

FILM THEORY MEETS ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY; OR, FILM STUDIES AND *L'AFFAIRE SOKAL*

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[A]nalytic philosophy is primarily known for its detailed and subtle discussions of concepts in the philosophy of language and the theory of knowledge, the very concepts that postmodernism so badly misunderstands [...]. Because philosophy concerns the most general categories of knowledge, categories that apply to any compartment of inquiry, it is inevitable that other disciplines will reflect on philosophical problems and develop philosophical positions. Analytic philosophy has a special responsibility to ensure that its insights on matters of broad intellectual interest are available widely, to more than a narrow class of insiders.¹

Last summer's academic farce involving the unwitting publication, by *Social Text*, of a physicist's parody of a poststructural, relativistic critique of science has generated a great deal of heat, and a little light along with it. In this respect, the event conforms to the unchanging laws of academic debate, if not the physical laws at stake in Alan Sokal's satire. To my knowledge, though, there has been little discussion of what it all might mean for film studies in particular. It would be nice to think that this was because film scholars were too smart to fall into the kind of trap laid by Sokal, that the adherents of poststructuralism within our community are not guilty of the kinds of sloppiness, ignorance or confusion that Sokal's hoax revealed among the editors of *Social Text*. But I doubt this. My sense is that many in our field just do not want to be bothered with the rather abstract, epistemological questions raised by *l'affaire Sokal*. After all, theory has been displaced by history, has it not? And do we not know, thanks to Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and others, that epistemology is a fruitless exercise in trying to provide some absolute foundation for our claims, a foundation as elusive, indeed as mythical as the Loch Ness monster?

These are just the kind of assumptions that the Sokal parody, however, throws into relief and brings into doubt. It begs the question, therefore, simply to assume that the kinds of question Sokal has posed are irrelevant to film studies. One of the finest commentaries on the affair, which actually brings out the pertinent issues in a clearer and more nuanced way than Sokal does himself, was written by the philosopher Paul Boghossian. In the quotation from this commentary at the head of this essay, Boghossian makes the point that the kinds of question raised by Sokal's hoax — epistemological questions, questions about truth and knowledge — are questions of pertinence to almost every field of enquiry. These are, moreover, questions which the tradition of analytic philosophy — the "core" tradition of Russell, Moore, and Quine, along with the tributaries of the pragmatism of James and Peirce, and the "ordinary-language" philosophy of the late Wittgenstein and Austin — has devoted itself to throughout this century. It is striking, then, that the fields of cultural enquiry — literary studies, film studies, and so forth — which in recent years have been preoccupied with epistemological issues (look no further than the various debates around realism and ideology, for example), should have so systematically disdained this tradition.

This was the starting point for a collection of essays, begun a few years ago by myself and Richard Allen, in which we hoped to bring to bear ideas drawn from analytic philosophy on problems in film theory (thereby continuing, and expanding, the efforts of writers like Noël Carroll and George M. Wilson). But we were acutely conscious, from the beginning, of the bias against analytic philosophy within film and related fields of study, along with a concomitant commitment to Continental philosophy. Of course, there are historical reasons for these prejudices - ones discussed by Allen and myself in the introduction to *Film Theory and Philosophy*² — but these no longer, if they ever did, provide a sufficient warrant to overlook the intellectual resources available to us within the analytic tradition. Rather than

rehearsing this argument here, however, I want to take a look at Peter Lehman's recent intervention on the question of pluralism in film studies,³ published in *Cinema Journal*, as a way of showing an analytic approach in action, as well as demonstrating that the analytic tradition is itself pluralistic in character — and not the narrow, monolithic approach it is often mistakenly described as in hostile discussions of it.

Lehman's essay makes an argument for pluralism, which in many ways I am sympathetic to, but his argument undermines itself in certain crucial ways, and connects pluralism, unnecessarily, with certain undesirable implications. Consider the following passage:

A prominent film scholar told me a few years ago that she did not believe that there was such a thing as the unconscious. Obviously, this position challenges the validity of Freudian and Lacanian methods of critical analysis. Just as obviously, we could say that either the statement is true or false, we should find out which, and we should adjust our methodologies accordingly. *But that may be neither possible nor desirable.* It would be more accurate to say that film scholars who proceed as if there were no unconscious will produce different kinds of knowledge about film than those who proceed as if there were an unconscious.⁴

The first thing to note about this passage is that it reduces questions of *truth* to questions of *utility* — or, to put it another way, it implies that epistemic criteria (what kind of knowledge does a claim provide? how can we assess its truth-value?) can or should be supplanted by pragmatic criteria (how useful is a claim relative to a particular end?). The effect of this is to relativize the notion of truth - Lehman speaks of “different kinds of knowledge” depending on one's own assumptions (in

this case, psychoanalytic or non-psychoanalytic assumptions). In slightly more technical terms, this is an example of *framework relativism*, according to which “truth” is only possible relative to a given framework of assumptions.⁵ Lehman’s statement advancing this position, however, is self-defeating. This becomes apparent when we arrive at the phrase “It would be more accurate...”, because “accuracy” here is just another way of applying epistemic criteria, or talking about truth. (Note that Lehman does *not* write, at this point in his essay, “It would be more useful...”).

To maintain that knowledge *is* our goal, and that this cannot be reduced to utility — or power, another great pretender — is not to assume that our truth claims have the status of absolute certainty.⁶ Rather, one can strive for knowledge, and make truth claims, within the context of a *fallibilist* epistemology, in which no claim is assumed to be forever unproblematic, but in which competing claims or theories can be assessed according to the weight of evidence and argument that supports them.⁷ Contra Lehman, then, it is certainly *possible* to ask epistemic questions about, for example, the existence of the unconscious, and to make judgements about the relative plausibility of claims that the unconscious exists, or does not exist, without assuming that our current judgements have the status of Absolute Truth.⁸ Perhaps the key phrase here is “relative plausibility”: just because we abandon any claim to final and absolute certainty, does not mean that we have to abandon assessing the likelihood of particular truth claims being true. Just because we cannot know for sure that our current theories about disease are correct, does not mean to say that we cannot say they are more plausible than, say, the miasmatic theory of disease. And how many of us would want to live in world in which such radical scepticism was acted upon — a world in which, to follow my example, it was merely a matter of random choice whether a doctor followed the implications of the miasmatic theory of disease or those of modern medicine? It is not only possible, then, but *desirable*,

that we observe epistemic criteria — indeed, it is far from clear that we could do without such criteria, as Lehman’s own references to “accuracy” suggest.

Such a position does not rule out pluralism — to return to the object of Lehman’s concern — but it does demand a more robust pluralism than the type Lehman seems to be calling for. A robust pluralism demands that we argue about the relative plausibility of psychoanalytic and other accounts of human motivation, on the basis of evidence and the soundness of arguments adducing this evidence, rather than ducking this responsibility and opting for a spurious democracy-among-theories (all theories are valid — it is just a question of finding their “useful” role). If the only criterion we have for assessing the value of research is its “usefulness,” then clearly anything goes, because any claim is useful in one way or another, if only in the attainment of a fatter CV. Though Lehman’s remarks are clearly well-intended, and directed against a kind of theoretical conformism nobody wants, they fall into the trap of wholly uncritical, “peaceful coexistence pluralism,” to use Noël Carroll’s phrase. In contrast to this, the robust pluralism of the analytic tradition is such that any claim can be considered, but if it is to be defended it must be honestly measured against epistemic criteria, and in the light of the consequences of the argument for related and competing arguments and assumptions.⁹

POSTSCRIPT

This short piece was originally delivered at the Society for Cinema Studies conference in Ottawa, Canada, in May 1997. Why republish such an antique piece now, thirteen years later? Reading the essay afresh, it strikes me that while there have certainly been significant changes in film studies, the fundamental questions that Sokal raised with his hoax are as important now as they were then. The

changes, first: analytic philosophy has a presence in the study of film in 2010 that it lacked in 1997. Perhaps the most obvious symptom of this is that it is common now to speak of “the philosophy of film,” to mark out a sub-community of debate sustained by a mix of analytic philosophers and film studies scholars. The community was nascent in the mid-1990s but is more firmly established and institutionalized now: consider Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga’s compendious anthology, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, published in 2008. But philosophical debate on film continues to be marked by the long-standing schism between analytic and Continental philosophy: even where the same or similar questions are posed, discussion usually proceeds within particular communities defined by their stance towards this underlying divide. Nowhere is this more evident than in relation to the “film as philosophy” question, where debates led by ideas from the Continental and analytic traditions proceed in parallel but with minimal interaction. A more unified forum for philosophical debate on film is one good *raison d’être* for *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, the new journal that you are now reading.

There are exceptions to this general state of fragmentation: “analytic phenomenologists” such as Alva Noë and Shaun Gallagher draw in roughly equal measure on Continental phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) and contemporary cognitive science, and argue in the analytic manner. In any event, beneath these trends, the two really fundamental issues raised in this brief essay persist. It remains true that all disciplines will (in the words of Boghossian) “develop philosophical positions” — even if these are buried in the assumptions of the field or particular debates within it. There is thus a philosophical job to be done — whoever does it — in bringing these “positions” or assumptions to light, and assessing them. And second, it remains true that truth counts, even as its doubters and detractors continue to cast it as an emperor without clothes. I think I can safely

venture that there will not be a contribution to this issue that does not bear the tell-tale signs of epistemic ambition, that is, the goal of saying something not merely useful, or powerful, or beautiful, or good, or shocking — but truthful. For such truth-seeking is an inescapable feature of all those human endeavours which inquire into the nature of the world, whatever banner they fly under.

1. Paul Boghossian, "What the Sokal Hoax Ought to Teach Us," *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 December 1996: 15.

2. Richard Allen and Murray Smith, eds., *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3. Lehman's essay was originally delivered as a paper at the 1989 Society for Cinema Studies Conference. It is "recent," though, insofar as the paper has just been published, along with an afterword written in 1996. See Peter Lehman, "Pluralism versus the Correct Position," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (1997): 114-19.

4. *Ibid.*, 117 (my emphasis).

5. The phrase "framework relativism" was coined by Paisley Livingston. See Paisley Livingston, *Literary Knowledge: Humanistic Inquiry and the Philosophy of Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 23.

6. As Lehman implies, "Pluralism versus the Correct Position," 116.

7. Fallibilism was propounded by C. S. Peirce, who wrote: "the first step toward *finding out* is to acknowledge that you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness" in Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vols. I and II, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), xi.

8. Perhaps I should add, to avert claims that this is just another exercise in Freud-bashing, that there are analytic philosophers who defend psychoanalysis. It is, though, no coincidence that this is the example that Lehman lights upon, as the claims of psychoanalysis continue to be among the most contentious in contemporary western culture.

9. In a response to a briefer, oral version of this paper, Lehman defended his argument by insisting that it was intended as a reflection on matters of pedagogical practice, not theoretical argument among professional scholars. Once again, I would certainly agree with him that it is the responsibility of teachers to give the arguments and theories they teach a fair shake. I, for one, am not in the business of dispensing Truths to students, but rather teaching them how to think critically. But teaching them how to think critically precisely involves teaching them to assess the claims of various theories against various criteria, including epistemic criteria. Students ultimately have to make up their own minds, and that is as it should be. But we renege on our responsibilities as teachers if we fail to give them the means to do this.