

“Wittgenstein, Language-Games, Film Theory”

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I begin with an observation by Wittgenstein about philosophy:

“One keeps hearing the remark that philosophy really makes no progress, that the same philosophical problems that had occupied the Greeks are still occupying us. ... The reason [why this is true] is that our language has remained the same and seduces us into asking the same questions over and over. As long as there is a verb ‘to be’ which seems to function like ‘to eat’ and ‘to drink,’ as long as there are adjectives like ‘identical,’ ‘true,’ ‘false,’ [and] ‘possible’ [and here Wittgenstein might have added: ‘as long as there is a noun “identity” which permits objects and states of affairs to acquire correlates like “identical,” “true,” “false,” and “possible”’ ... Wittgenstein continues: ...], as long as one talks about a *flow* of time and an *expanse* of space, etc., etc., [as long as all this happens in our language] humans will continue to bump up against the same mysterious difficulties, and stare at something that no explanation seems able to remove.

“And this by the way satisfies a longing for the supra-natural //transcendental//, for in believing that they see the ‘limits of human understanding’ of course they believe that they can see beyond it.”

(chapter entitled “Philosophy” from “The Big Typescript” in *Philosophical Occasions*, 185, 187; my italics; //...// indicates variant word given by Wittgenstein)

Indeed ‘the Greeks *are* still troubling us today.’ And, equally, film theorists today still ‘run up against the same teasing difficulties and will continue to stare at something (usually an image) which no explanation seems able to remove.’ Is it because an image is *ineffable* that we still do not know its ‘identity’ and we debate how it is to be ‘true,’ ‘false,’ or ‘possible’? That is, it seems that we continue to wonder what attributes an image must possess from the real. Certainly, there must be certain (definite) attributes, we believe. Is it because an image *surpasses* language — is permanently *other* and *excessive* — that it remains teasingly alien? Recall that people often say in a half-serious

way that an image is ‘worth a thousand words,’ but, of course, *which* thousand words is it worth and *whose* thousand words? Ironically, this adage seems to make an image *untouchable* and *mute*, since any specific collection of words that is chosen seems inadequate.

Furthermore, the adage is not really uttered in a ‘half-serious’ manner, but in perfect seriousness. This notion that an image is worth a thousand words is already deeply entrenched in our language, and hence [to quote Wittgenstein] “connected with the oldest thought habits, i.e., with the oldest images that are engraved into our language itself” [BT, 183, 185]? If this adage could be made to speak, I believe that it would point us away from a (metaphysical) generalization about the muteness of an image and toward a series of concrete examples — toward the *differences and practices* — that mark the many discrete ways that an image *may be used* by us on various occasions when we stare at a film screen. An image *can* be said to speak to us *when* a specific question has been asked, when there is a task at hand. The danger is in over-generalizing about the nature of a film image; the cure is to remind oneself of the situation. If many different sets containing ‘a thousand words’ may be made appropriate, then it is reductive to imagine that at any given moment there is but a single image on the screen. Instead, there are many images at a given moment. Thus it is fruitless to search for ‘the ontology of the photographic image.’

A theory of film typically works with an *iconography* of grammatical objects; things like ‘image,’ ‘frame,’ ‘shot,’ ‘camera,’ ‘point of view,’ ‘editing,’ ‘style,’ ‘realism,’ ‘auteur,’ ‘performance,’ ‘spectatorship,’ and ‘medium specificity’ (i.e., ‘medium identity’). I wish to examine one of these iconic objects, one that is closely related to an “image” and raises many of the same philosophical problems — namely, the “camera.” Like an “image,” the camera is apparently *untouchable* and *mute*, and, in addition, *invisible*. I wish to inquire whether this camera has an *identity* that is *common* to all film theories. I will argue that it does *not* and that film theories play *different games* with this grammatical object. If it is true that film theories play different games, then the “camera” will not be shared among the theories as a common ground or grounding; indeed the “camera” will not have a ground, an intrinsic nature apart from its use in a language and the tie that a language has to, what Wittgenstein calls, a “form of life.” Instead, there will be a series of “cameras” bearing only a family resemblance to one another.

What really is our idea of a “camera”? What is its apparent *identity*? When we choose to speak, for example, of the *movement* of a camera as an explanation for a motion we sense on the screen, what is meant? Does a spectator, for example, think of the *specific* camera leased by a studio, having a certain weight and serial number that was in movement during the making of a shot? It seems unlikely that a spectator would even know which actual camera to think of. Perhaps, then, the spectator thinks of a very generalized camera with many possible weights and serial numbers — thus creating the image, as it were, of a *universal* camera. But this may still be too concrete. Instead, the spectator may be thinking of an *abstract* camera; that is, some sort of “box” with a lens, diaphragm, shutter, and film, accompanied by hazy thoughts of a cone of vision, light rays, refraction, chromatic aberration, mechanical parts, and laws of chemistry. Yet this

abstraction may be too detailed: perhaps simply a (silent) “box” would do. The problem, however, is that none of these notions of a camera seem to be pertinent at least to the experience of a *fiction*. Knowing that some camera operated in the past to shoot the film, or knowing how a camera operates generally, is quite different than knowing how a camera functions in a film fictionally and narratively as well as quite different than experiencing fictional, narrative, and discursive movements.

Suppose that someone now protests as follows:

“But the word ‘camera’ must surely name a particular *thing* that *guides us* to a particular experience of an image or photograph! The camera surely causes us to have a particular experience of a photograph through a related experience of form, lighting, space, time, movement, causation, meaning, feeling, belief, and/or self-awareness, among other experiences that we have in watching a film.”

The answer is: when you say this you are *thinking of* a particular experience of being guided in a film which forces an expression on you that makes it seem as if there were something *common* to all forms of guiding, that there is a guide, and that the camera is it. You are thinking of your experience not only through the medium of film, but also through the medium of the concepts “because,” “influence,” “cause,” “connection,” and even, “through,” which seem to share a definitive, core meaning (as in looking *through* a window that sustains a view). [PI, §§ 173, 175, 177, 178; cf. §§ 172, 156-171] The concept of *guiding*, for example, would seem to presuppose a continuous act along a continuous path revealing a continuous set of experiences for a witness who is within some setting. But, one may ask, how many forms of “continuous” experience may be said to exist? How does one decide *when* certain changes of impression, but not others, belong together as the effects of being guided, and that, by virtue of these impressions, become parts of a setting? What sort of large-scale mental “picture” or “scene” must be constructed from these diverse parts to contain the relevant actions of guiding and the effects of being guided?

A more cautious approach would be to assume that there are many and incompatible ways of being a guide (and of being a *cause*) and that, rather than just one, there are many cameras operating in different regions of our language activity as we consider the various places and ‘language-games’ that concern (relate to, affect, are affected by) cinema. In order to speak of a camera as a guide, one must *feel the effects of being guided*, of having been presented points of interest for consideration; that is, one’s course — one’s movement in a fiction and in a narrative — must be altered, and one must perform under this influence in some way — and probably in several ways — by, for example, having feelings, remembering, expecting, being surprised, narrativizing, fantasizing, learning, behaving, and speaking in response to being guided. Being guided has many parts and different parts on different occasions. If our guide is to be a camera, it will be a different thing on different occasions, and it will be relative to *our performance* (i.e., relative to our behavior while being guided and our explanations to ourselves and others about having been guided), and not just relative to the *physicality* of

a photograph or to the *physical* objects seen in a photograph. Are there not many kinds of experiences that viewers may have with a film that will support feelings of having been guided? Although we may do many things with, and to, a camera and, for that matter, a computer (in these days of new media), neither of these objects can itself be guided since neither is sentient, except metaphorically.

Well, then, what shall we say about the entity that we call THE CAMERA? Doesn't the camera *cause* a framing to be on the screen? More precisely, the camera may be said to cause the framing *after* one has specified in a suitable manner what it means to be "on the screen."

Perhaps we should turn the question around — let the tail wag the dog for once. Since there are many ways of seeing the act of framing, perhaps there are many ways for the camera to be seen . . . or to be. Consider that the camera we see "moving" in animation is not identical to the physical camera on the animation stand (even if that camera were to move). Consider also that the camera we experience moving around Group Captain Mandrake, President Muffley, and Dr. Strangelove is *not* the same camera that moves around Peter Sellers. (Peter Sellers, but not the others, could be seen performing on a set in front of a camera in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*.) Perhaps, then, there are many ways for the word "camera" to function in our discourse when we undertake to describe how we have experienced a film. That is, there may be many cameras (some incompatible, some indefinite) in our talk about cinema depending upon our goals.

I believe that the concept of a "camera" in one film theory bears only a family resemblance to the same word appearing in another film theory. In the terminology of George Lakoff, the word "camera" is a *radial* concept that extends far beyond the properties of a (definite) physical apparatus able to record the real world and having a weight and serial number. I believe that the camera extends beyond — dare I say? — photographicity, beyond pictured-ness, beyond even the visible and visual, and instead extends into the schematic and abstract wherein lies language and the language of film, where there is no genuine and exact description proper for all occasions, where a camera is created to point out, and where getting the point means imagining a camera. [PI, § 99 and Part II, xi, p. 200; cf. §§ 71, 76-77, 98, 100-101; see also § 114; cf. §§ 104, 122; and see BB, pp. 27, 26, 28.]

I believe that if one were to treat the full *iconography* of a film theory in the way I have just suggested with the concepts of "image" and "camera," then the resulting film theory would be seen as:

- *grammatical* (i.e., a film theory would be nothing more than the grammar of an ensemble of such words as "frame," "shot," "camera," "editing," "sound," "style," "realism," "auteur," "performance," "spectatorship," and "medium specificity");

- *intersubjective* (i.e., a film theory would be conceived not as a set of fixed, objective, or universal propositions about film but rather would be tied to social practices, values, and a community consensus about, for example, the present and past boundaries of the medium);
- *fragmentary* (i.e., once we have given up the idea that a film theory is objective and unified — and that a film theory provides us with a comprehensive overview of film from an ideal point of view — then we will come to see theoretical descriptions of film as being partial, provisional, and relative to historical forces);
- *figurative* (i.e., the “abstractions” of a film theory are often metaphorical projections or displacements based upon bodily experiences, embodied concepts, heuristics, scenarios, and image schemata; a “camera” is an instance of just such a projection);
- *connected* (i.e., the complex parts of a film theory will not be understood as composed of simpler and simpler constituents as if they could be dissected and arranged into a *hierarchy* — as if to explain film were a matter of penetrating a surface to discover the most basic and essential elements; instead, the parts of a film theory would be seen as spreading outward in ever-wider lines and curves, connecting and jumping to parts in new systems to make a network or *heterarchy*); and,
- *impure* (i.e., qualities like those just listed suggest that a film theory should not be considered as a Theory specific to film or as itself pure and autonomous; there is no Medium of film, no film Specificity).

With respect to this notion of an “impure” film theory, consider André Bazin’s argument for “impure film” in which he explicitly rejects ontology and hidden, entrenched values in favor of connecting film to the relativity of culture and history:

“[W]e must say of the cinema that its existence precedes its essence; even in his most adventurous extrapolations, it is this existence from which the critic must take his point of departure. As in history, and with approximately the same reservations, the verification of a change goes beyond reality and already postulates a value judgment. Those who damned the sound film at its birth were unwilling to admit precisely this, even when the sound film held the incomparable advantage over the silent film that it was replacing it.” (“In Defense of Mixed Cinema,” p. 71)

In conclusion, I believe that one must resist the reification of film in the form of an immutable *medium* or *specificity* and the consequent reification of film theory. Instead one should embrace the “anthropological turn” and “pragmatics” that drive Wittgenstein’s theory of “language-games” leading to what Ian Hacking calls a ‘death of

meaning.’ What Hacking presumably refers to here is the fact that there is *no place* in Wittgenstein’s approach to language for the word “meaning,” since meaning is neither a property of an object (like color or size) nor is it a mental property of a mental object, as if a thought had a color. It is true that we may speak of having a “deep” thought, or of the “movement” of our thought, or of the “shape” of someone’s argument, but these are projections from sensory perception, and do not license an omnipresent, supra-mental *paint* like “meanings.”

Rather than seeking to break a film or a film theory into its most basic and logical, “meaningful” pieces in order to reassemble it as a more perfect grander whole, one should move outwards along radial lines to trace how a theory is designed to be fragmentary and impure, and used to create value by merging with historical contingency and social existence. A particular film theory is a grammar relative to a chosen language-game. It is a way of speaking. A way of being social. Like offering someone your “best wishes” on a certain occasion. It’s not like saying, “Don’t smoke,” or “Eat your vegetables.” There are many film theory language-games and all must be evaluated on the basis of changing, pragmatic criteria as well as evaluated on the basis of their interface with the *practices* that count for us. (Only a few of these practices are *film* practices.) In short, one must carefully weigh Wittgenstein’s ideas about language when one evaluates the usefulness of a given film theory — that is, when one evaluates what a theory says a film image and a camera may, or may not, say.

The last word goes to Christian Metz – a man who is much missed in today’s film theory – a man I personally miss.... This from “The Imaginary Signifier”:

“I no longer believe that each film has *a* textual system nor even a fixed *number* of distinct textual systems (several ‘readings’ of the same film). I now see merely working conveniences – ‘blocks of interpretation’ that the analysis has *already* selected in its interminable movement from the indefinite thickness of the textual system.” [p. 29; my italics, ellipses not shown]

I think that for Metz a text is “indefinitely thick” and permits “blocks of interpretation” precisely because a text for Metz is *already situated* in the life of a people. We need only be “reminded,” Wittgenstein might say, of the ways a text has been used.
