Cinemadope

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Christopher Falzon

Philosophy Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Philosophy
Routledge, $39.95pb, 230pp, 0 415 23741 6
$149hb, 0 415 23740 8

It cannot be easy to write a good introduction to philosophy. There are numerous hurdles. The subject is vast, but an introduction must be selective yet representative; it is often abstruse, but an introduction should not be; moreover, it is unclear just what the subject is. Many departments of knowledge have specialised arms of philosophy dedicated to them. There is social and political philosophy, the philosophy of science, of mathematics, of art, and so on. But philosophy appears to be neither science nor art nor politics nor any other kindred thing; so what is the beast? There are also the native disciplines of reflection that constitute the trunk of philosophy: logic, the theory of knowledge, metaphysics, moral philosophy. They often tackle the large questions — the ones we are sometimes not even sure are questions — such as those about the meaning of life, the right way to live, the nature of reason, self and knowledge, the existence of deity. It is difficult in our scientistic and reductive age even to see that there may be problems or mysteries in these departments that are intractable to scientific inquiry, measurement or technical ingenuity. It is difficult, at the beginning, to see what space remains for philosophy.

Another major hurdle for an effective introduction to philosophy requires that this strange discipline be fashioned to look alluring without being merceracious. Packaging is four-fifths of contemporary culture, and most students or beginners coming to a new discipline will expect the product to be festooned and inviting. Teachers, who are now trapped (like everyone else) in the market place, have to contrive and employ lures, and the best lure is a conspicuous link between the new thing and something that already interests.

Christopher Falzon, a philosopher at the University of Newcastle, has written what seems to me, overall, an admirable introduction to philosophy. His selection of philosophical themes is balanced and judicious, and his presentation is unusually lucid and economical. His idea of using film as a resource to illustrate and explore philosophical ideas will appeal to most beginners, and probably assist with the marketing problem. Other recent philosophical publications have attended to popular entertainments of genius like Seinfeld and The Simpsons, and it’s a fair bet that their association, if not with genius then with entertainment, has helped with the ledgers.

Falzon’s book is not about the philosophy of film, although his discussion does shed light on the philosophical content of some films. It is an invitation to philosophy that domesticates its subject by using film to illustrate, dramatise and, occasionally, propose philosophical themes. An introductory chapter explains the usefulness of considering film for philosophical purposes. Films often reflect social and other concerns of philosophical interest, and sometimes have their own insights. Moreover, by addressing philosophical issues in a concrete way, ‘they can also act as a corrective to philosophy, especially a philosophy that has lost itself in abstraction and universalization and has forgotten its connection to concrete existence’. In this section, Falzon also has good things to say about philosophy as a reflective, critical activity that clarifies and evaluates the basic terms and presuppositions on which we think and act. And in the final chapter, Falzon deftly elaborates this idea to show how such critical activity is the very condition of a strong form of freedom, of the capacity to be free of manipulation and the sway of unexamined ideas and attitudes.

Six chapters treat consecutively the theory of knowledge; the self and personal identity; moral philosophy; social and political philosophy; society, science and technology; and critical thinking. There follows a brief glossary of important philosophical terms and eminent figures, a section on suggestions for further reading and an index. The chapters are not equally successful. Some, it seemed to me — and I know that some experienced teachers would disagree with this assessment — are pitched too low (for university study). All show an educated judgment, and it is a pleasing feature that the major thinkers in each field are often the stations of departure. Falzon manages to cover, in his casual and economical manner, in the last three chapters especially, an impressively broad tract of philosophy. In ‘Antz — Social and Political Philosophy’, some of the fundamental ideas of Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Kant and Mill get an airing and are illustrated with the help of Antz, 1984, Clockwork Orange and other films. Here, and in the following chapter, there is also, refreshingly, discussion of Marx and his successors in the Frankfurt school on the fusion of the political and the economic, and on labour relations and the alienating impact of technology. In these chapters, the discussion achieves not only range but some depth, and Falzon is well abetted by the movies. Although, as he points out, Western films concerned with labour relations are scarce, the impact of science and technology on society has been a major theme of filmic contemplation at least since Fritz Lang’s Metropolis.

Less successful, it seemed to me, were the earlier chapters where filmic illustration preponderates over philosophical argument. The first chapter takes up the perennials: appearance and reality, scepticism and certainty, rationalism and
Empiricism, relativism, truth. Here the imagery of Plato’s cave (in which bound observers mistake for realities the shadows of things borne behind them) and Descartes’ all-deceiving demon are particularly happy for Falzon’s purposes. They are the master images of illusion as well as the prefiguration of cinematic experience. The distinction between appearance and reality, the possibility of radical deception, and the uncertainty of inference from ‘mere’ sense experience to the existence of an ‘external’ world are illustrated by snaps from a range of movies including *The Matrix*, *Cinema Paradiso* and Bertolucci’s wonderful *The Conformist*. It works well, up to a point. The reality-simulating supercomputer of *The Matrix* is a hi-tech demon that Descartes would have liked. The student who knows the film will certainly grasp the philosophical problems it subtends. But an excess of illustration displaces argument. Film, for all its illustrative and dramatic powers, is not a strong philosophical medium. It cannot ruminate, pursue alternatives and objections, arrive at rationally persuasive conclusions. When the time comes to put some solutions on the table, to consider, for example, Plato’s extraordinary conception of reality as consisting of unchanging, rationally apprehensible Forms subsisting in a realm apart from that of sense or image, the cursory preparation for Plato’s conclusion is likely to leave the student perplexed, and not entirely profitably.

Philosophical exploration riding on the movies has other liabilities. I found myself less interested when I didn’t know the movie being discussed, and I wondered how many students would be familiar with *High Noon* (Kant on duty), *The Conformist* (Plato’s cave) or *Twelve Angry Men* (informal logic) and other superb but aged movies like them. I suppose that lunchtime screenings can always be arranged.

Much more troubling for their philosophical use is the disturbing fact that, with very few exceptions, movies do not generate a will to action. All those films about science and technology out of control, of the horrors of war and poverty, should scare the pants off us and translate into political action. But they don’t. Most films function like daydream and masturbatory fantasy, as a substitute for action and emotional engagement not as a provocative to them. They don’t generate real concern, they mollify and suppress concern. Moreover, most films, especially most American films, are radically untrue to reality. (To get a glimpse of this, contrast just about anything from Hollywood with the marvellous, modest movies that came out of the Eastern bloc in the 1960s and 1970s.) The immensity of that radical unrealism is now hard to discern, in part because the omnipresence of deadening shallowness, lies and distortion in film itself and other omnipresent media disable our capacity to distinguish what is true to life. Falzon believes, rightly I think, that there is a need to ‘bring philosophy down to earth’ and to put it in touch with concrete realities. But if I am right about film, then its illustrative use to that end is a hazardous device.