

# *Philosophy and Film*

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**Tutoring: Thursdays, 2:45pm-3:45pm**

## **Course Description**

This course examines various philosophies through literature and film, along with film aesthetics. Topics we will investigate include:

- How can film function as philosophy?
- How do we engage with narrative characters in film?
- What is genre? How does it affect how we understand a film?
- How do different narration and story structure affect how we view and understand film?
- Is morality relative? Why or why not?
- Is it important to be skeptical? Why or why not?
- How can we be certain that our senses are not lying to us?
- Is there only one right way to live?
- Is civil disobedience good for society? Why or why not?
- Will A.I. be humanity greatest achievement or its worst nightmare?

We will explore these issues primarily through careful film analysis, by thoughtfully viewing selected films, which will lead class to discussions, journal writing, and other related assignments. Our overall aim is to develop a reasoned, considered perspective on film as an art form insofar as it can mimic philosophy, elicit viewer emotions, offer different narration and narrative structure, and convey to us crucial insights regarding fictional characters and other human beings.

**NOTE:** All the films for this course have been chosen to make you think philosophically about film and life. They will require you to view films in a way different from which you have been accustomed. They will challenge you intellectually and visually, so be prepared to analyze them, not simply sit back and regard them merely as entertainment. It is, in fact, essential to take notes on these films while or immediately after viewing them. You will also occasionally read essays on these films or other related literature, which will all help you to understand the issues, techniques, or themes/philosophies in the films. As a secondary approach, this class aims to put to rest the simple-minded view that films are “just entertainment” and not to be taken seriously. Still, it stands to reason that some philosophical essays (and not just the movies) will be central to the class.

## **Rationale:**

- According to research, people learn abstract, new, and novel concepts more easily when they are presented in both verbal and visual form (Salomon, 1979).
- Other research shows that visual media make concepts more accessible to a person than text media and help with later recall (Cowen, 1984).
- In Willingham's (2009) research he asked a simple question to make his point, "Why do students remember everything that's on television and forget what we lecture?" – because visual media helps students retain concepts and ideas.
- Films are ideologies that speak to themselves, but they are also cultural artifacts that represent our values and ideas as well as our dreams and nightmares.
- To explore the idea that film is philosophy is to take an intellectual walk up the down staircase and back into ourselves, what we value, who we are, and who we are becoming.

## **Required Assignments**

- Attendance (daily)
- Entrance Ticket (daily)
- Exit Ticket (daily)
- Class Participation (daily)
- Note-taking (daily)
- Various writing projects (TBD)
- Thinker's Journal (weekly/online)
- Socratic Dialogues (TBD)
- Quizzes/Tests (for each film we watch)
- Existential Project (second semester only)

## **Grading Policy**

Number grades in the course will be awarded according to the criteria described below:

- **90-100.** Achievement that is outstanding relative to basic course requirements—for example, written work that demonstrates superior understanding or has a special quality, such as a particularly insightful analysis, criticism, or reflection.
- **80-89.** Achievement that is significantly higher than basic course requirements; e.g., work that shows solid understanding.
- **70-79.** Achievement that fulfills basic course requirements; e.g., work that is clear or noteworthy way and shows some understanding, but presents it partially, incompletely, or awkwardly.
- **65-69.** Achievement that is worth course credit, but is not satisfactory; e.g., an essay that forces the reader to do far too much work to understand it, due to numerous and/or serious grammatical errors, incomplete, inadequate or poor reasoning or poor writing.
- **55 or below.** Achievement that does not earn course credit.

## **Other Course Policies and Information**

- *Academic Dishonesty.* All work for this course must be written/done by the person submitting it for evaluation. It must also be written/done for this course. These requirements include anything submitted for credit in the class. Anyone found to plagiarize, cheat, or demonstrate academic dishonesty, in any way, will receive a failing grade for the assignment and possibly the course.
- *Assigned Readings.* To understand film as philosophy or the philosophy behind a film will require that you gain a certain critical foundation or reading comprehension that will allow you to better analyze, discuss, and synthesize concepts that you see and hear. We will therefore read texts that relate to the film and/or their themes and must make every effort to read these assigned materials. One way to achieve the comprehension needed to discuss philosophical texts intelligently is to read the material carefully and more than once: first for a general grasp, then a second or additional times (generally more slowly) for a deeper, more detailed understanding.
- *Attendance, Participation, and Industry.* Your grade in this class will depend heavily on your active participation and industry, which can demonstrate through thoughtful discussion, comments, and questions regarding the films, the character, and the thoughts they elicit. Of course, this presupposes regular attendance. Missing numerous class sessions will negatively affect your grade, and if persistent will lead to failure. In addition, only rarely or never saying anything in class will negatively impact your grade.
- *A further note on the films.* Some films we watch will contain mature content (i.e., “R” Rated). I will inform you in advance which films contain mature content and exactly what is that content, so you can have the option to not view them.

## **Classroom Norms**

1. Entrance Ticket: 5-10 minutes
2. Mini-Lesson/Review: 5-10 minutes
- 3a. Guided Reading/Viewing: 20-30 minutes
- 3b. Socratic Dialogue (one to conclude every unit): 20 minutes
4. Exit Ticket: 5-10 minutes

## Unit 1: Real/Apearances?

### *What's the Big Idea?*

If philosophy has a patron saint, it is Socrates, and yet we really do not know what he believed or argued. Unusual for a philosopher, Socrates refused to write anything down. It is mainly through his star pupil, Plato that we have some idea about who Socrates the thinker might have been. Socrates is said to have demonstrated his wisdom through dialogues he had with people he met in the marketplace. Plato wrote down these conversations, now known as Platonic Dialogues; in them, we get a sense about what Socrates was like, how clever he was and how infuriating. Even so, it is not as straightforward as that, as we cannot tell whether Plato was writing down what Socrates really said, or whether he was putting ideas into a character he calls Socrates.

One idea that most people believe is Plato's rather than Socrates' is that the world is not all as it seems. Plato believed that there is a significant difference between appearance and reality. He thought that most people mistake appearances for reality. We think we understand, but we don't. Only philosophers understand what the world is truly like. They discover it by thinking rather than relying on their senses.

To make his point, Plato described a cave. In that imaginary cave, there are people chained facing a wall; they cannot turn around. Above them are flickering shadows that they believe are real things. They are not. What they see are shadows formed from objects and people crossing a fire behind them. These people spend their whole lives thinking that the shadows projected on the wall are the real world. One day, someone breaks free from his chains and turns towards the fire. His eyes are blurry at first, but then he starts to see where he is. He stumbles out the cave and eventually is able to look at the sun. When he comes back to the cave, no one believes what he tells them about the outside world. The man who breaks free is like a philosopher. He sees beyond appearances. Ordinary people have little idea about reality because they are content with looking at what's in front them rather than thinking deeply about it. But appearances are deceptive. What they see are shadows, not reality. *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show* explore this idea in their own unique way. We will watch, analyze and discuss these two films to examine and understand how closely they resemble Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" and to what degree is Plato's idea plausible or not. We will, of course, start by reading Plato's famous allegory and eventually read, discuss (maybe even debate), and write about other people's thoughts on not just Plato's philosophy, but also how that idea is depicted in the films.

## **(Unit 1: Real/Appearances?)—continued**

### Essential Questions:

- What is “real”? How do we define “real”? If real is what we can feel, smell, taste and see, then is “real” simply not just electrical signals interpreted by our brains?
- How can appearances be different than reality?
- How do we know that what we perceive is real? What influences our perceptions?
- To what extent is reality a social construct?
- Is it better to live happily in ignorance than miserably in reality? Why or why not?

### Films:

- *The Truman Show* (1998)
- *The Matrix* (1999)

Literary Texts: “Allegory of the Cave” by Plato (from *The Republic*, Book VII)

### Informational Texts:

- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton - Chapter 1: “The Man Who Asked Questions: Socrates and Plato”
- “The Matrix - A Complex, Modern Adaptation of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave” by Rebecca (*Vector* | February 16, 2012)
- “Life After ‘Truman’? The Televisual Imaginary and the Symptomatic Eruption of the Real in Peter Weir’s ‘Truman Show’” by Salah El Moncef
- “The Evolutionary Argument Against Reality” by Amanda Geffer (*Quanta Magazine* | April 21, 2016)

Art: “Allegory of the Cave” by Steve Zapata (also known as Shock-Socks)

### Optional:

- *The Complete Philosophy Files* by Stephen Law – File 2. “How Do I Know the World Isn’t Virtual?” (“Allegory of the Cave” by Plato – A Retelling)
- Claymation Video (“Allegory of the Cave”)

## Unit 2: Certain Doubt

### *What's the Big Idea?*

Skepticism, also known as Pyrrhonism or Pyrrhonic Skepticism after the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho, is the philosophical position that one should refrain from making truth claims, and avoid asserting final truths. This is not necessarily the same as claiming that truth is impossible (which would itself be a truth claim), but rather that there is no such thing as certainty in human knowledge. Pyrrho, who like Socrates did not write anything down, championed the idea that we know nothing, and even that is not certain; we should not rely on what we believe to be true; we might be mistaken, for everything can be questioned, everything doubted, so the best option, then, is to keep an open mind: if we do not commit, we will not be disappointed. True skepticism then is more like an attitude rather than a belief. It is what we might call the willingness to suspend our belief, and requires us to apply reason to all ideas that we are presented with. A skeptic's position can be summed up in two words: "prove it." What does proof look and sound like, however?

Rene Descartes, who was not sure he could trust his senses either, felt he had a method for deciding certainty, a way to prove if something is or is not true. He called it the "Method of Cartesian Doubt." It goes: if you have the slightest doubt that something is true, reject it as true. What if you have evidence that something is true, though? What would make that evidence, evidence is perhaps and even more challenging question? Take religious belief for example. Is a book written by men evidence that there is a supernatural being responsible for all life? If there is no evidence to prove a divine creator is this evidence that there is none? As Carl Sagan put it, "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence." Which leads us back to question what is evidence, what is proof, what is certainty? Can we ever trust what we think we know or what we see, feel, hear, touch, or taste? Is uncertainty the only certainty? Is skepticism therefore our only defense against ignorance, superstition, and other beliefs governing daily life? We might never know, but if we commit to uncertainty, then perhaps our disappointment too will be uncertain.

To examine this further, we will watch two films by Christopher Nolan that explore this very concept: *Memento* and *Inception*. We will also read a short story by Jonathan Nolan, which is the basis for the film *Memento* and read, discuss, and debate articles and essays on skepticism, including what is it exactly, its history, its importance today, and whether it is healthy or dangerous.

## **(Unit 2: Certain Doubt)—*continued***

### Essential Questions:

- Is it important to be skeptical? Why or why not?
- What is philosophical skepticism and how is it different than naïve cynicism and doubt?
- To what extent is philosophical skepticism a rational standpoint?
- How does philosophical skepticism help or hinder our understanding and knowledge?
- To what extent is our ability to reason reliable and how should we try to understand or learn once our ability to reason becomes useless?
- To what extent can we trust our senses? Or rather, how can we be certain that our senses are not lying to us?

### Films:

- *Memento* (2000)
- *Inception* (2010)

### Literary Texts: “Memento Mori” by Jonathan Nolan

### Informational Texts:

- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton - Chapter 3: “We Know Nothing: Pyrrho”
- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton - Chapter 11: “Could You be Dreaming: René Descartes”
- “How Our Brains Make Memories” by Greg Miller (*Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2010)
- “Think You’re an Ethical Person? You May Just Have a Selective Memory” by Beth Mole
- “Your Memory Isn’t What You Think It Is” by Arthur Dobrin, D.S.W (from *Psychology Today*, June 16, 2013)
- “Wonder and Skepticism” by Carl Sagan (*Skeptical Inquirer* | Volume 19.1 | January / February 1995)

### Art:

- “Got Doubt?” by Anji Johnston
- “Metamorphosis-Doubt” (2011) by Miao Xiaochun

### Unit 3: Relatively Moral?

#### *What's the Big Idea?*

Whether Socrates' ideas as we have come to know them were his own or his student's is a debate that might never be settled. Yet unlike most philosophical quandaries, it is not an existential dilemma. Socrates, however, might have put to rest one debate. In a conversation with Euthydemus, Socrates asked him whether being deceitful counted as being immoral. Of course, it does, Euthydemus replied. He thought it was obvious. Socrates then asked, if your friend is feeling very low and might kill himself, and you steal his knife, isn't that a deceitful act? Of course, it is. But isn't it *moral* rather than *immoral* to do that? It's a good thing, not a bad one—despite being a deceitful act. Yes, says Euthydemus. What Euthydemus did not realize was that Socrates' counter-example showed that morality is relative. Is morality relative, though? *Mean Creek* and *Gone Baby Gone* are two films that bring this question to the forefront, but they also shed light on what is morality in general and how it applies to individuals and laws. These films can be seen as counter-examples to Socrates' question about what is or is not moral. We will therefore watch, analyzed and discuss these two films to examine and understand whether morality is relative and whether these examples further complicate the question or settle the debate. We will also read a short moral tale by Yann Martel as well as two essays on moral relativism as additional fodder for our inquiries, wonderings, discussions, debates, and writings.

#### Essential Questions:

- Is morality relative or is there only one way to be morally right or morally wrong?
- To what extent is morality a culturally conditioned response, i.e., learn from our environment? Or rather, to what extent is morality intrinsic, i.e., present in us from birth?
- Is the law or rules governing moral behavior always necessary and fair or are they arbitrary?
- Is there a difference between the law and what is right and wrong? Should there be? Who or what determines the difference?
- To what extent is a *crime* different from a *sin*? Is a *sin* just a religious belief and should it therefore not be seen or treated the same as a *crime*, particularly in a society that separates church from state?
- How should our society collectively deal with criminals? Should we deal differently with sinners?
- To what extent does justice/injustice differ from fairness/unfairness?
- How should our society collectively distinguish between *just* and *unjust* punishments?

#### Films:

- *Mean Creek* (2004)
- *Gone Baby Gone* (2007)

#### Literary Texts:

- “We Ate the Children Last” by Yann Martel

#### Informational Texts:

- “Moral Relativism Explained” by Gilbert Harman
- “Morality Is a Culturally Conditioned Response” by Jesse Prinz (from *Philosophy Now*: Issue 82, January/February 2011)

Art: “Morality Lesson” by Joanna Mialkowska

## Unit 4: God/Complex?

### *What's the Big Idea?*

In the gothic classic *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's warns the reader to consider if just because something can be done should it be done? Twenty years before Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, Luigi Galvani found that electricity could be used to cause muscles in the dead to spasm, opening the door to the possibility that reanimation was possible. It was in this mind frame that Shelley began *Frankenstein*. Shelley's story is a troubling tale that puts forth questions that have been repeated over the centuries by many people: (1) Do people have the right to play God? (2) Can any good come from it? (3) Can man come to terms with his playing God? Throughout the centuries, human have wrestled with such questions, because the ability to create life as Victor Frankenstein does by reanimating bodies have long been considered immoral and something that only God can do. Victor cannot see that what he is creating is potentially problematic and takes no responsibility for the end product.

Today, scientists, in their quest to give birth to A.I., are turning fiction into fact. Will their achievement, if it does indeed happen, bring us to paradise or will paradise be lost forever? We cannot know for sure, so as an elaborate thought experiment we will watch two science fiction possibilities for AI, read two science fiction short stories that similarly depict AI in the future and then read, discuss, debate, and write about different perspectives, in articles and essays, on what AI might mean to us moving forward.

## **(Unit 4: God/Complex?)—continued**

### Essential Questions:

- Just because something can be done should it be done?
- Do people have the right to play God? Can any good come from it? Can we come to terms with his playing God?
- To what extent does creating a sentient AI represent a god-complex?
- Is our collective desire to create sentient AI us playing God or just social evolution through technology?
- Will A.I. be humanity greatest achievement or its worst nightmare? How can we be certain? Is the potential reward worth the potential risk?

### Films:

- *Her* (2013)
- *Ex Machina* (2015)

### Literary Texts:

- “Tomorrow Is Waiting” by Holli Mintzer
- “True Love” by Isaac Asimov

### Informational Texts:

- “Dyson Wants to Build Domestic Robots That ‘See and Think’ Like We Do” by Ellis Hamburger (*The Verge* | February 9, 2014)
- “Google Isn’t the Only Company Working on Artificial intelligence. It’s Just the Richest.” by Derrick Harris (*GigaOm* | January 29, 2014)
- “Google’s Grand Plan to Make Your Brain Irrelevant” by Marcus Wohlsen (*Wired* | January 27, 2014)
- “Musk, Wozniak and Hawking Urge Ban on Warfare AI and Autonomous Weapons” by Samuel Gibbs (*The Guardian* | July 27, 2015)
- “What Happens When Artificial Intelligence Turns on Us?” by Erica R. Hendry (*Smithsonian* | January 21, 2014)
- “What Jobs Will the Robots Take?” (Published in *The Atlantic* | January 2014 | Business Section)
- “Why We Should Think About the Threat of Artificial Intelligence” by Gary Marcus (*The New Yorker* | October 24, 2013)

Art: “A.I.: The Evolution Man?” (digital concept art)

## Unit 5: Born Free?

### *What's the Big Idea?*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his dramatic opening lines to his immensely powerful treatise *The Social Contract*, wrote, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave than they are.” It was his contention that humans were naturally good but become corrupted and influenced by human society and institutions. He further preached that we can improve ourselves by returning to nature and living a natural life at peace with our neighbors and ourselves. Some people have literally and figuratively taken his words and turned them into action. In the films *Into the Wild* (based on a true story) and *Captain Fantastic*, the main characters choose to leave society to live in the wild. Like Rousseau, they believed society to be a corrupting influence and wanted to live at peace with nature and themselves. Similarly, but not exactly in the same spirit, several principle characters in James Joyce’s short story, “The Dead,” want to escape the restrictive routines and the repetitive, mundane details that mark their everyday life. They want to escape society’s institutions, find new experiences, have adventures, and discover happiness. They don’t want to die and regret never living. They, unlike the characters in *Into the Wild* and *Captain Fantastic*, do not feel like they have free will and determinism. They feel trapped and imprisoned by social institution. Is this how we all feel?

If we are born free, as Rousseau believed, and we willingly accept the social contract, then are the chains not our own? Or is free will and determinism a myth? *Into the Wild* certainly is not fiction, but is the life chosen by the main character the best way to live? Is there only one right way to live? Can we ever truly be free in a society or will we always feel trapped, imprisoned, corrupted, and/or influenced by its institutions and the restrictive routines, the repetitive and mundane features that define our lives? Maybe, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, freedom is anguish, but we must embrace and accept that we are our choices. In this unit, we will explore, discuss, debate, and write about this existential philosophy and the other ideas about freedom, society, and determinism, through films, literature, and other informational texts.

**(Unit 5: Born Free?)—continued**

Essential Questions:

- Is human nature inherently good or destructive? To what extent is our nature influenced and/or corrupted by society and its institutions?
- Was Jean-Jacques Rousseau right when he stated, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”? To what degree is society the chains?
- Why do we willingly accept the social contract?
- Is living in a society the only right way to live? Why or why not?
- Can we truly be free in a society? Or will we always feel trapped, imprisoned, corrupted, and/or influenced by its institutions and the restrictive routines, the repetitive and mundane features that define our lives?
- Is there no such thing as free will and determinism? Or are we conditioned/influenced to think the opposite due to our co-dependent relationship to society?

Films:

- *Into the Wild* (2007)
- *Captain Fantastic* (2016)

Literature Texts:

- “The Dead” by James Joyce
- “Three Questions” by Leo Tolstoy
- “I’m Dying” (from *A 4th Course of Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 More Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit* by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Hanoch McCarty, and Meladee McCarty)

Informational Texts:

- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton - Chapter 18: “Born Free: Jean-Jacques Rousseau”
- *A Little History of Philosophy* by Nigel Warburton - “The Anguish of Freedom: Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus”
- “There’s No Such Thing as Free Will” by Stephen Cave (*The Atlantic* | June 2016 Issue)
- “There’s No Such Thing as Free Will and Determinism” by Nicholas Clairmont (*The Atlantic* | June 1, 2016)

Art:

- “Escape from the Wall” by Matteo Pugliese
- “Freedom” by Uday Bhan Singh

Optional: “The Top 5 Regrets of the Dying” by Joe Martino (*Collective Evolution*, August 3, 2013)

## Unit 6: Anarchism and the Vendetta of Ideas

### *What's the Big Idea?*

In a letter written to Williams Stephens Smith in 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “God forbid we should ever be 20 years without...a rebellion. The people cannot be all, and always, well informed. The part which is wrong will be discontented in proportion to the ... facts they misconceive. If they remain quiet under such misconceptions it is a lethargy, the...death to the public liberty... [W]hat country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.... The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.” Jefferson is not necessarily arguing for anarchism, but he does suggest that without the occasional revolution, governments and people become complacent and lethargic, which will lead to a slow but eventual end to freedom. And so, we must ask, is a revolution the only way to preserve our freedom and must it be violent to be effective? Is there another way to remind government that it exists for us by us? What is the best way to remind ourselves that we should not fear government, but instead government should fear us? Or simply that government exists to ensure and protect our rights rather than to limit them or take them away. Is civil disobedience the answer? What about anarchy? In this unit, we will try to answer these questions, as we explore, discuss, debate, and write about them as they preexist in films, literature, and other informational texts.

### Essential Questions:

- Is a revolution the only way to preserve our freedom and must it be violent to be effective? Is there another way to remind government that it exists for us by us?
- What is the best way to remind ourselves that we should not fear government, but instead government should fear us? Or simply that government exists to ensure and protect our rights rather than to limit them or take them away. Is civil disobedience the answer? What about anarchy?

### Films:

- *SLC Punk!* (1998)
- *V for Vendetta* (2006)

### Literary Texts:

- “Before the Law” by Franz Kafka

### Informational Texts:

- “Anarchism: From Theory to Practice” by Daniel Guérin
- “Anarchism: Arguments for and Against” by Albert Meltzer
- “The Essential Difference Between Anarchism and Social Democracy” by Harold Quelch (*The Social Democrat*, October 1897, pp. 207-301; Transcribed: by Ted Crawford)

Art: “You Are Free” by Wenqing Yan (also known as yuumei)

### Optional:

- “Civil Disobedience,” an essay by Henry David Thoreau
- “On Civil Disobedience,” excerpted from an essay by Mohandas Gandhi
- *Fight Club* (1999 film, directed by David Fincher)