

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 8, 2016

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics



Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Challenges of Philosophical Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper is concerned with the connection between art, in particular literature and film, and philosophy. My basic question is how to understand claims such as the one made by literary critic in reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*, when he proclaims that "in this tale and in others Hawthorne tests the proposition that human identity is contingent and circumstantial, rather than an inherent essence – that is, not identity at all". These kinds of claims, which not only see art as coming together with knowledge seeking disciplines but as capable of philosophizing, raise the question of whether there is a category of philosophical art. Drawing an analogy with religious, pornographic and erotic art, I offer an array of challenges that philosophical art sets to aestheticians, the crucial of which is determining whether or how a work of art is or can be philosophical. My crucial concern is showing how the fact that an artwork is in some sense philosophical has implications for the identity of that artwork. After discussing some scepticism regarding the possibility of philosophical art, I proceed to show how this concern relates to artwork's interpretation and appreciation, as well as for our understanding of arts and philosophy as valuable cultural practices.

1. Philosophy in the Hands of an Artist

In commenting on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*, Leland S. Person (Person 2007, p. 49) claimed:

In this tale and in others Hawthorne tests the proposition that human identity is contingent and circumstantial, rather than an inherent essence – that is, not identity at all. We like to think that there is something in us – a soul, or some other core of identity, the continuity that memory gives us – that does not change. We may change, but at some deep level we remain the same person. Indeed, it is hard

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to think of ourselves in any other way; for if we do not have such a core essence in us, how do we know ourselves at all? This is precisely the problem that Reverend Hooper faces. Not only does he become a monster to his parishioners; he becomes a monster to himself.

This commentary might seem puzzling to those who think of notions such as ‘identity’, ‘continuity of memory’, or ‘knowledge of oneself’ as philosophical concepts. It is the philosophers who come up with all sorts of views on human identity and test various propositions regarding who we are, not literary authors. Literary authors write aesthetically pleasing stories about who we are, but they do not ask questions about it, and do not try to provide answers to them. Yet, on Person’s view, this is precisely what Hawthorne is doing: by writing a story about Reverend Hooper, who one day for no apparent reason put a black veil on his face, Hawthorne explores “what happens to our relationship with others – to the identity we have for others and for ourselves – when we make such a drastic, even if superficial, change in ourselves?” (p.47-8). If we grant that some questions, such as ‘what is our core identity’, are intrinsically philosophical questions, then it indeed seems that Hawthorne is stepping in philosopher’s shoes.

However, Person’s commentary is exemplary in illustrating numerous critical readings, not only of Hawthorne but of literary works more generally. Literary critics often see works of literary fiction and poetry as engaging with philosophical issues, sometimes even to the point when they create their own philosophical system. Thus, Mary Ann Perkins says: “Coleridge developed a framework for the reconciliation of thought, faith and experience which is potentially as generative of critical thought in the area of psychology, philosophy and religion, as Schelling and Hegel” (Perkins 1994, p. 1). Proclamations like these not only see works of literature as coming together with knowledge seeking disciplines, but they attribute an epistemological role to these works, claiming they engage with, or do philosophy.

As of lately, philosophers of more or less analytic bent have taken up this kind of ‘philosophy through literature’ approach and have expanded it to cinematic art and theatre, occasionally rekindling an old debate about the ways in which (absolute) music can express content, particularly philo-

sophical one.¹ In the hands of philosophers, the crucial question concerning the mutual bonding of art and philosophy is that of determining the scope of artwork's philosophical engagement and possibilities, with two main options. On the one hand, it is almost a triviality to say that certain artworks address philosophical concerns, in the sense that they illustrate some philosophical positions, claims or arguments. To put it somewhat formally, philosophy is *in* these works, and therefore they give content to otherwise abstract philosophical ideas and claims. This makes them helpful pedagogical tools that serve as an illustration, counterexample or intuition pumps. On the other hand, it seems that some artworks do more than just illustrate: they express original philosophical contribution and therefore are, or should be considered as, philosophy in their own right. Philip Kitcher offers such a view regarding Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, when he says "Mann merits our attention *as a contributor to the philosophical discussions in which his sources were engaged*" (Kitcher 2013, p. 10, italics original). Discussing the *Alien* series, Stephen Mulhall (Mulhall 2008, p.4) voices a 'philosophy through art' position with respect to cinema's philosophical engagement, claiming

I do not look at these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers. I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them, in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, nor a source of its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – films as philosophy.²

Not entirely unrelated are claims made by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1990), Alan Goldman (Goldman 2013) and Cora Diamond (Diamond 2010), who claim that literary works are better than

¹ See Philip Kitcher 2013, and Mark Evans Bond 2014 for discussions over music and philosophy.

² See also Christopher Falzon, who claims that films „have their own philosophical points to make, their own truth to reveal, their own insights into the human situation.” (Falzon 2008, 6), and Thomas E. Wartenberg, who argues that “at least certain cinematic illustrations of a philosophical theory or claim do make a contribution to the philosophical discussion of a problem or issue.” (Wartenberg 2006, p. 20, Wartenberg 2008).

philosophy at addressing some crucial ethical concerns and revealing nuances of ethical conundrums. While these authors are not committed to the claim that works they see as 'better than philosophy at doing philosophy' are themselves works of philosophy, such a claim is implicit in their argument.

The kinds of critical commentaries about some works exemplified in Person's interpretation of Hawthorne, and claims regarding literature and films' ability to do philosophy, do not seem entirely misconstrued for several reasons. First, there is an overlap in the themes that philosophers and artists are concerned with, as reflected in the thematic concepts frequently found in both, literary and philosophical works. These include concepts such as right or wrong, justice, freedom, value, purpose, knowledge, duty etc. Thomas Mann might be writing about the allure of a young boy's body but he is in fact probing the fundamental philosophical question – what does it mean to lead a valuable life? – thus joining the long line of philosophers who tried to unravel the mystery of a good life. When Robert Frost questions the limits of human knowledge in regard to the natural world, he is interested in those very themes that define the epistemological project of addressing the scepticism regarding the external world and the limits of human (and scientific) knowledge. More formally, the rationale here is that both, a poet and a philosopher, are concerned with (some of) the same problems. The overlap between art and philosophy is thematic, and given how deeply an artist probes these themes, her work might become a piece of philosophy.

Another point of contact concerns the similarities in the impact that some artworks have on the audience. I will refer to this impact as a cognitive one, to contrast it from artwork's other impacts (aesthetic, artistic or emotional), and to highlight its main experiential aspect: that of undergoing a certain intellectual, reflective experience that results, or has the potential to result, in various kinds of cognitive gains. Engaging with artworks often brings about a heightened sense of a better, more profound understanding of whatever that artwork brings to view, or to a change of perspective: position, arguments or belief that once seemed appropriate might, after the experience with an artwork, be found untenable and in need of refinement, elaboration or even abandonment. Kitcher explains the impact of *Death in Venice* along these lines: Mann's depiction of Aschen-

bach's deterioration brings forward a heightened sense of understanding the grip that some desires and passions have on humans, a grip which can cause the disruption of discipline that was crucial for one's life. Art and philosophy then seem to overlap in their capacity to bring about a certain change in how the audience comes to understand the world and its many aspects, themselves and other human beings.

Third, artists themselves often acknowledge (or critical comments about their works reveal) their interest at a certain philosophical problem, their enthusiasm for a particular philosopher or intention to tackle a concrete philosophical issue. Many artists have philosophical background, and given how philosophy permeates the public discourse and cultural background against which artists create, it is hard to imagine one would not be influenced by some philosophical concerns.³

Finally, some thinkers are philosophers and literary writers, regardless of whether they consider themselves one or the other, or both. The interesting case does not only concern people like Iris Murdoch, who wrote philosophical works and literary works (and, by her own confession, was always clearly aware of when she was writing one and when the other – an awareness that arguably does not transfer so directly to her readers), but cases such as Stanislaw Lem, a Polish science fiction writer frequently referred to as philosopher, or cases such as Albert Camus, who is still considered a father of (philosophical position known as) existentialism although he himself rejected the title.⁴

I will take these points of contact between literature and philosophy, fuelled by critical commentaries and philosophical advocacies of the overlap of the two, as reasons enough to claim that there is a distinctive category of artworks, those with substantial philosophical aspect. I will refer to a class of these works as philosophical art. Unlike most philosophers who are interested in the overlap between philosophy and literary and cinematic art in order to claim either that these art forms are in fact merging

³ See Paisley Livingston (2009) for a discussion of philosophical and other influences of Ingmar Bergman and David Davies (2009) for a discussion of Terrence Malick's philosophical background. Kitcher (2013) illuminatingly discusses philosophical sources behind Thomas Mann.

⁴ See Murdoch 1999. For a discussion of philosophical aspects of Stanislaw Lem, see Swirski ed. 2006.

with philosophy (in virtue of their ability to deliver original and innovative contributions to philosophy), or to discuss these artworks' pedagogical use in light of how they illustrate philosophical concerns, my interest is in examining some of the challenges that this category raises not only to philosophers of art generally, but to philosophy and arts as valuable cultural practices. This interest is theoretically close to the traditional debate about the connections between literature and philosophy, connections that were considered natural and unquestionable given their shared intellectual background, up till the point when Plato insisted on divorcing them. Given that philosophy and literature share the same medium, language, the connection between the two of them is deeper and harder to entangle, than the connection between philosophy and cinema, as it inevitably raises the question of classification for at least some works which can be taken as literary as well as philosophical. While movies do contain linguistic dimension, their primary medium is a visual one, a medium which is significantly different from the medium of philosophy. This makes it easier to see how cinema and philosophy come apart, but it raises the problem of accounting for the films' philosophical engagement.⁵

2. Sceptical Take on Philosophical Art

One may wonder whether my preliminary view on the ways in which philosophy comes close to some art forms is philosophically important. Given the wide range of issues that philosophy concerns itself with, and given that there is no restriction to what can be given an artistic treatment, it is to expect that in some cases at least philosophy and art will meet. In reference to literature, such an argument was made by Lamarque and Olsen (Lamarque and Olsen 1994), who claimed that the mere fact that some literary works deal with philosophical issues or employ philosoph-

⁵ To avoid constant repetition, my use of the term philosophical art(works) should be taken as including literary and cinematic works of (popular) art that contain philosophical dimension. Artworks pertaining to other forms, such as visual art, music and theatre will not be my concern here. My focus on literature and cinema is shaped by current philosophical debates. I believe that theatre can be philosophical in the same way as literary and cinematic works can. Though my discussion will be limited in focus, I trust it can be joined with discussions regarding musical and theatrical philosophical engagement.

ical concepts isn't in itself interesting for literature generally.⁶ The intuitive appeal of this claim can easily be appreciated and its rationale transferred to debates on philosophy and film – some films are (or can be interpreted as) philosophical, but that fact alone doesn't suffice to see these films as philosophy, or cinematic art as a medium capable of philosophizing. This argument is bolstered by the fact that many other disciplines 'borrow' their themes to art without thereby losing their distinctive nature. Despite Henry James' superb tackling of psychological concerns in his novels, there are no arguments to the effect that philosophy and psychology should merge or are inseparable. While the lack of such theoretical discussions shows that there is something special in the connection between literature and philosophy, it can also make us wonder whether indeed there is such a thing as philosophical art. Let us therefore start with a sceptical view and examine arguments invoked to show that there is no philosophical art, other than in the trivial sense in which some artworks do illustrate, or are about, philosophical concerns.

As a point of departure, notice that the kind of theoretical divide Plato was trying to prescribe when he urged his fellow citizens to break connection with poets was never followed by a practical division of labour. An array of examples philosophers frequently discuss in relation to artworks which deal with philosophy – Falzon analyses more than 150 films, and writers as diverse as Shakespeare, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, James, Melville, Goethe, Hawthorne, Frost, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Milton and Wallace, to randomly mention but few, were given philosophical readings – shows that the intersecting character of art and philosophy is a more dominant tendency in literature and in cinema and that the intersecting character of art and philosophy is not limited to occasional few authors or concrete works. There is hardly any philosophical problem, regardless of philosoph-

⁶ Lamarque and Olsen issued this commentary as a response to Nussbaum's claims that some literary works should be adjoined to moral philosophy, in light of their alleged capacity to engage with the issues of moral philosophy better than moral philosophy itself. While my discussion is not quite on this track (my concern is in the general overlap of philosophy and art, not in discussing how some literary works address moral issues and affect their readers' moral sensibility), nothing in principle renders their argument impotent within this wider context, as it can still be claimed that the occasional overlap of art and philosophy isn't relevant for arts or for philosophy.

ical discipline to which it belongs to, that hasn't been given expression in literature and film. This in itself justifies our taking seriously the bond between art and philosophy and examining whether indeed there is philosophical art. A more pressing reason to re-examine the bond between art and philosophy has to do with the fact that none of the sceptical arguments against taking this bond seriously seems entirely convincing. I will focus on two sceptical strategies dominant in debate regarding literature's philosophical engagements, those which I find most troubling for my claim that philosophy can be accommodated within literary and cinematic works of art.

The first sceptical strategy denies the possibility of doing philosophy through art, given that the two practices are so fundamentally different that their coming together is made impossible by their very nature. This strategy insists on the differences in style and structure of philosophy and literature, and on the supposedly different aims they are to fulfil. Iris Murdoch (Murdoch 1999) claims that philosophy, whose role is primarily to clarify things, should be clear and precise, while literature is semantically dense and ambiguous, full of hidden meanings and mystifications, aiming to entertain. Philosophy is about reasons, analysis and constant revisions of one's solutions to the problems, literature as an art form is first and foremost a storytelling activity in which one may just be interested in a way a story is given a form.

There is an immediate intuitive appeal in this strategy, particularly from the perspective of analytic philosophy, since its building block is argument. Given that works of art do not offer arguments, it is hard to see them as doing philosophy. However, such generalized view about what is, or should be, central to the method, writing style or aim of the two practices is but one possible way in which to think (normatively or prescriptively) about them, which wrongly presupposes, rather than demonstrably proves, that there is a neat line between clearly written philosophy that aims to clarify, and ambiguously dense literature that aims to satisfy. To put it somehow simply, philosophy can be aesthetically pleasing and art can be (is!) cognitively rich. Not only do philosophy and literature share their intellectual concerns, but throughout their long histories, they often shared stylistic and argumentative devices, such as reliance on first person experience, thought experiments and genres (meditations, diaries).

In addition, the insistence on arguments as the main philosophical tool is shattered by Wittgenstein-inspired views of philosophy, offered by such analytic splendours like Philip Kitcher, who invites us to recognize that philosophy can be done by showing, not just arguing.⁷ And, if Wartenberg is right about the role that images and visual illustrations have in philosophy, it is even less obvious that philosophy can only proceed if formulated in neat and rigid arguments.

A more basic worry with the first sceptical strategy concerns its scope. We initiated this discussion because we wanted to explain how it can be that philosophy and art can be so similar – in terms of the themes they explore, cognitive impact they have on the audience, even (in some cases at least) styles of argumentation – to give rise to the views according to which they overlap, perhaps even merge. However, by insisting on stylistic difference in language, the first sceptical strategy cannot be employed against artistic forms that do not use language, and philosophy. In a sense of course, cinema does employ language – linguistic expressions figure in dialogues, monologues and voice-overs, and sometimes philosophical bits are conveyed in this way, but this is not what philosophers have in mind when they claim that movies are philosophy, as they tend to discuss distinctive cinematic medium, such as visual image and editing, that are the vehicle via which philosophical thought is conveyed. Therefore, invoking stylistic features of language that is supposedly distinctive of philosophy will not suffice to keep it out of or apart from cinematic art.

The point that the sceptics are most forceful about is the idea that literature and movies do not aim at, or are not in the function of, ‘doing philosophy’. Taking them as vehicles of philosophical thought is therefore a case of misunderstanding at best, or instrumentalization at worst. However, the force of this argument can be attenuated by David Davies’ treatment of the artistic status of political, religious and pornographic art, that is, art that has a non-artistic primary intended function (Davies 2012). On Davies’ view, the fact that these works aim to elicit response other than artistic one does not take away from their artistic status, because they fulfil their primary function in virtue of how the artefact articulates those contents that bear upon the fulfilment of its non-artistic function. If Davies

⁷ See Kitcher 2013; particularly pp. 12-18.

is right here, it follows that there can be philosophical art, provided philosophical artworks fulfil their artistic function by handling philosophical concerns in a manner that elicits a proper response in the audience – that of inspiring the audience to take artistic regard towards the work. Philosophical art is philosophical because its subject is philosophical and because it elicits philosophical response (as explained above), and it is artistic because its philosophical aspect is developed via artistic means, that is, in such a way that the artwork invites artistic regard. Davies' account is premised upon the intended response in the receiver, and presupposes that the artist intends to create an artwork that has a double function (artistic, and religious, political or erotic/pornographic). Applied to the category of philosophical art, this implies that a writer or a filmmaker intends to create a literary or cinematic piece of work that is artistic in virtue of the way it addresses philosophical concerns and works with them.

Davies' account gives us what we need to set foundations for philosophical art, such that, even if we accept that art and philosophy have distinct functions and pursue different aims, these can nevertheless be reconciled in a work of art. Because a viewer needs to attend to artistic means via which the primary function (arguably, to deal with or do philosophy) is executed, it is possible for her to simultaneously attend to artwork's artistic and philosophical dimension, i.e. appreciate a work of art for its philosophical and artistic function. On this view, the aims of art and philosophy might be separate, but they can be united in philosophical art.

I will postpone the discussion of the relevance of intentions for the creation of philosophical art till later, but at this point Davies has given us a way forward. His method of uniting two functions in a single artwork is precisely how some of the most fervent advocates of philosophical art see their bonding. Kitcher, for example, focuses on works "in which philosophical explorations are organically integrated with the narrative, with the evocation and development of character, and with the literary style" (Kitcher 2013, p. 12). In cases such as these, I argue, works are artistic in virtue of how they develop philosophical concerns, which are inherently entwined with the artistic dimension of the work itself.⁸

⁸ See Livingston 2009, whose analysis of Bergman's employment of cinematic means to treat philosophical concerns is insightful with respect to artwork's philosophical and artistic aspect coming united.

The second sceptical strategy denies not only the possibility of doing philosophy through art, but it denies that philosophy can be *in* art. Stein Haugom Olsen (Olsen 1978), for example, acknowledges that literature and philosophy share some of the same concerns and operate with the same thematic concepts, used not only to interpret literary works, but human experience generally, that is, “eternal human problems” (p. 114). However, he claims, once the concepts from a non-literary framework are taken over by literature, they can no longer be given their usual meanings but “become tied to a new theoretical and practical background through literary interpretation, and through their relation to their background they take on a new significance. They become interesting as expressing literary insights through their role in interpretation.” (p.113). Because Olsen equates this background with the literary tradition, he concludes that “applying a term of this type in literary interpretation, the critic often invokes literary precedents as justification for the application, but he never invokes non-literary uses of the terms as this would not be helpful” (p.114). Given that the primary function of these terms has to do with literary aims, “this vocabulary therefore gains a sort of autonomy from the identical vocabulary which is used as a body of interpretative terms in philosophy, religion and science; an autonomy due to the fact that as interpretive terms the two identical classes are used to interpret different phenomena” (p.115).⁹

One problem with this claim is that it seems to imply that thematic concepts change their meaning once they are contextualized. If that were the case, not only would it be unclear where the interpretive concepts come from, but Olsen would have to explain the correct use of critical vocabulary, if in fact it is not grounded in the extra-literary practices to which the concepts usually belong (that is, from which the author has taken them). If Olsen were right and the concepts change meanings, it would be impossible to understand anything before learning the meaning that these concepts acquire once they are contextualized. Neither

⁹ Arguments to the same effect are also voiced in Olsen and Lamarque’s joint 1994 masterpiece, where they claim for example, that “The general theme of the freedom of the will and responsibility does not exist independently of the way in which it is developed in various cultural discourses” and “The thematic concepts are, by themselves, vacuous. They cannot be separated from the way they are ‘anatomized’ in literature and other cultural discourses” (see Lamarque and Olsen 1994, pp. 402-3).

philosophers nor literary authors possess the Humpty Dumpty capacity to create meanings simply by inserting words into a specific context. What they do share is the capacity to shed light on the implications of concepts, which is why literature can have the power to deliver the cognitive impact described above.

The notion of ‘the’ literary tradition, which, on Olsen’s account determines and justifies the use of concepts, raises further worries for his theory. Not only it may seem overly monolithic – is there really *one* such tradition? – but even granting that there is, it can’t operate in a way as isolated as Olsen envisions. Perhaps the most oft-discussed example against such a clear distinction between the two traditions (literary and philosophical) comes from romanticism, which belies the idea of any sharp division. The well established intellectual connections and patterns of influence between post-Kantian German idealism and Romantic literature exemplified in the writings of Hölderlin prove the point. Hölderlin found philosophy incapable of answering its own questions and believed that only art is up to this task. His literary opus has been interpreted as a criticism of Fichte’s postulation of the first principle of philosophy aimed against Kant’s dualism. A clear line of philosophers dealing with the relationship between the mind and the world (Kant – Reinhold – Schulze – Fichte) is thus completed by literature.¹⁰

To illustrate the claim that literary tradition does not create its own domain of knowledge divorced from other intellectual domains, consider an example from a different period. To appreciate and understand George Meredith’s poem, *Lucifer in Starlight*, readers should be familiar with some prominent biblical and religious beliefs, most notably the rebellion of angels against God and Lucifer’s role in that rebellion. There is undeniably a direct link to Milton’s treatment of the subject in *Paradise Lost*, but it is wrong to claim that one can only appreciate Meredith’s poem and its way of tackling the issue if one ‘justifies’ its treatment of the theme by linking it to Milton. Not only would it be quite hard to think of how such a justification might take place, but it would be almost impossible to understand

¹⁰ See Horstmann 2000 and Larmore 2000. The idea that literature continues the philosophical line is exemplified in Larmore’s view, according to which ‘Hölderlin’s main thesis is that, contrary to Fichte, subjectivity cannot function as the first principle of philosophy, for it cannot be understood in its own terms (Larmore 2000, p. 146).

the visions of betrayal, rebellion, arrogance and pride Lucifer embodies, if one didn't approach the poem from the wider context that in addition to literature includes biblical, theological and philosophical references.

Meredith's poem further shows the fault in Murdoch (1999) claim, similar to Olsen's, that philosophy stops being philosophy when inserted into literature. If the concepts are divorced from their meaning once they are inserted into literary context, then, by the same reasoning, religious concerns stop being religious concerns. Yet how would we be able to make sense of the poem unless we took religious concerns that are the subject in Meredith in their usual meaning?¹¹

None of what I said in reference to sceptical strategy number two (denying that some thematic concepts found in literature, (and by extension in cinematic art) retain their philosophical meanings once inserted into works of art) should be taken as supporting an argument made by John Gibson (Gibson 2017), another sceptic regarding the intersection of literature and philosophy. On his view, asking "What makes a poem philosophical", only adds fuel to the ancient feud between these two disciplines and it ignores valuable distinctive ways in which both, poetry and philosophy, treat a certain 'content'. There are no philosophical poems, he claims, because there is no philosophical content, only "a kind of common cultural property that belongs to neither the poet nor the philosopher" and the difference is "really just a matter of whether one opts to give philosophical or poetic form to this basic, common content". Gibson does not deny that certain concerns which animate philosophy also animate poets (his own example is Wallace Stevens, a poet who is a go to example for so many philosophers who argue in favour of philosophical poetry), but he does object to calling these concerns philosophical: "Why, one wonders, does it get to be called philosophical?"

Why indeed? The question that Gibson raises seems fundamental to this discussion, and it will be part of my argument below that probing philosophical art might help us explain something more fundamentally

¹¹ Murdoch refutes her own claims when she says, explaining her own importation of philosophy into her novels, 'I might put in things about philosophy because I happen to know about philosophy. If I knew about sailing ships, I would put in sailing ships' (pp. 19–20). Given that sailing ships do not stop being sailing ships, philosophical ideas do not stop being philosophical ideas once they are incorporated into a novel.

about the nature of philosophical questions. However, I am not quite at ease with Gibson's solution. For one thing, if he is right, how are we to account for the numerous examples of works of art identified as engaging with philosophical questions?¹²

Second, and more troubling, Gibson seems to be denying, implicitly at least, that there are distinctively philosophical concerns that belong to clearly established philosophical tradition, since all there is, is a shared intellectual background. He might be right – after all, we still lack a general definition of what philosophy is or what it does – but a rather influential view has it that philosophy is concerned with certain questions which are central to it (the 'big questions' view). Denying this, as Gibson seems to be doing, denies that philosophy is a substantially distinctive field of enquiry and reduces it to a methodological approach. More to the point, it remains unclear what the common intellectual background consists of, and how some other disciplines which, we can assume, are part of it (such as religion, anthropology, sociology) retain their distinctive identities within such background. The most that the argument from the common intellectual background does, it seems to me, is reinforcing the idea that literature and philosophy have a more intimate relation than either of them has with other disciplines.

How then to think of the notions of literary and philosophical tradition, and how to separate them from the wider intellectual background? Rather than keeping them apart, as Olsen and Murdoch do, my suggestion

¹² M.H. Abrams provided an inimitable account of how deep and influential the common cultural property is, in his brilliant portrayal of romantic poetry: '... the writings of these poets were part of a comprehensive intellectual tendency which manifested itself in philosophy as well as in poetry; this tendency was casually related to the drastic political and social changes of the age' (11). However, while analyzing numerous examples of how 'closely interinvolved' (192) literature and technical philosophy have been in this period, Abrams nevertheless describes poetic practice as distinct from, although deeply influenced by, philosophical. While the question of 'philosophical poems' does not pop up for him in the sense we are interested in here, Abrams, unlike Gibson, does not negate distinctively philosophical questions: "The major German poets and novelists (as well as Coleridge, and later Carlyle, in England) avidly assimilated the writings of the philosophers; many of them wrote philosophical essays; and all incorporated *current philosophical concepts and procedures* into the subject matter and structure of their principal works of imagination" (Abrams p. 192, italics mine).

is to recognize the overall encompassing intellectual tradition consisting of scientific (natural and social) and humanistic practices which gives rise to various sources of influence that shape literary as well as philosophical writings. Though disentangling these multiple sources of ideas or tracing multiple causal relationships would be impossible, there is no reason to think that within each discipline itself we cannot recognize distinctive patterns of influence. In philosophy, these patterns take the form of criticism and sometimes the form of advancing some principles, questions or themes taken to be basic – the possibility of the coherent account of the history of philosophy is based on it. The same reasoning applies to literature. At any time there is a more or less fixed conception of the literary canon within which we trace patterns of influence. But that does not justify the further step Olsen and Murdoch suggest, namely cutting off literature entirely from other domains, nor Gibson's argument regarding mixing it all up into one giant intellectual background.

3. Taking Philosophical Art Seriously

Having at least mitigated sceptical views, the time has come to address challenges that philosophical art raises. I will develop these challenges along four main points: identification, interpretation, appreciation, and cultural significance.

To ask about identification of philosophical art is to ask about criterion or criteria that identify those works which in fact are philosophical. For all that has been said so far, we still do not have a criterion or a set of criteria that would help us determine when in fact a work is philosophical, or can rightly be considered as such. Three possibilities, not necessarily disconnected or separate, are put on offer with respect to this problem: first, a work is philosophical in virtue of what is explicit in the work itself. Second, a work is philosophical in virtue of artists' intention to create a work of art which is philosophical, so that it contains, deals with or raises philosophical concerns. Third, a work is philosophical only indirectly, via the interpretation imposed upon it by a philosophically minded critic. Let's start with the first option.

An artwork can be philosophical in virtue of philosophical content that is explicitly present in it, at the level of text itself, or, in case of cinematic

art, in a form of a dialogue, monologue or a voice over. Such is the case with the characters in Lars Von Tier's *Dogville* which on numerous occasions raise and discuss issues regarding duty and responsibility, and their actions reflect their ethical commitments that are verbally expressed. It is also the case with writers like Theodore Dreiser, who often inserts philosophical reflections into his characters' reveries. It might be tempting to claim that the presence of textual clues of this kind is to be taken as criterion on what counts as philosophical art. Not only it is clearly stated that the work is about philosophical concerns, but the insertion of philosophical bits guides the audience in their imaginative reflective engagement with a work. This can be helpful in providing an incentive for the audience to focus on questions that might otherwise go unnoticed or remain unacknowledged. This kind of criteria is straightforward, and as long as we can come up with a more or less agreed-upon list of philosophical concerns, we will not have problems recognizing philosophical art. Those works which, at the textual level, do not contain or refer to thematic concepts recognized as philosophical or pertaining to philosophy, are not, on this option, philosophical.

There are however two possible problems with this solution. The mere presence of philosophical concepts does not suffice to turn something into philosophy. Referencing a particular philosophical problem without systematically and critically dealing with it does not count as doing philosophy. Detective novels or police procedurals occasionally raise issues regarding the just punishment, but they do not engage theoretically with these issues as the story is focused on catching the culprit, not on debating reasons for or against punishment, the rights of the victim or the reasons why the culprit committed the crime and should be punished – those, namely, that can be considered philosophical concerns. Second, even when philosophical issues feature in a work; it might be the case that the audience fails to identify them as philosophical, i.e. to recognize the relevant philosophical concerns that are being pursued. While this failure doesn't necessarily render a work non-philosophical, it does raise a question of the audience's role in recognizing philosophical art, the relevance of which is not always taken into consideration by those working on this topic. Mostly, they tend to ignore the role that the background knowledge and familiarity with philosophical theories have for recognizing, and respond-

ing to, what the work brings to view. For example, it could be argued that a difference between illustrating a philosophical problem and offering an original, innovative contribution is not a matter of how the work is, but of what it does for a particular audience member. A trained and experienced philosopher can anticipate Hamlet's epistemic reflections into the nature of death, while for a non philosopher, they might serve as insightful push into contemplation about how she envisions afterlife. It seems then that a work can be philosophical to a smaller or greater extent, relative to the background knowledge, beliefs and assumptions of the audience.

While this line of relativism is not satisfying if we want a clearly defined, objective criterion on what makes something a work of philosophical art, I want to further elaborate on the role of the audience by examining one more way in which a work can be philosophical in virtue of what it brings to view. We saw with Person that a work can be philosophical even if philosophical bits are not explicit at the level of content, but at the thematic level. Person's interpretation shows that a work can be philosophical in virtue of themes it pursues, of what the work is about, independently of whether or not thematic philosophical concepts are explicitly stated in the work. Given that recognizing the theme, understanding what the work is about, is a crucial element in how the audiences should engage with works of art, it can be argued that a work is philosophical because the audience recognizes its theme to be philosophical. A work's philosophical status will, on this option, depend on whether or not the audience finds its theme philosophical. Figuring out what the work is about includes responding to the work by identifying the relevant thematic concepts so as to make sense of what is described. Those works which invite the application of philosophical concepts can engage the audience in 'philosophical' thinking – these are the grounds upon which we identified the second point of contact between art and philosophy. The analogy with pornographic art might be helpful to bring this point home: some authors define pornographic art not in terms of explicit content, but in terms of the impact they have on the audience (sexual arousal). On this analogy, some artworks are philosophical because they stimulate philosophical thinking in the audience.

The second possibility for identifying philosophical art makes references to artist's intentions. The claim is that the work's content is organ-

ized and presented in a way which renders it philosophical because it is the artist who wanted to pursue a philosophical topic via her artistic creation.¹³ We touched upon this idea above, in Davies' account of artworks with non-artistic primary function. To argue that philosophical art is philosophical in virtue of their makers' intentions to deal with philosophy has a strong initial plausibility, not in the least because doing philosophy is in itself intentional activity which presupposes one's decision to engage with certain questions at a sufficiently high level of abstraction. One cannot, in other words, do philosophy by accident. Given the complexity of philosophical ideas expressed in artworks, it would be highly surprising if there was no intention on the part of the artist to create a work which presents precisely such content as to give rise to those ideas.

However, intentionalism can only get us so far. As its critics never get tired of pointing out, not only can a work have meanings their makers did not envision, but intentions can fail. Consequently, nothing in principle prevents artworks from being philosophical, even if their makers had no philosophical intentions, and vice versa. On the other hand, presupposing we can adduce sufficient evidence to claim an artist had the intentions to create philosophical work of art, the evidence can nevertheless be indeterminate with respect to concrete ideas she wanted to explore. Varieties of critical philosophical commentaries on Terrence Malick's *Thin Red Line* is a case in point. Depending on whom you listen to, in this film Malick is dealing with the darkness in the American soul, with a state of paradise lost and the possibilities of redemption, with transcendentalism, with contemplations about death and nature's indifference to it, with Heidegger's ontology and numerous other topics.¹⁴ On the one hand, this variety might simply be an instance of disagreement: Malick is, no doubt, doing philosophy, it is just not clear precisely which philosophical idea he is developing. The problem with this is that, on the whole, it doesn't tell us what the work is like or how it should be understood. As I will claim below, if we take philosophical dimension of a work to be essential to its identity, then not knowing precisely which philosophical idea is developed in a work is a serious obstacle to knowing how to properly engage with it and appreciate

¹³ Livingston (2009) interprets Ingmar Bergman's artistic creations along these lines.

¹⁴ See Davies 2009.

it, even if we still recognize it as an instance of philosophical art.

The third option is to claim that works are philosophical only under certain interpretation.¹⁵ It is the interpreters, rather than the artists, who make works philosophical by offering an interpretation which brings forward philosophical issues or philosophical meaning in a work, as Kitcher did in his reading of Mann's masterpiece. On this option, philosophy is neither in the work nor do author's intentions necessarily matter. Since different interpreters might offer different interpretations, one and the same work can be and not be philosophical, and it can inspire various, even incompatible philosophical interpretations.

The difficulties with this option are again twofold. There is still the intuition that some works just are philosophical and that whatever philosophical issues they are concerned with is what they are offering to the audience, as the object of artistic regard and appreciation. To rob them of this dimension, or to deny them this aspect (by making it relative to the interpreter) is to rob them of, or to deny them, what they truly are. On the other hand, it could be that interpreters deliberately impose philosophical interpretations, to make works more interesting, as Murdoch claims. In 'film as philosophy' debates, this has become known as the imposition problem. Wartenberg offers a regulative advice: in proposing a philosophical interpretation be careful not to impose your own ideas upon the film." (Wartenberg 2008, p. 554). However, handy as this advice seems, it hardly solves the problem, as it doesn't explain how we are to identify philosophical art, that is, how are we to know when philosophical interpretation is being imposed, and when it is being recovered from a work.

None of the three options examined gave us a way of determining when (or, in virtue of what) it is justified to say that a work is philosophical. It might be that different artworks are philosophical for different reasons – some, given their content and the subject/theme interrelation, some, because of their makers' intentions, some because of how they inspire reflection in the audience – and that there is no one criterion on what makes an artwork philosophical. However, that should not make the problem of identifying philosophical art irrelevant, as there are further issues, related to interpretation and appreciation of such works, that are relevant.

¹⁵ See Lamarque and Olsen 1994, Murdoch 1999.

On the most general level, can we claim that philosophical dimension is essentially a part of those works we identify as philosophical? Following David Novitz's way of phrasing a debate between singularism and pluralism of interpretations, we can ask if philosophical dimension belongs to the set of properties that are in the artwork independently of any interpretations of it.¹⁶ Following Peter Lamarque's account of aesthetic essentialism, we can wonder whether philosophical dimension of an artwork is its essential property, in a way that being a tragedy is an essential property of *King Lear* (Lamarque 2010). Of course, 'being philosophical' is not an artistic property in any straightforward sense in which 'being a tragedy is'. However, it is not artistically insignificant either. One important consequence of phrasing the question along the lines of aesthetic essentialism is that it makes a demand on the audience to acknowledge this philosophical dimension and to have a proper reaction to it (though it remains to be explained what a proper reaction to a philosophical work is, i.e. how much 'philosophical thinking' suffices). If in fact artworks develop their own philosophical systems, then the audience's proper reaction to it has to include an awareness and appreciation of it, which, ideally, should not be raised by critic's insight. If philosophical dimension is an essential part of the artwork, then in case the audience misses it (fails to recognize a philosophical problem), it misses something crucial in the artwork, even if they still 'get the story'. This is why the question of the 'normative power' of philosophical dimension matters, and why we might want to know which philosophical idea is in fact expressed in Mallick's *Thin Red Line*.¹⁷

Numerous works are complex and multi-layered, with philosophical dimension being but one of their aspects. However, a failure to take it into consideration is a form of underestimating a work. Cinematic achievements such as David Fincher's *Seven* or Denis Villeneuve *Sicario* offer an

¹⁶ Notice that my angle on the issue of interpretation does not raise the question of the rivalry between philosophical interpretation and other possible interpretation of a work. Nor am I interested in asking whether the 'philosophical' interpretation is the only right one. For now at least, I can put these issues aside, though we can expect that some of the conclusions I reach will have impacts on how one answers these questions.

¹⁷ It can be argued though that *Thin Red Line* simply is a kind of film that is deliberately indeterminate with respect to varieties of philosophical ideas it pursues. If that is the case, the philosophical dimension might speak in favour of ambiguity of the film, rather than stand as its primary focus.

interesting, gripping story and hold the attention of the audience via the way they play with the elements of a detective genre to raise mystery and create a puzzle, not only for the characters but for the viewers as well. However, it is the philosophical dimension – what is a right way to live, do we need to justify our life choices (*Seven*), what is a right thing to do (*Sicario*) – that turns a great action movie into an experience that pushes the audience to re-examine their fundamental beliefs about living in a proper way and knowing what our ethical obligations are. By engaging with these stories, the viewer comes to negotiate her own beliefs, commitments and the motivational patterns that she finds acceptable as a mode of living and interacting with others. On the whole, these movies give an incentive for reflective experiences that trigger the audience to rethink and re-examine their most basic ethical commitments. Not recognizing this aspect seriously mars the experience they have the potential to offer, and consequently, their artistic status.

One final challenge that philosophical art raises concerns the nature, identity, definition and value of both, philosophy and the arts. We need a distinction between philosophy and the arts, where the way we characterize these two practices does not take away their distinctive values and finds a proper explanation for the ‘literariness’ of philosophy and ‘philosophicality’ of literature and film. Regardless of its long tradition and history, philosophy has yet to explain its own identity, what does it take to philosophize, what are its methods, what is its task, what goals it aims to achieve, how it connects to the sciences, and the like. These questions perhaps should not bother us – there are philosophers who reject their relevance – but if we could answer them, we would have a better and more encompassing understanding of philosophy, and of connections and discrepancies between philosophy, sciences and the arts. We would know, in other words, what makes anything philosophical, or such that it can or should be given a philosophical consideration. Lamarque and Olsen insightfully suggest that this debate tells us more about the nature of philosophy than it does about literature. It does so, I suggest, not because it challenges philosophy as an institutional, intellectual practice, but by probing our understanding of what it is and what it can practically do for us, outside of the confines of academic discipline.

On the other hand, probing further the overlap between philosophy

and the arts might deepen our understanding of the nature of the arts, their cognitive potentialities, the uses to which they can be put, ways in which they engage the audiences and the responses they elicit in us. After all, philosophical considerations regarding arts generally and literature in particular have for so long been affected by Plato's negative views on it, the least we can do is to reconsider the 'ancient quarrel' and reasons for the split he called for. Disagreements regarding art's cognitive potentials are far from being settled. On the view proposed here, the fact that artworks can engage philosophically is one way in which they can be cognitively valuable; it pays to explore how this value is cashed out. Wartenberg's work on cinematic art, at the centre of which are visual image and illustration, inspires questions regarding the role that they play in advancing philosophical ideas. Though I said nothing about music here, debates over its expressive capacities are not resolved, and it would be beneficial to both, philosophers and musicologists, if we had more conclusive accounts of the ways in which music inspires or expresses philosophical ideas, if indeed it does so.

4. Conclusion

Regardless of what I said here about philosophical art and the problems involved in identifying these works, appreciating them and properly responding to them, it might nevertheless be legitimate to dismiss the problem all together: what, after all, is gained by insisting on this category? On the view I am proposing, the category of philosophical art does not invite deleting the boundaries between the two disciplines, nor does it speak in favour of merging them together. What it calls for is recognition of a distinctive category that emerges from the intersecting characters of these practices, both of which make a special demand on the audience, in terms of attitudes and expectations appropriate to them. To say that something is a work of art is to attribute it a special value, and to make a demand on the audience to search for and try to identify this value, to see how different pieces of a work hang together to make the work a valuable piece of art. Calling something philosophy, or philosophical, is indicative of the special kind of content that it brings to view, a content that merits a special kind of reflective attention. Philosophy, for all of its variations in

themes and methods, is ultimately concerned with the most fundamental questions that we, as rational, intelligent, reflective human beings in the constant search of a meaning, capable of abstract thinking, counterfactual predictions and of recognizing and responding to values, are capable of. We are not only the most evolved creatures in the universe, but also the only creatures capable of reflecting on our world, our selves, and all of our interactions, endeavours and predicaments. Philosophy is the sum total of these, as it represents the unstoppable cognitive engagements with the world that are so crucial for humanity. It is in philosophy that the search for truth and the search for meaning and values come united. When philosophy is inserted into works of art, it adds up to what these works have to offer. The point here isn't that insertion of philosophy in artworks in any way diminishes or enhances their artistic status, nor was I interested in exploring what philosophical art can do for our practice of philosophy and philosophical education. Rather, my interest was in what it can tell us about the way our intellectual and artistic practices meet, and my suggestion was that it can tell us quite a lot.¹⁸

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¹⁸ I am very grateful to the audience at the ESA 2016 for their helpful comments regarding the material presented here. Special thanks go to most amazing philosophers and literary lovers who never got tired of discussing these issues with me, Michael Watkins, Jody Graham, James Shelley, Joshua Johnston, Robbie Kubala, Jonathan Fine, Lydia Goehr, and in particular, to Philip Kitcher and David Davies.

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