

Does Philosophy Meet Film in Plato's Cave? Or at the Pharmacy? Reflections on *Memento*



We are sitting in a dark, underground cave. Our backs are warmed by its only light source, a fire blazing in its centre, tended by sophists. We watch the firelight reflected upon the anterior wall of the cave, and deceive ourselves that these flickerings, and the shadows made by the sophists, be truth. Only the most motivated of us will eventually turn to see the machinations at the fire, and then look past this to the speck of sunlight glimpsed through a narrow and rugged passage that leads up to the outer-world. Those who manage to drag themselves through this passage and into the world above are the philosophers. We philosophers are better than those left wallowing in the illusions of the cave.¹ Or so writes Plato, in that text most seminal for Western philosophy, *The Republic*.

Not surprisingly, many philosophers—quite unreflectively—equate film with these cave illusions that captivate the people. Not only is Plato's cave analogy a powerful image, and one that dominates the philosophical imagination to this day, but the mechanics of viewing film do, after all, lend to such an appropriation. The darkened room, the screen, the flickering light projected thereupon, all resonate with the apparatus of Plato's illustration. However, many metaphysical assumptions are also thereby imported to the analogy. Philosophers often consider film a derivative mode of philosophising: a representation of ideas that were first germinated and propagated by philosophers, in writing. At best, many philosophers see film as a useful pedagogical tool for the illustration of concepts: as the medium for ideas otherwise inaccessible to students (who no longer have the capacity to read), but with little philosophical value in itself. The real source of knowledge is the sunlit world above, the dwelling place of the philosophers. Other sources of light—the projector, for instance—are only pale imitations of the Truth of a philosophical text.

In what follows I wish to challenge this common misconception about the relation between philosophy and film. I argue that film should be understood as a partner in dialogue with written philosophy, rather than as parasitic upon it. Moreover, film is a medium that allows thought to “happen” differently. That is to say, by means of film we must approach ideas in a manner in which—as readers of text—we are for the most part unaccustomed. This difference in the ‘transmission’ of thought allows for the creation of new philosophical insight. In order to distance the philosophical film from its association with the illusions of Plato's cave, I will invoke another of Plato's analogies, the story of

the origin of writing from his *Phaedrus*. I will reflect upon this parable with reference to Christopher Nolan's 'cult' film, *Memento* (2000).

The Meeting of Philosophy and Film

For a number of years now, philosophers have looked to film as a resource for thought. This is partly due to pedagogical considerations: being predominantly a visual culture, our students inevitably associate ideas with films they have seen; and now that the worm has turned, so to speak, and lecturers are also assessed by their students, it is increasingly important that lessons are not only accessible, but entertaining. Additionally, film is such a fast growing research area (especially relative to philosophy), that some are motivated by a desire to maintain philosophy's academic relevance. In this case, the emphasis rests upon what philosophy can bring to film studies, rather than what the study of film might bring to philosophical dialogue.² Yet, it is arguable that films are also becoming increasingly 'philosophy-savvy.' That is to say, the thought and contemplation that was once invested only in reading has to a large extent migrated to cinema, which is now a favoured source of spiritual and intellectual material. The 'cult' film is a phenomenon of this cultural shift: films such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Fight Club* (1999), and *Being John Malkovich* (1999)—not to mention the television shows *The X-Files*, *The Sopranos*, and *Buffy*—are returned to again and again because they offer viewers insight into the meaning of their lives.

However, notwithstanding the growing use of film as a resource for philosophy teachers, the approach taken to film is often conservative. For instance, films *about* philosophy—such as Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993)—are the most obvious, but not always the best choice for the teaching of philosophy. Likewise, if we look merely for a rearticulation of a well-known philosophical argument or example within the film, which itself has nothing to add to a philosophical conversation, then we simply adhere to the "Plato's cave" paradigm of the relation between film and thought. If, on the other hand, we attempt to find in the film a *response* to philosophical discourse, then we are better able to engage with that film philosophically. Ironically, by merely condescending to film, and assuming that it is an inferior medium for thought in relation to text, we limit our ability to think philosophically about it.

Take, for example, the film *Memento*. To summarise the plot as briefly as I can, the film's protagonist, Leonard Shelby, has lost his short-term memory because of an injury sustained during an incident in which he lost his wife. Although Leonard cannot make new memories, and so is functionally disabled, he nonetheless has set out to investigate his wife's murder, and to avenge its perpetrator. Along the way, his disability, and project of revenge, are exploited by others for their own purposes. The film, of course, contains a twist, to which I will return in the philosophical explication of the film. This film is rich with provocations for the philosophically inquisitive mind. It interrogates the relation of personal identity to memory (taking up a question addressed by Locke); it poses epistemological and ethical questions; it revisits the old chestnut of subjective idealism. It

also addresses the debate over the relation of writing to truth that has occupied philosophy for millennia, and this is where my analysis finds its point of entry: because this issue is not just wearily ‘rehearsed’ by the film, in a derivative manner, but the film’s treatment of the debate *responds* to philosophy, putting into question the priority that we award philosophical writing over film. I will summarise Plato’s argument in the *Phaedrus* before turning again to its treatment in *Memento*.

Speech and Writing in Plato’s Phaedrus and in Memento



In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates propounds a philosophical point with the use of an ‘illustration’—perhaps an ancient equivalent to film—from fable. The Egyptian divinity, Theuth, he says, invented numbers, arithmetic, geometry, and gambling... and writing, which he promotes to the King, Thamus, as an aid to memory and to wisdom. Writing, Theuth argues, will greatly extend our

intellectual capacities, as a prosthetic memory. It will free our minds for more productive pursuits. Thamus, however, disagrees, citing possible dangers that would attend this supplementation of memory. He characterises writing as a *pharmakon*—as both a medicine and a poison—that:

...will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. (Plato, 1995, 275A. pp. 79 - 80)

We find in this passage a clear delineation between outside and inside: an intrinsic kernel of memory and truth is opposed to the external and alien insignia that threaten to erode it. The ‘menace from without’ that Plato addresses in this text imperils a living, oral discourse. He fears that writing poses a threat to dialogue because when you ask it to explain itself, writing “continues to signify just that very same thing forever” (Plato, 1995, 275D. pp. 80 - 1). Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of whether or not Plato was *right* to distrust writing (and, ironically, to do so in the medium of writing), I would like to propose that, rather than the illusions within Plato’s cave, we might rearticulate film’s relation to philosophy according to this schema: thus, film is a living discourse, to philosophy’s written word. Film leaves an opening to response that is closed, or at least obscured and abjured, by the philosophical text.

Let us return to *Memento*. In this film we find an interesting development of the writing as *pharmakon* idea. Leonard supplements his missing short-term memories with all

manner of written-upon objects, from post-it notes to Polaroids: even his own skin becomes a surface for writing and the recording of memory. As he comes to regard one of his written notes as certain, Shelby inscribes it permanently upon himself, as a tattoo. Thus he brings it closer to his interiority, so that it represents the kernel of memory that writing replaces. These truths are enumerated as ‘facts’ one through six, the creed of Shelby’s revenge: pieces of a puzzle that, once deciphered, will enable him to avenge his wife’s murderer. Yet the facts of which Shelby is most certain, and that he most cherishes, are the memories laid down before the accident: memories of his wife, of his work as an insurance investigator, and of one case in particular, that of Sammy Jankis, whose disorder parallels Shelby’s but for the fact that Jankis did not find a systematic use for writing. Sammy Jankis is the case against which Leonard defines himself: because Sammy did not have a system, he allowed his wife to trick him into killing her, by over-administering her insulin. Leonard Shelby, like Theuth, places all his faith in his writing ‘invention,’ his system of note taking that provides him with the order required to act. In a line from the film, Shelby says, “you learn to trust your own handwriting.” His notes are advice passed to one self from a previous self: the only person he trusts not to manipulate him. But as King Thamus warns, and as we find later in the film, writing corrupts absolutely, as Shelby’s handwriting cannot protect him even from himself.

The Priority of the Word

We might ask at this point, of the status of the short story, *Memento Mori*, from which the film is adapted. When I first set out to mine the philosophical depths of *Memento*, I sought the short story—the ‘original’ written account—for the distilled kernel of truth from which the film was derived. Heir to the legacy of Plato’s cave analogy, I had assumed that thought would have originated in the mind of the author, only to be copied within the film.



It seemed sensible to go directly to the source of the film’s meaning: the story upon which it is based. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of *Memento*, born of a collaboration between two brothers—the author of a short story (Jonathan Nolan), and the film’s director (Christopher Nolan)—the film itself contributes to the discourse begun by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* in a more complex and creative manner than does the short story. To an extent, this complexity and creativity is enabled by the medium of film: not only because images are far more economical communicators than are words, and the scope of a short story is limited; but also because the manner in which film can arrange ideas is less constrained than is the case with text. Let us compare the two, in order to draw out the differences between them.

The story also addresses the double bind of writing described by King Thamus. Jonathan Nolan writes:

They tried to teach you to make lists in grade school, remember? Back when your day planner was the back of your hand. And if your assignments came off in the shower, well, then they didn't get done. No direction, they said, No discipline. So they tried to get you to write it all down somewhere more permanent.

Of course, your grade-school teachers would be laughing their pants wet if they could see you now. Because you've become the exact product of their organizational lessons. Because you can't even take a piss without consulting one of your lists.

They were right. Lists are the only way out of this mess. (Nolan, pp. 3 - 4)

Nolan provides a 'developmental' account of Plato's 'writing as *pharmakon*' idea: 'discipline' and 'direction' are educational outcomes of a process by which all spontaneity and natural ability—or internal truth—is extinguished. Leonard (or Earl, as he is in the story) is every man: he lives according to the dictates of his personal organiser, communicates by email, he knows what he thinks because of the notes written in the margins of his books, and where he has been according to his credit card account.³ As King Thamus counsels, writing can come to replace memory, as well as a vital engagement with one's own needs and with others. 'Earl' is a man of our times: the 'last man' of Thamus' prophesied emptying of memory, and the loss of dialogue.

Yet, I would like to suggest that the film opens up a more critical dimension of the double bind of writing than does the short story. First, the film—as with the story—presents the protagonist as utterly dependent upon note taking, and this reliance is rewarded with a sense of order and discipline that make his life liveable. However, only the film extends this idea further by showing that once the interior of the subject is emptied—once there is no memory—writing can no more be relied upon as a source of truth than can memory. Without a short-term memory, Leonard trusts only his own handwriting: He says, "memories are just an interpretation, not a record." Yet what the film brings to light is that writing, too, can dissimulate. Its permanence deceives us into thinking it truer than the fleeting memory, but as Plato warns, writing cannot speak back when it is addressed. It can be appropriated and misappropriated to any interest: and, as we find in *Memento*, the written word can even be used by the subject's own ephemeral interest, *against* himself. Leonard exploits his own disorder—and his reliance upon his handwriting—to deceive *himself* into disposing of the purveyor of a truth that he refuses. He plants clues in writing that he knows will condemn "Teddy" (another character) in his own eyes at a later time, once he has forgotten his act of self-deception. At the self-conscious moment when Leonard fabricates evidence against Teddy, he makes a mockery of the project—to determine the facts in writing—that founds all of which he is certain. The interest that links Teddy's license plate number to his wife's murderer is silenced as soon as the writing is brought into a new context: thus demonstrating Plato's concern that writing cannot speak back when spoken to. Writing ultimately has the power to pervert truth, but its *physical* permanence (Leonard tattoos Teddy's license number onto his leg, creating for it the status of certainty) gives the illusion that it is immortal and unchanging, as we might imagine truth to be.

A second point that the film contributes to this philosophical dialogue comes in the form of a retort to Plato, rather than supporting his arguments in the *Phaedrus*. It concerns the 'truth' that Teddy verbalises to Leonard, but which does not survive his record-making

procedure, and in fact leads Teddy to his death. Teddy tells Leonard that he had already disposed of the man who attacked his wife, but cannot remember having done so. Furthermore, according to Teddy, Leonard had deleted text from the police report in order to create a puzzle for himself: in order, that is, ultimately, to keep his project of revenge going indefinitely. None of this is new to the *Phaedrus*: it is still a case of the danger of writing. The third truth that Teddy tells is the most debilitating both to Leonard, and to Plato: for, Teddy asserts that Leonard's memories that precede the accident—that he holds most certain, and that secure for him his identity—are unreliable. According to Teddy, when Leonard tells his cautionary tale about Sammy Jankis, he conceals himself within the story. Teddy plants doubt into Leonard's mind by reminding him that his wife had survived the attack, that she was diabetic, and that it was he who could not remember that he had already given her the insulin. Accordingly, memory, like writing, is untrustworthy. It can be manipulated and altered, and so can be relied upon as a source of truth and certainty as little as writing can. This truth upsets Plato's metaphysics as surely as it threatens Leonard's identity. Neither memory nor writing represents a pure point of origin: each is a trace, mutable not only to the interest that writes it, but also to the interest that 'reads' it.

Text versus Film?

How can we apply *Memento*'s insights about the limits of memory and of writing to the question posed earlier, of the relation of film to thought? It is the 'form' of *Memento*—the way the film has been edited together—that enables the critique, first, of the priority of writing over memory, and then of memory itself. The sequence of scenes allowed the film to distort the viewer's sense of temporality, so that we have to put together the facts with Leonard, from a distorted perspective, thereby analogous to his own. However, *Memento* (the film) is decidedly non-linear not only because it is arranged out of temporal sequence. It also has a non-linear relation to thought. While writing *tends* to be organised linearly, a film such as *Memento* can open up thoughts to the viewer that then must remain suspended, until a point comes when we are better able to make sense of them. One thought does not have to lead inevitably to the next, as the philosophical argument demands. Film does not use argument to explore an idea, but this is not necessarily a failing for it, philosophically speaking. Film can allow the multiple consequences of a particular premise to resonate all at once. Where the philosophical argument attempts to direct the reader along the groove of thought already routed by the philosopher, film opens itself to a variety of viewpoints, and thereby allows a dialogue to occur with the viewer. It is a dialogue most densely populated with doubts and questions, and only sparsely inhabited with certainties, but perhaps this is in keeping with the Socratic tradition from which philosophy began. On this basis, perhaps film is better aligned with the oral tradition of story telling that Plato defended, than to the illusions native to his cave analogy. And perhaps such a realignment of our understanding, of the relation of film to thought, will aid philosophers in exploiting this important resource for teaching and for thinking.

Endnotes:

1. See Plato, 1955, Book VII, 514 – 9, pp. 278 – 84. There is a somewhat ironic relation between the ‘message’ of Plato’s cave analogy—that the masses can only access ‘truth’ through illusion—and his own reliance upon the image of the cave to convey this message. As Chris Falzon remarks, in his recently published *Philosophy Goes to the Movies*:

The image Plato is using is not an illusion or mere appearance that we have to tear our eyes away from in order to start to do philosophy. Rather, it is playing a positive role in his philosophical discourse, as an illustration or illumination of his position...(Falzon, 2002 p. 4).

While I would contend that Plato’s use of the Cave simile extends beyond mere ‘illustration’ or ‘illumination,’ Falzon also indicates Michèle Le Doeuff’s argument, in *The Philosophical Imaginary*, that the image does not merely represent, but actually structures the philosophical argument.

2. Freeland and Wartenberg, in the Introduction to their *Philosophy and Film*, take precisely this approach, stating that “philosophy has its own unique perspective to bring to the exploration of film,” and “philosophy has the potential to make distinctive and valuable contributions to the study of film” (p. 1). That film might bring a unique perspective to philosophy is not considered.

3. Chuck Palahniuk has written an excellent response to *Memento* along these lines in *Metaphilm*. <http://www.metaphilm.com/philms/memento.html>

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