded in the narrative and focuses on three:

- (1) *memory is unreliable,*

- (2) *memory is partly determined by one's aims, and*
- (3) *memory is essential to understanding.*²⁰

The narration of the film provides partial confirmation of these claims, which he calls 'narrational confirmation'.²¹ Gaut then offers evidence for the narrational confirmation of assertions (1) to (3).

Regarding (1), he claims that the film actually confirms the unreliability of memory through its narration.²² *Memento's* narration is so complex that remembering the sequence in which the events are presented and the actual sequence of the events is extremely difficult. This may seem unconvincing to someone who has not watched the work, but Gaut cites both Christopher Nolan's experience of not always knowing which scene is next²³ and his own;²⁴ the former is based on more than a thousand viewings, the latter on more than thirty. On a mere dozen viewings, I am in complete agreement, and Gaut's claim that *Memento* is 'one of the most narratively complex artworks ever produced' is no exaggeration.²⁵

Gaut fails to demonstrate the operation of narrational confirmation for (2).²⁶ The impaired memory of the protagonist, Leonard (Guy Pearce), is indeed explained by his aims, which – depending on one's interpretation of the film, are: (a) his genuine – albeit flawed – attempts to avenge his wife's murder, (b) his use of his wife's murder by others as an excuse to indulge his own love of killing, or (c) his attempts to repress his memory of murdering of his wife himself. There is no strong parallel between fiction and reality here as the viewer is simply trying to make sense of the narrative. Even though there is evidence for all three interpretations, the viewer has no vested interest in a particular interpretation to the extent that this interest determines one's memory of events in any way comparable to Leonard's self-manipulation in the film. What is interesting about Gaut's failure to show (2) is that it

shows the strength of (1) and (3), i.e. (2) shows the real difference between deriving a proposition from the evidence offered by a film (*memory is partly determined by one's aims*) and experiencing the narrational confirmation of a proposition (*memory is unreliable*).

The narrational confirmation of (3) is paradigmatic. Leonard has a severe case of anterograde amnesia, and the narration of the film is such the color scenes are shown in reverse order; i.e. the viewer does not know what has happened immediately prior to the events depicted. Gaut claims that *Memento* forces epistemic identification with Leonard on the viewer by placing her in a similar epistemic situation, and that this epistemic identification results in a more powerful affective identification (imagining what Leonard is feeling) and empathy (feeling what Leonard is feeling).²⁷ The similarity of the epistemic situations of Leonard and the viewer provide narrational confirmation of the importance of memory to understanding because:

we not only grasp that Leonard cannot interpret the situation correctly because of his incapacity, but we are also made to experience through the narrational strategy that *we* cannot grasp the situation correctly if [we] are deprived of the information that memory would normally provide.²⁸

Gaut concludes that narrational confirmation is 'partial confirmation' and 'a kind of experiential confirmation'.²⁹ The latter term refers to the fact that a work of film can provide a particular experience for a viewer. In the case of *Memento* it is the narration which facilitates the viewer's experience of (1) memory as unreliable, and (3) memory as essential to understanding. According to Gaut, therefore, the experience of watching the film is an experience which confirms (1) and (3):³⁰ 'narrational confirmation is a real phenomenon, and it is one whose existence is disclosed by detailed attention to *Memento*.'³¹ I shall employ the

term *experiential confirmation* as opposed to partial or narrational confirmation, and I take Gaut to have demonstrated that: *Memento provides experiential confirmation of the cognitive claims about the actual world that are explicit or implicit in the work.* I shall now show that Gaut's claim is in fact too weak, and that *Memento* provides more than experiential confirmation of (1) and (3).

Gaut's use of the word *confirmation* implies that the assertions in (1) and (3) are already known to him, i.e. the knowledge they yield is not new. The absence of innovation is not a cinematic feature of *Memento*, however, because it has potential application to all means by which philosophical knowledge is communicated. As Smuts has pointed out, relatively few contributions to philosophy are innovative in 'the strong sense of the term.'³² The question of whether a particular method is capable of presenting new ideas or restricted to the illustration of pre-existing ideas can therefore be asked of all means of philosophical communication, including – e.g. – thought experiments. In her defenses of thought experiments as indispensable tools in science and philosophy, Tamar Gendler discusses (1*) the thought experiment Galileo employed to refute Aristotle's claim that natural speed is directly proportional to weight,³³ and an example of her own invention:

- (2*) Think about your next-door neighbor's living room, and ask yourself the following questions: If you painted its walls bright green, would that clash with the current carpet, or complement it? If you removed all its furniture, could four elephants fit comfortably inside? If you removed all but one of the elephants, would there be enough space to ride a bicycle without tipping as you turned?³⁴

For the majority of readers, (1*) will not provide new knowledge, but (2*) will: where most contemporary readers probably already know that natural speed is not directly proportional to

weight, Gendler has selected (2*) precisely because it is an unlikely way to conceive of living space.³⁵ If I am conducting (2*), it seems highly unlikely that someone else has already considered my neighbor's living space in terms of its capacity to house elephants and cyclists. If not, or if someone else has in fact conceived of the space in this way but has not communicated the information to me, then Gendler maintains that the thought experiment would have produced a new, justified, true belief.³⁶ If, however, that person – perhaps my neighbor's other neighbor – had already communicated the information to me, then undertaking the thought experiment myself would only produce a justified, true belief.

Thought experiments are clearly capable of presenting new ideas, but the novelty of the knowledge provided is dependent upon the reader rather than the thought experiment itself. Gaut refers to (1) and (3) as experiential confirmation, but in doing so he assumes that *Memento's* audience already knows that memory is both unreliable and essential to understanding. He is probably correct, but if a particular viewer did not believe that – e.g. – memory was essential to understanding, then watching *Memento* would provide more than experiential confirmation: the justified, true belief formed in virtue of watching the film would (also) be new. The difference between confirmation and affirmation has nothing to do with *Memento* and everything to do with the audience and there is no reason to restrict the film to the illustration of pre-existing ideas. For the appropriately uninformed audience, the experience of *Memento* will produce new, justified, true beliefs. In such cases, the film would have provided experiential *affirmation* of a proposition or assertion. It is important to note that the reliance upon the audience for the distinction between confirmation and affirmation is precisely the same for thought experiments: Galileo's thought experiment provides *confirmation* for Gendler (who already knows that natural speed is not directly proportional to weight), but *affirmation* for an Aristotelian (who does not).

I shall define *experiential affirmation* as: the production of new, justified, true belief by the employment of cinematic imagery to stimulate the imagination. There is evidence for experiential affirmation in at least one work of film as *Memento* provides experiential affirmation that memory is both unreliable and essential to understanding. The bold thesis poses the question of whether a film can: *make innovative and independent contributions to philosophy by paradigmatically cinematic means*. My answer is that by means of experiential affirmation, *Memento* makes an innovative and independent contribution to philosophical knowledge. The contribution is not dependent upon interpretation or context, and although the ideas presented are not innovative in the strong sense of the term, there is nothing about *Memento qua* work of cinema which precludes the presentation of new ideas; the film therefore meets Livingston's results condition. In the next section I shall offer evidence that experiential affirmation is a paradigmatically cinematic means of contributing to philosophical knowledge.

3. Cinematic Depiction

Elsewhere, I have discussed the conflict between the significance accorded to the role of the imagination in engaging with works of art and the fact that many films appear to leave very little to the imagination.³⁷ The same qualities which restrict the scope of the imagination – the potential for perceptual realism in work of cinematic art – are also those which facilitate the operation of experiential affirmation in *Memento*. In §1 I identified “film” as *the art form of moving photorealistic pictures*, and in §2 I described “experiential affirmation” as producing new, justified, true belief *by the employment of cinematic imagery*. “Cinematic imagery” is not, however, restricted to moving photorealistic pictures, such as one finds in

The Birth of a Nation (D.W. Griffith, 1915). Since the nineteen-twenties, cinematic images have been both audible and colored, and the experience of watching *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is consequently much closer to the experience of perceiving people, places, and events in real life than Griffith's prototypical feature film.³⁸ Kendall Walton characterizes the imaginings authorized by depictive (as opposed to descriptive) representations as *rich* and *vivid*.³⁹ He uses "rich" to refer to the amount of detail conveyed, and "vivid" to the level of realism the experience involves, i.e. the ease with which one is able to make-believe the fiction.⁴⁰ As Walton does not discuss film in great detail, I shall turn to Gregory Currie for an explanation of cinematic depiction.⁴¹

Currie begins with a general theory of depiction which holds that pictures are realistic by being *like* the things they depict.⁴² A written description of a horse can be entirely accurate, but the experience of reading it is entirely unlike the visual experience of seeing a horse.

Pictures differ in that recognition is by spatial features:

my visual capacity to recognize a horse is the capacity to associate some visual feature of what I see with the concept *horse*, thereby enabling me to bring what I see under that concept.⁴³

The horse and the picture of the horse have spatial features in common. While the font and typeface of a written description of a horse do not affect one's recognition, spatial changes in a picture might cause one to mistake a horse for a zebra or a unicorn. Inherent in this capacity for visual recognition is the mind's ability to discriminate between a real horse and a pictorial representation thereof.⁴⁴ Looking at a photographic representation of a horse is realistic because it deploys the same object-recognition capacity, and object-recognition causes natural generativity,⁴⁵ which means that – generally – one can recognize a picture of *X* if one can recognize *X* itself.⁴⁶ Currie holds that where representation displays natural

generativity it is perceptually realistic, and that an absence of natural generativity results in a lack of perceptual realism.

He maintains that film is distinct in ‘its portrayal of time by means of time’,⁴⁷ distinguishing three kinds of temporality: the temporality of the work, the temporality of the observer’s experience of the work, and the temporality of what the work represents. All representational art forms are representationally temporal; literature, cinema, theatre, and music are also experientially temporal; and cinema, theatre, and music are additionally work-temporal.⁴⁸ ‘It is the default setting for cinematic interpretation that the representation of duration in cinema is automorphic’.⁴⁹ Thus even in a film which is as complex as *Memento*, one should assume that the time it takes Leonard to discuss the unreliability of memory with Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) over lunch is about a minute and a half, which is the actual time it takes to watch the conversation occur on screen. If the duration of the work differs from the duration of the representation – as in *Memento*, where a story which takes place over approximately forty-eight hours is represented in a work of just under two hours – there will be visual cues to indicate the difference.

Currie believes that the representation of space is more difficult than time due to the representation of three dimensional objects on a two dimensional screen.⁵⁰ ‘In cinema, spatial properties of representations represent spatial properties of the things represented.’⁵¹ Spatial representation is homomorphic rather than automorphic: the spatial properties of cinematic representations function automorphically for relative spatial properties and nonautomorphically for absolute spatial properties.⁵² The difference in height between the cinematic representations of Leonard and Teddy will therefore be a ratio of the difference

between the actors, but it will be only coincidental if the image of Leonard appears as 1.8 meters tall (Pearce's height) on the screen.

The combination of natural generativity, the automorphic representation of time, and the homomorphic representation of space leads to Currie to conclude that film 'has the capacity for realism not merely in its depiction of objects but in its depiction of spatial and temporal relations between those objects.'⁵³ This perceptual realism admits of degrees and has been greatly enhanced by the introduction of color and sound. Color makes object-recognition more effortless and the addition of a soundtrack which corresponds to the visual representation brings a new perceptual dimension to cinematic experience, making the experience so much more like reality. Contrast, e.g., the cinematic experience of the abolitionist lecture in *The Birth of a Nation* with the cinematic experience of the marshal attempting to raise a posse in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. For my purpose in this paper, I shall take *cinematic depiction* to be: representation by means of moving, audible photorealistic pictures.⁵⁴

Cinematic depiction means that films can, in Walton's terms, be 'be understood without decoding and inference'.⁵⁵ The depictive realism in films is greater than all the other representational art forms. Photographs tend to be more realistic than paintings, but photographs do not move or make a noise. The closest art form in terms of realism is theatre, but film is more perceptually realistic still, and requires less decoding. If one watches a performance of *Richard III*, e.g., one typically perceives two actors pretending to duel and imagines the Battle of Bosworth Field raging around them. In contrast, when one watches *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), one perceives images of the actors apparently engaged in a real battle. The richness and vividness of the cinematic imagery is so great that

very little is left to the imagination, and one seems to perceive precisely the sights and sounds of Omaha Beach on D Day.⁵⁶ My thesis is that the experiential affirmation in *Memento* is a function of cinematic depiction, but as cinematic depiction is not unique to the film, the question of whether other films can do philosophy by means of experiential affirmation arises. I discuss this possibility briefly in §5.

The element of cinematic depiction which plays the most significant role in experiential affirmation in *Memento* is the automorphic representation of time, specifically work-temporality. The complexity of the narration makes it appear as if the viewer's memory – like Leonard's – is unreliable. This experience is exacerbated by the fact that one finds oneself in the same position as Leonard with each successive color scene: where Leonard has forgotten what has just happened, the viewer has not yet seen that part of the film due to the reversed chronology. Leonard's confusion is thus mirrored by one's own, and one learns (or is reminded) that memory for Leonard and knowledge of what has occurred previously for the viewer, is necessary for understanding. Perhaps this experiential affirmation could be achieved by any work which was experientially temporal and had a sufficiently complex narration, e.g. a novelization of *Memento*,⁵⁷ and is not therefore a feature of cinematic depiction.

There are three problems with this view. First, the experiential temporality of novels is such that they are (usually) not intended to be read in a single sitting. The time it would take to read the novel from first page to last, generally a dozen or more hours spread over one or more days, would alter the effect that the narration has on the viewer. Typically, if one comes back to a novel after a few day's absence, one does not remember all the salient points and flicks back to refresh one's memory. The affirmation that memory is unreliable is diluted

and diminished. Although one could flick back and forth for clarification in *Memento*, the film is intended to be watched in one sitting, from the first second to the last. One experiences affirmation that one's own memory is unreliable because one cannot remember what has happened an hour ago – or, more likely, what has happened a few minutes beforehand. Work-temporality is thus a crucial element of the experiential affirmation. Second, there are elements of the film which could not be represented – at least as effectively – in another art form. Aside from the standard flashbacks in *Memento*, there are several very quick flashes which may or may not be accurate memories of Leonard's:⁵⁸ one shot shows him in a mental institution, another suggests his wife was diabetic, another suggests he may have killed her violently. It is difficult to imagine how the effects of these brief shots, appearing in the manner in which they do in the film, could be replicated in a non-cinematic narrative representation.

Finally, I think that the ease of engaging with the cinematic depiction allows the viewer to focus on the complexity of the narration. The film has been created so as to reward attention to the artistic properties of its narration in a particular manner. Lengthy descriptions of the people, places, and events would interfere with the complexity of the presentation of the sequence of events, but without detailed descriptions the reader could not be expected to make sense of the story. When one watches the film, and here it is significant that the central story – the “present” of forty-eight-odd hours which is shown in scenes with reversed chronological order – is in color, the perceptual realism means that one is able to instantly absorb a large amount of audio-visual information about the characters, setting, and action. No lengthy descriptions are required as sufficient information is presented for the viewer to follow the narrative (albeit with great difficulty). The color scenes comprise just over three quarters of the film, and – for the reasons outlined above – require less decoding: they are

more *like* real perception than the black and white scenes, and the audience can focus on attempting to make sense of the plot while experiencing the affirmation that memory is essential to understanding. My claim is thus that the experiential affirmation by means of which *Memento* contributes to philosophical knowledge is a paradigmatically cinematic means as it is a function of the depictive representation peculiar to cinema. *Memento* therefore meets the results and means conditions of the bold thesis. I shall now consider two objections to my argument.

4. Objections

Wartenberg characterizes his view of cinematic philosophy as the ‘*moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position*’.⁵⁹ Unlike the stronger pro-cinematic philosophy position held by Stanley Cavell and Stephen Mulhall, Wartenberg restricts the ability of cinema to do philosophy to three ways: illustrating a position, presenting a thought experiment, or performing a cinematic experiment.⁶⁰ The first and third of these are not relevant to my discussion of *Memento*. The third is confined to *avante garde*, experimental films, e.g. *Empire* (Andy Warhol, 1965), which test the boundaries of the art form. The first is not paradigmatic of film: Wartenberg discusses illustrated books,⁶¹ and arguments could be offered for literary or dramatic illustrations. He uses *The Matrix* (Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski, 1999) as an example of a film that presents a thought experiment,⁶² specifically the deception hypothesis, originally proposed by Descartes with his evil demon or spirit.⁶³ Wartenberg contrasts *The Matrix* with the hypothetical film *The Matron*, where the audience is aware that the fictional world is a deception.⁶⁴ Unlike the latter, in the former:

the filmmakers disrupt our experience of the film world as well, providing us viewers with an actual experience (albeit of a fictional world) in which we recognize that our senses have been deceiving us about the nature of reality.⁶⁵

Wartenberg notes that the ability to deceive an audience is not limited to film, but that what is unique about *The Matrix* is that it ‘deceives viewers about their *perceptual beliefs*’.⁶⁶ This perceptual deception is sufficient for the film performing a thought experiment and therefore doing philosophy. The objection to my position is that the experiential affirmation I have attributed to *Memento* is an example of *Memento* presenting a thought experiment and is thus better suited to Wartenberg’s moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position than Livingston’s bold thesis.

The comparison between *The Matrix* and *The Matron* is interesting because it parallels the comparison between *Memento* and the Easter Egg version, highlighting particularly relevant features. The difference between *The Matrix* and *The Matron* is that the former has an experiential element: like Thomas Anderson/Neo (Keanu Reeves), the viewer initially believes that life in the matrix is reality in the fictional world of the film. Like Neo, therefore, the viewer is deceived. In *The Matrix*, one has the experience of being deceived; in *The Matron* one has the experience of perceiving someone else being deceived. In this respect, it seems as if *The Matrix* is similar to *Memento*: just as the viewer has the experience of unreliable memory in the latter, one is deceived in the former. If *The Matrix* produces new, justified, true belief – e.g., the belief in the possibility of the real world being an illusion – by the employment of cinematic imagery to stimulate the imagination, then it may also be an example of experiential affirmation.

If so, however, *The Matrix* is a far more controversial example than *Memento*. In the former, Neo's deception – and that of the audience – is relatively short-lived. As soon as Neo takes the red pill he escapes the illusory matrix for the reality in the film, a world where human beings and machines are at war. In contrast, *Memento*'s experiential affirmation is sustained throughout the film and the full force of the claim that memory is essential to understanding is only realised at the very end, when Leonard's self-deception is revealed. The difference in the intensity of the experience is significant as it marks the difference between the presentation of a thought experiment and making an innovative contribution to philosophical knowledge, i.e. meeting the results condition of the bold thesis.

It is clear that *The Matrix* does present a thought experiment, namely the evil demon. It is equally clear that the presentation lacks innovation, as the film merely presents Descartes thought experiment in a contemporary setting, employing it as a plot device in a science fiction film. The use of the thought experiment as a device may be an artistic merit, but the philosophy is not innovative – precisely because it takes a famous thought experiment and re-presents it. *Memento* does not re-present a thought experiment. Although there have been numerous films with a-chronological narratives, none have used precisely this method nor – I propose – exhibited the degree of complexity evident in *Memento*, both of which are essential to the experiential affirmation for which I have argued. If there is a relation between *Memento* and thought experiments then that relation is not one of presentation or illustration, but constitution: the film *is* a thought experiment. My thesis does not therefore collapse into the moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position.

This brings me to the second objection. Smuts, referring to Wartenberg and others, claims that the most popular argument for film as philosophy is that ‘some films can function as’ thought experiments.⁶⁷ He uses *The Matrix* to show what is wrong with this approach:

The problem with the thought experiment argument for film as philosophy is that it does not show how films could do philosophy, much less innovative philosophy, only how *we* could do philosophy with a film.⁶⁸

The idea seems to be that while one watches Neo penetrate through the illusion to the reality in the film, it is the viewer who must take the step to pose a question along the lines of: *how do I know I am not living in a matrix myself?* *The Matrix* does not thus invite one to imagine that the real world is illusory, only to imagine that Neo’s world is illusory, and if one extrapolates from the work to the world, then one is doing the philosophy, performing the thought experiment, oneself. The objection to my position is that if *Memento* constitutes a thought experiment then it is the audience rather than the film which is doing the philosophy.

There are two problems with this objection. First, I employed thought experiments – the two discussed by Gendler – as an analogy in order to show that the difference between confirmation and affirmation was dependent upon the knowledge of the observer. My argument for *Memento* contributing to philosophy by means of experiential affirmation is not therefore reliant upon *Memento* constituting a thought experiment. Second, while Smuts is correct about *The Matrix* requiring the viewer to perform the experiment, this is not true of *Memento*. In *Memento*, the complexity of the narration demonstrates that the *viewer’s* memory is unreliable and that the *viewer’s* memory is essential to understanding. One knows that Leonard’s memory is unreliable due to his anterograde amnesia, and one perceives the effects that this unreliability has on his understanding. But the experiential affirmation which operates in the film goes beyond the viewer’s experience of perceiving Leonard’s unreliable

memory: the complex narration shows how unreliable *one's own* memory is, and one understands the partial confusion of the first viewing of the film as a result of this failure of memory, i.e. one realizes that memorizing the correct chronology is essential to understanding the narrative. This is why I rejected the second of Gaut's claims in §2, that memory is partly determined by one's aims, because while that is certainly true of Leonard, it is not true of the viewer.

One can now see why *The Matrix* and *Memento* are not equivalent: *Memento* plays with the viewer's memory in a way that *The Matrix* could not possibly play with our perception of reality. When I watch *The Matrix*, I can imagine that the cinema theatre and film are just illusions in a similar manner to which I imaginatively engage with the film, but I am not compelled to do so. If the film inspires me to perform Descartes' thought experiment then Smuts is quite correct and it is me, rather than *The Matrix*, that does the philosophy. When I watch *Memento*, however, there is no choice: if I engage with the film I have an experience which affirms the unreliability of my memory and the consequences of that unreliability. If experiential affirmation was understood in terms of thought experiments, Smuts' objection to the thought experiment argument for cinematic philosophy would thus still fail against *Memento*.

5. Conclusion

My thesis is that *Memento* does philosophy by meeting both the results and means conditions of Livingston's bold thesis. I have identified experiential affirmation as the manner in which *Memento* does philosophy, and proposed that experiential affirmation is paradigmatically cinematic as it is a function of the (potential for) perceptual realism of cinematic depiction.

Even if my explanation of the cause of experiential affirmation is flawed, *Memento* nonetheless meets the two conditions, and remains an example of a film which does philosophy. I have furthermore shown that my thesis does not collapse into Wartenberg's moderate pro-cinematic philosophy position and that it is not susceptible to Smuts' argument against film doing philosophy by means of thought experiments. In §3 I explained the experiential affirmation in *Memento* as a function of cinematic depiction and raised the question of whether other works of cinematic art – works which are also characterized by cinematic depiction – do philosophy by the same means. I was dismissive of *The Matrix* as a candidate, but I do not wish to imply that *Memento* is the only film which makes a contribution to philosophical knowledge by means of experiential affirmation or the only film which meets both conditions for the bold thesis. I think, e.g., that Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) might do philosophy in a similar manner, and Alessandro Giovannelli has advanced a convincing argument for the operation of *experiential identification* in the film.⁶⁹ Like Gaut, Giovannelli does not enter the cinematic philosophy debate, but – again, like Gaut – his argument could easily be extrapolated in that direction.

My claim is, however, deliberately restricted to *Memento*. Gaut notes an identical restriction on his claims about narrative properties, i.e. he does not rule out that other works of film may have the same properties, but is wary of generalizing.⁷⁰ For Gaut this means both that critical attention to the detail of a particular film can disclose its philosophical significance, and that one should be wary of inductive arguments from the properties of a particular film to the properties of cinematic art in general. The focus on criticism and particularism is echoed by Wartenberg in his discussion of the relationship between film and thought experiments:

I don't think that *a priori* arguments about the possibility of film's ability to present philosophical thought experiments will settle the issue. What's needed is a critical

assessment of the interpretations of specific films that I and others have offered in support of the idea that certain films actually present philosophical thought experiments.⁷¹

I have only shown that a particular work of film – *Memento* – meets the conditions for the bold thesis. Despite my identification of cinematic depiction as crucial to experiential affirmation, the question of whether other films do philosophy by the same means should be answered on a film-by-film basis. To my conclusion that *Memento* does philosophy, I therefore add the caveat that there are no general theories or principles for meeting the conditions of the bold thesis which can be derived from my analysis.⁷²

RAFE MCGREGOR

Department of Philosophy

University of York

Heslington, York, YO10 5DD

INTERNET: rafemc@gmail.com

¹ I have discussed the problems with answering the deceptively simple question “what is film?” elsewhere. See: “A New/Old Philosophy of Film,” *Film-Philosophy* 16, forthcoming.

² Robert Sinnerbrink has recently provided an authoritative and concise overview of the different philosophical approaches to film. See: *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, (London: Continuum, 2011), 3-8.

³ *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

⁴ My discussion of *Memento* is as a work of cinematic art. I do not have space to discuss the relationship between the art form and the medium in this paper.

⁵ *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 11.

⁶ Smuts actually refers to the initial version of Livingston’s bold thesis, but his commentary is nonetheless pertinent. See: Paisley Livingston, “Theses on Cinema as Philosophy,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 11-18.

⁷ “Film as Philosophy: In Defense of a Bold Thesis,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), 409. See also: Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 13-20.

⁸ “Film as Philosophy,” 410.

⁹ “Film as Philosophy,” 410.

¹⁰ “Film as Philosophy,” 411. See also: Livingston, *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman*, 13.

¹¹ “Film as Philosophy,” 411.

¹² “Film as Philosophy,” 411.

¹³ See, e.g., the papers by Simon Critchley and Hubert Dreyfus & Camilo Salazar in: David Davies (ed.), *The Thin Red Line (Philosophers on Film)* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁴ “Telling Stories: Narration, Emotion, and Insight in *Memento*,” in Noël Carroll & John Gibson, eds., *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 23-44.

¹⁵ “Telling Stories,” 26.

- ¹⁶ For a comprehensive examination of this structure, see: Andrew Kania, "Scene Tables," in Andrew Kania, ed., *Memento (Philosophers on Film)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 13-22.
- ¹⁷ Originally: *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*.
- ¹⁸ "Telling Stories," 27.
- ¹⁹ "Telling Stories," 37.
- ²⁰ "Telling Stories," 38-39.
- ²¹ "Telling Stories," 40.
- ²² "Telling Stories," 40.
- ²³ "Telling Stories," 30.
- ²⁴ "Telling Stories," 40.
- ²⁵ "Telling Stories," 23.
- ²⁶ "Telling Stories," 40-41.
- ²⁷ "Telling Stories," 28.
- ²⁸ "Telling Stories," 41.
- ²⁹ "Telling Stories," 41.
- ³⁰ And (2), in his account.
- ³¹ "Telling Stories," 41.
- ³² "Film as Philosophy," 411.
- ³³ "Galileo and the Indispensability of Scientific Thought Experiments," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49 (1998): 397-424.
- ³⁴ "Thought Experiments Rethought – and Reperceived," *Philosophy of Science* 71 (2004), 1156.
- ³⁵ "Thought Experiments Rethought," 1157.
- ³⁶ "Thought Experiments Rethought," 1157-1159.
- ³⁷ See: "The Problem of Cinematic Imagination," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2012), available at <<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=629>>.
- ³⁸ This move towards greater verisimilitude between the experience of film and the experience of reality has included the employment of three-dimensional cinematic imagery. The phenomenon began in the nineteen-twenties, with the now-lost *The Power of Love* (Nat G. Deverich & Harry K. Fairall, 1922), but has been less sustained than the introduction of sound and color. Three-dimensional cinema enjoyed a brief golden age in the nineteen-fifties, followed by a similarly brief revival in the nineteen-eighties. The change from photochemical to digital film has produced a second revival, beginning with *Ghosts of the Abyss* (James Cameron, 2003) and fuelled by the commercial success of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). Three-dimensional film has thus been a part of mainstream cinema for a decade, but it is by no means standardly employed, in the way that sound and color are.
- ³⁹ Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990), 350.
- ⁴⁰ See also: *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 14.
- ⁴¹ Although Currie and Walton's respective conceptions of make-believe differ on a number of points, the similarities are significant. Their compatibility is particularly evident in two papers which I do not have space to discuss: Gregory Currie, "Visual Fictions," *Philosophical Quarterly* 41 (1996): 129-143; and Kendall Walton, "Depiction, Perception, and Imagination: Responses to Richard Wollheim," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 27-35. Gaut also discusses perceptual realism; see: *Cinematic Art*, 71-77.
- ⁴² Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 79.
- ⁴³ *Image and Mind*, 81.
- ⁴⁴ *Image and Mind*, 86.
- ⁴⁵ The concept of natural generativity is from Flint Schier. See: *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 43-55.
- ⁴⁶ *Image and Mind*, 89-90.
- ⁴⁷ *Image and Mind*, 96.
- ⁴⁸ *Image and Mind*, 95-96.
- ⁴⁹ *Image and Mind*, 99.
- ⁵⁰ *Image and Mind*, 104.
- ⁵¹ *Image and Mind*, 103.
- ⁵² *Image and Mind*, 104.
- ⁵³ *Image and Mind*, 106.
- ⁵⁴ Where "photorealistic" presumes color.
- ⁵⁵ *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 350.

⁵⁶ I discussed the difference in theatrical and cinematic realism in greater detail in “The Problem of Cinematic Imagination”.

⁵⁷ *Memento* is in fact based on a short story, entitled “Memento Mori”, by Christopher Nolan’s brother, Jonathan.

⁵⁸ Gaut calls these ‘micro shots’ (“Telling Stories,” 32).

⁵⁹ On the Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” in Havi Carel & Greg Tuck, eds., *New Takes in Film-Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 16.

⁶⁰ “Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” 17-21.

⁶¹ “Beyond Mere Illustration: How Can Films Be Philosophy?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006), 24-27.

⁶² *Thinking on Screen: Film as philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 67.

⁶³ René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in Elizabeth Anscombe & Peter Geach, eds. & translators, *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1970), 65.

⁶⁴ *Thinking on Screen*, 74.

⁶⁵ *Thinking on Screen*, 69.

⁶⁶ *Thinking on Screen*, 72.

⁶⁷ “Film as Philosophy,” 414.

⁶⁸ “Film as Philosophy,” 414.

⁶⁹ Experiential identification is different from – although not entirely unrelated to – experiential affirmation, functioning as follows: ‘the film powerfully makes us the protagonists of the attempt of finding one’s way through the oneiric reality it represents. Hence, the enigma I have been trying to identify and explain turns out being all in the experience of the film, in the special and hard-to-pinpoint power that this film can exercise on the viewer.’ See: “Cognitive Value and Imaginative Identification: The Case of Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68 (2010): 362.

⁷⁰ “Telling Stories”, 23 & 42-43.

⁷¹ “Possibility of Cinematic Philosophy,” 20.

⁷² I would like to thank Helen Bradley and Jon Robson for their invaluable assistance with this paper.