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THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIDE OF CONTEMPORARY ART FORMS

by

KRISTINA BODETTI

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

The Philosophical Side of Contemporary Art Forms

By Kristina Bodetti

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The purpose of this project is to show that contemporary art forms, specifically popular music, film and comics/graphic novels, are capable of, and do in many cases work as philosophical pieces. I believe that an analysis of these mediums will reveal instances in which the works of art explicate established philosophical theories, expand upon them, and in some cases invent new theories.

Each new medium of art gets examined by philosophy in its turn and its merits as a unique art form are debated. From these arguments it is possible to extrapolate the ways in which these works can become philosophical as well as artistic.

In philosophically examining the merits of a medium its unique and distinctive qualities are examined. Once these qualities are known it is possible to examine how they can be used to convey philosophical ideas and theories.

Preface

It seems clear to me that the philosophical field of aesthetics can be divided into two distinct categories. The first is the philosophy of art and the second is art as philosophy. The philosophy of art attempts to define what art is, what makes a medium a unique art form and often includes a discussion of beauty. Art as philosophy, on the other hand, attempts to determine if works of art can also be works of philosophy. Art as philosophy is focused on the content of the work; the ideas and meaning behind the art. While the philosophy of art is an important and beneficial line of inquiry it is art as philosophy that I am interested in and will explore here.

The second category, art as philosophy, can again be divided in two. Art can become philosophy by illustrating or explicating a pre-existing philosophical idea or theory, or art can become philosophy by making a new or updated philosophical statement. It is the second of these that is more difficult to do and as such more difficult to prove. How can art enable us to work out philosophical thought without using words and lengthy prose? Art can be the way those who have trouble articulating deep, philosophical thoughts express those ideas.

Art is clearly a form of creative expression and is often thought of as a form of emotional expression but the idea of art as a form of intellectual and philosophical expression may be more difficult to believe. While some philosophical theories look at art as a practice that diminishes the reasoning ability of the artist and audience, other theories show the intellectual side of art to be an important component of what makes a work successful art. For example, in Idealism, where there is believed to be a difference between perception and reality, some philosophers, such as Schopenhauer, believe art to be the closest connection we have to reality. Without going to the extreme of Idealism it is still possible to make philosophical art.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Sounds Like Philosophy: Music Theory.....	3
Philosophy on the Big (and Small) Screen: Film & Television.....	18
Getting the (Philosophical) Picture: Comics & Graphic Novels.....	24
Conclusion.....	43
Appendix.....	44
Bibliography.....	45

Introduction

Art and philosophy have been connected since ancient Greece when Plato and Aristotle debated the power and merits of art. As new media for creating art arose, modern philosophy began to analyze them asking questions like, “what is it?” and “does this new medium make art?” and then goes on to build a philosophy of the medium. A subsequent question that may arise is whether the medium can create works of philosophy and then arguments may follow for and against the medium as philosophy.

The first important distinction to make is between philosophy of art and art as philosophy. Philosophy of art implies a theory of what art is and, in the case of specific media, an examination of the medium and its use. This answers the question of whether or not the medium is art and what makes it unique. Art as philosophy, on the other hand, is related to the content of the work being philosophical in itself. This idea can take two forms; the first is representing or illustrating previously conceived theories and the second is presenting a new philosophical idea, theory or argument.

When considering whether a new medium is art, a common argument that arises is the Medium Specificity argument. Medium Specificity looks to the elements of a medium that are unique and make it different from any other previously established art forms. This method of determining if a new medium is a new art form can become hotly debated. For example, when these arguments arose around film, some believed that film was nothing more than recorded theatre and, therefore, that it wasn't an art form but simply a means of preserving an art performance. Others looked to things like cinematography, camera angles and framing to separate film from theatre and prove it to be its own art form.

Once it is established that a medium is a unique art form another question worth exploring is whether or not that medium is capable of being philosophy. The first way that it is possible for art to be philosophy is by exploring philosophical ideas and theories that have already been explored in the traditional prose form. Common examples of this are films, such as *the Matrix*, exploring the belief in the existence of the external world. The theories associated with Idealism are well established in prose by many prominent philosophers. What films like *the Matrix* do isn't to tell us anything new about these ideas but to simply present them in a different way.

Art can do more than this, however. In some cases art does tell us something new about the philosophical ideas and theories it is referencing. These cases are more difficult to prove but can also be far more interesting to examine. The artwork in question may raise new questions, explore inventive answers to old philosophical questions, or take a previous theory a step further. However the work does it, when art becomes philosophy the result is something greater than just a work of art.

Sounds like Philosophy: Music Theory

Music is one of the oldest art forms and much has been written on how it should be made and what is important about it. It has been examined not only by musicians and artists but by scientists, educators, mathematicians and, of course, philosophers. Philosophers have been examining music since ancient Greece and continue through today in works like the “Pop Culture and Philosophy” books. There is something about music that touches us on a deep level that is difficult to understand intellectually. Writers across many fields have tried to identify what quality music has that gives it this ability to talk to us without words, to inspire us to thought and action and to connect us to one another. Regardless of which theory on the matter one subscribes to, it is clear that this mysterious quality of music is what makes it a medium capable of philosophy.

Demystifying Music

At least part of music’s power lies in intervals, the space between two notes, specifically thirds. A major third creates sound waves that are in phase with one another which thus sound harmonic. This harmonic sound is what most people refer to as sounding pleasant or happy. A minor third, on the other hand, creates sound waves that are out of phase with one another and thus sound dissonant. Dissonance is perceived by most people to be sad or displeasing. The reactions most people have to these intervals are the result of how the brain interprets these sound waves, though neuroscience doesn’t completely understand how this translation of sound wave to emotion happens. Of course, not everyone reacts the same way to these sounds and they can be used in varying ways (Singh).

Composers have used this feature of music for centuries to move their audiences to particular emotions and thoughts. Consider the theme from the movie *Jaws*. John Williams uses two notes, a half-step apart, to create suspense and a feeling of impending danger. Or take James Horner's "Zorro's Theme" from the film *The Mask of Zorro* and compare it to Alan Menken's "Arabian Nights" from the animated film *Aladdin*. While "Zorro's Theme" is meant to evoke images of Mexico and Spanish influences, "Arabian Nights" is meant to lead the listener to think of the Arabian desert and Eastern influences. The main themes from these two songs share seven out of eight notes and are similar in tempo, timbre and orchestration. One important difference in these two is the third. There is a major third in "Arabian Nights" and a minor third in "Zorro's Theme" and this difference makes the regional implication drastically different.

There are a limited number of notes and chords available for a composer to use but the slightest differences, as shown above, can make songs sound completely different. How these subtleties are exploited in order to use the power music has over us is the job of the composer and also a consideration for ethics. While music used to guide the viewer through a narrative, such as in the examples above, is mostly innocuous there are many other ways in which music is used to move us. Television commercials, casinos, supermarkets and other stores all use music to affect the moods of their customers in the hopes of making them spend more money. These sounds are generally in a major key or mode which will give most people a sense of happiness and thus make them more likely to spend (Singh). The morality of this use of music must depend on the extent to which the song can influence a person's judgment. If Plato was correct, as he states in the *Republic*, that music, and all art, speaks to the baser parts of the human soul and influences those baser parts to take control over the reason then these commercial uses of music would be morally wrong.

Music's power has more philosophical implications than ethics. If a difference of minor third and major third can move our minds from one part of the world to another, if just two notes can raise a sense of anxiety and fear, then what other kinds of thoughts can music push our perceptions towards?

Instrumental Philosophy

The great composer Ludwig van Beethoven once said, "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy." The great philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer would seem to agree as he speaks about music in his work *The World as Will and Representation*. Schopenhauer divides the world in a similar way to Kant; the representation (or as Kant would say, the phenomena) is the world as we perceive it to be and the will (or as Kant would say, the noumena) is reality. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer believes that it is possible for us to directly experience the will and this is done through music. Listening to music, for Schopenhauer, is the most direct way that humanity can connect to reality. While science is bound by the world of representation and appearances, art presents ideas or represents levels of the will's objectification. Music is different from other art forms however and does not represent ideas but is instead the language of the will itself (Wartenberg, 64-72).

The nature and subtleties of music (discussed above) are what makes it distinct from the other art forms and allows it to be this connection to the will of reality that Schopenhauer deems it to be. For Schopenhauer, art, in general, is representative not merely of the empirical but also of ideas behind it; art is not concerned with the particular but instead with universal ideas about reality. Visual arts represent ideas behind particulars we see in daily life; literary arts describe these ideas. Music does not communicate ideas in the forms of representation we are

accommodated to from daily life. The power of music that moves us to emotions and thoughts without words or images is what makes it the vehicle to connect us to the will.

Lyrical Philosophy

Lyrics as part of music have been around for a long time but it started to become the norm for popular music to contain lyrics in the 11th-13th centuries in Provençal France with Troubadours. Prior to this most lyrical music was sacred music in which the music was written to fit the, usually biblical, verse. The Troubadours changed the focus of lyrics from worship to humanity by writing poetry, usually about love, to music (Singh). Lyric music continued to evolve from here and most popular music today contains at least some lyrics.

Lyrics can be used in a variety of ways, just as poetry can, including to convey complex and important ideas. Unlike poetry, lyrics can be enhanced by the music they accompany. Music's ability to move our emotions and thoughts can reinforce the message of the lyrics or can stand in contrast to the tone of the lyrics adding a sense of irony and lyrical dissonance. Combining the power of music with words and making use of all the small, sometimes barely noticeable, tools available to them the musician/songwriter can convey profound messages.

Take, for example, John Lennon's "Imagine" with its lyrics of peace and tolerance. While the surface message calling for acceptance and harmony is clear to anyone who hears the song, there is something more lingering within the music and lyrics. As the song goes, "Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try, no hell below us, above us only sky, imagine all the people living for today." These lyrics are reminiscent of the existential philosophy of writers such as Albert Camus. In his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus describes the absurdity of the world and life. He believes that it is the nature of human consciousness to look for meaning, usually

looking to the world around us for answers, but that the world and our experiences do not hold the answers or meaning that human consciousness searches for. This conflict makes the existence of human consciousness in the world inherently absurd. Lennon's lyrics ask us to imagine life without the things we use to give us meaning. In the world Lennon asks us to imagine there is only the world as it is and us; there is no outside force to give existence meaning, no reasons for life. Lennon and Camus both go on to tell us that we should continue to live despite the lack of meaning, despite the absurd; we must accept the absurd and find happiness in living with it. The music of the song also helps us to understand this meaning. The serious tone of the song combined with the steady and constant eighth note rhythm can be seen as representing the droning nature of existence without meaning. As Camus describes Sisyphus rolling the rock up the mountain, watching it fall and then rolling it up again so does the rhythm of "Imagine" give us a sense of repetitive and monotonous persistence.

Another example of this is the Simon & Garfunkel song "The Sound of Silence." The lyrics of this song outline the speaker's discovery of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. As the speaker goes out into the world looking for answers and sees others doing the same all that is given to them is silence. The people the speaker describes look to the neon lights and "the neon god they'd made" praying for the answers but there is only silence. The world answers our questions, searches and cries with silence. This is another parallel to Camus' discussion of the absurdity of human nature's inquisitiveness in the meaninglessness of the world. "The Sound of Silence" also uses a somber tone and constant, steady eighth note rhythm which, just as with "Imagine," reminds one of Sisyphus and the need to continue on without the meaning we were looking for. The song also does not feature a traditional chorus part. The chorus is usually something the rest of the song is centered around and the lack of it here is similar to the lack of

meaning to be found in the speaker's, and our, endeavors. "The Sound of Silence" goes further than "Imagine" however. In the fourth verse of the song the speaker reaches out to the other people he sees and tries to show them the absurdity of what they are doing but he is ignored. This section is reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave in which, after having seen the light and the truth the enlightened man returns to the cave and attempts to get others to see what he has but is mocked for his efforts. In this way "The Sound of Silence" connects Camus' discussion of absurdity to Plato's discussion of truth and education. This new connection of ideas changes the song from simply being representative of philosophical ideas to adding something new to the discussion.

Soundtrack of Philosophy

Music is not only enjoyed by itself but it is frequently placed within another work such as a play, film or videogame. In these cases the musical score or soundtrack can be a helpful tool for progressing narrative as well as helping to make philosophical points in the larger work more clear.

Since the invention of the movie theatre, films have been accompanied by music. Early silent films were distributed with sheet music that a musician, usually a pianist, would play live in theatre while the movie played. This, of course, meant that the music was never exactly the same with multiple showings of the film; while the basic music remained constant each player would have their own style of playing and one player might perform differently each time. With the invention of sound on film technologies the music of a film was enabled to remain constant with each viewing since it was recorded and played back along with the images. While the music

was an integral part of the film viewing experience prior to this, the invention of sound on film technology solidified music's place in film, making the two almost inseparable (Lewis).

In his chapter, "Music", in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* Jeff Smith describes the variety of uses of music in films and how they might affect the audience's viewing of the film. He begins by attempting to identify the ontology of film music in comparison to music in general. He explores how, while the written music remains constant, a musical piece can change from one performance to the next. The primary musical parameters of the piece; this includes rhythm, melody and harmony; are part of the written music and will remain constant with each performance. However, secondary parameters, such as dynamics, tempo and timbre, will vary with each performance. While the main ideas of a piece are carried in the melody, harmony and rhythm, the secondary qualities can also have a strong effect on the message conveyed by a piece of music. Smith believes that this variance makes determining the thoughtful content of the piece difficult as each performance will have a different take on the piece (Smith, 185). For example, compare the cover of "Imagine" by the band A Perfect Circle to the original. While the song is still recognizable as "Imagine" the differences in tempo, timbre and dynamics changes the meaning of the song from a hopeful look to a peaceful future to a warning about the things leading us to destruction; from a song asking us to believe in the world Lennon imagines to a song telling us to change our ways before they destroy us. This difference which exists in music in general between the written piece and the variances of performance can make defining any one musical piece's philosophical content difficult since the emotional and thoughtful content can change each time the piece is heard. Smith finds that this is not an issue within the specific context of film music. The reason film music avoids this problem is because it exists as a recorded medium.

Film music does of course have a written score, as concert music does, and it can be performed in live settings. Nevertheless the film score exists independent of these as a component of the films soundtrack, which includes not only the score but also the dialogue and sound effects. In the case of film music it is understood, according to Smith, that performances and soundtrack albums are derivations of the original score, which is part of a larger audio-visual total (Smith, 185). Acknowledging film music as part of a larger whole, with the variance in performances being set aside as derivations, allows the music to be analyzed as a single item set in relation to other aspects of the film. It also allows us to identify the specific performance of the piece which would be considered to convey the philosophical message the piece is intended to. This specific performance is of course that which appears with the film, as it is heard during the film; the viewing of the film cannot be separated from the hearing of the score if the correct philosophical message is to be discerned.

First it is important to address the question: can any film music add significantly to the philosophical content of the film? In order to answer this, one must examine the ways in which the audience interacts with the music of a film. Smith observes a psychological difference between film music and other types of music. While they both serve the same aesthetic pleasures, formal structures and emotional significances, film music also fulfills narrative functions and acts as something of which the viewers are unaware (Smith, 191). The narrative function of film music is clear; it allows us a greater understanding of the characters and events in the film and allows a way to connect to the emotions of the characters and scenes.

Smith describes the process by which film music unconsciously influences the audience as subliminal perception. Smith writes, "Subliminal perception [is defined] as something that occurs whenever 'stimuli presented below the threshold or limens for awareness are found to

influence thoughts, feelings, or actions.’ Film music seems to fit both conditions...insofar as music is perceived by film viewers, for the most part, without awareness, and clearly affects their perceptions and thoughts about the events depicted on screen” (Smith, 193). Consider the final battle in *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, specifically when the Riders of Rohan arrive. Just prior to their arrival the music is playing quietly in the background, and then we hear the horn that signifies the arrival of Rohan. The diegetic sound of the soldiers, horses and the horn are mixed with the softly playing orchestral soundtrack. At this point in viewing, unless one is paying specific attention to the music, the orchestral piece is barely noticeable and is heard unconsciously. As the two armies ready for battle the orchestral music stops, but this is not an obvious change to the viewer engrossed in the film as whole. When the Orcs begin to march the music starts again, still softly sitting under the surface, barely noticeable. Now the music starts to build suspense and grows louder, more prominent within the film as it sets the stage for the fight sequence. When Theoden’s speech reaches its climax so does the music, which then takes another brief pause that passes unnoticed by the standard viewer. As the two armies charge the diegetic sound of the horns and screams become louder, almost completely drowning out the orchestral sound, but the music remains playing underneath the other sounds continuing to build tension prior to the armies meeting. At the moment the two armies collide, the music stops. All these subtle changes in the music; the stops and starts, the dynamic shifts, even the emphasis moving from horns to strings and back to horns; are not specifically noticed by the viewer who isn’t paying explicit attention to it but they influence the viewing experience. This method of unconscious awareness creating thoughts within the audience is clearly the means by which any philosophical content may be transmitted by the film music.

Jessica Green addresses how this unconscious transmission of ideas can be philosophical in her article "Understanding the Score: Film Music Communicating to and Influencing the Audience." Green acknowledges that music in film is usually heard unconsciously but ponders the question, "is the film's score more than just a reflection of a character's sadness or the exciting chase music that exhilarates audiences?" (Green, 82). Green clearly believes that the answer is yes and states that, "some people might be surprised by the extent to which film music shapes and affects meaning in film" (Green, 82).

Green begins her discussion by referencing five types of film music in scores as outlined by Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis. The first is redundant music which reinforces emotional tone in the scene and is a common use of film music easily identified. The second is contrapuntal music which runs counter to the dominant emotion of the scene; this can be used to make the audience question the context of the events on screen. Empathetic music conveys the emotions of the characters, and is one of the most common uses of film music. A-empathetic music seems indifferent to the drama of the film and scene. Finally, didactic contrapuntal music is used to distance the audience in order to elicit a precise, usually ironic, idea in the mind of the viewer; there is clearly a philosophical use for this style of film music since its intent is to place specific ideas into the mind of the viewer despite the images. Green lists these types of music in order to demonstrate that, though the categories can be limiting, the music of the film is making an argument of some type (Green, 82). If the music can be making an argument then it would be clear that it can indeed be transmitting a philosophical context, one that enhances the philosophical content of the film and that may also add philosophical content itself.

In order to examine this, Green looks into the basic functions of film music. The first is, of course, to convey emotions; this can be of a specific character or of a scene or sequence. It

may be possible for this emotional conveyance to be philosophical, especially in the case of contrapuntal music. The second function of film music lies in its power to suggest connections and themes. Music can be used to convey what the character may be thinking about or considering; possibly a previous action, person or place. The music can also connect to overarching themes of the film to help the audience to understand the purpose or meaning. Green uses the example of *The Last of the Mohicans* where the overarching theme is the sense of duty which is repeatedly referenced by military tunes and marching drums (Green, 83). It is in this function of film music that philosophical content is most possible. The music can connect ideas and themes to illustrate a philosophical idea. If the music can connect ideas in a new way, or connect ideas that have not been associated before it is possible that film music can also create philosophy

Green goes on to address the argument that some might pose believing music simply reflects the drama on the screen. Green dismisses this idea, however, by virtue of how the music affects the way the viewer interprets what is happening on the screen. “By working with other channels of information, music moves beyond the role of simply reflecting or filling the background to the role of actually affecting and creating meaning in the film” (Green, 84). The music cannot simply be background or reflection when it is so closely connected to the meaning of the film. Green’s argument continues as she addresses the ability of film music to identify and suspend reality. Audiences tend to use the score as a tool to understand the meaning of the other information channels available in the film. This is what makes film music integral to the viewing experience. While using the music to help determine meaning, the audience becomes less questioning and more accepting of what is happening on screen. “Another important function of film music is its ability to suspend reality for the audience. When movie-goers sit in a theatre and

hear the opening strains of the title theme, they have been conditioned to accept the music as part of the cinematic experience; indeed, many films use opening music to situate the story in a time, place or context that will help the audience more readily accept the film” (Green, 85). Evidence in support of Green’s theory is easily found. Many period films set in a time decades or centuries in the past use the music of that time period to set the stage for the narrative. Hearing swing music helps to put the audience in the mindset of the 1920’s making it easier for them to accept what they are seeing as having taken place in that time.

Take, for example, the *Back to the Future* trilogy. As the duo of Doc Brown and Marty McFly travel through various time periods from the past to the future the music changes helping the audience to acclimate to the new time setting the action has moved into. During the scenes taking place in the 50’s doo-wop music can be heard. When the characters travel back to the old west, music reminiscent of the style of music used in the western genre of films plays. The film also uses the music to enhance the meaning of the film. When Marty goes back in time to his parents high school dance and plays “Johnny B. Goode” on stage, the people in the room look at him strangely, the room is quiet when he finishes. Before walking off stage Marty lets the teenagers at the dance know that, “Your kids are gonna love it.” This entire sequence uses the music to demonstrate that Marty is out of place in this time and needs to return to his own. The sense of alienation caused by the time travel is never more clearly demonstrated then in this scene by the film.

Both images and sounds, when arranged in a certain way, can create thoughts in the mind of the audience. These illustrations do not only reference previous theories but also add to them with context and new associations or dimensions. The way film juxtaposes images, seemingly unrelated, to create a connection in the mind of the viewer, so film music juxtaposes tones and

emotions to connect the viewer to the underlying themes of the film. Film music connects themes and ideas to specific characters, places, things and events that the viewer may not have noticed otherwise. For Example, specific musical themes are often associated with specific characters within a film. These themes can then be used by the filmmaker to bring the character to mind even when they do not appear on screen. In order for this to take place the image of the character and the musical theme must appear in conjunction first, either enough times or with enough emphasis, in order for the association of the two to be created in the mind of the viewer. In such cases, in order for the full meaning to be understood, the music and images of the film are, and must be, intertwined, neither one being sufficient on its own to demonstrate the intended meaning.

Music also plays an integral role in videogames. Just as in film the music of games can be used to help advance the narrative or make connections clearer to the player. A well-crafted videogame soundtrack can have an integral effect on the player's experience. Consider the early arcade game "Space Invaders" in which the player must destroy alien space ships as they descend on the screen toward earth. As the alien crafts got closer to the player the music would get faster. This change in tempo was well calculated; the programmers analyzed player's heart rates as the ships got closer and the music faster and found that people would start to panic. When the same studies were repeated without the sound the people didn't panic the way they did with the music (NPR). Videogame music has only become more elaborate in the years since "Space Invaders" height of popularity.

In 1998 the videogame company, Nintendo, released another sequel to their popular series, "The Legend of Zelda," titled "The Ocarina of Time." While music had always played a major role in the series this game took the use of music a step further by making it part of the

game mechanic. In the narrative of the game the player's character, Link, receives an ocarina with the power to change time. The player must use the game control to play specific melodies with the ocarina in order to perform a variety of tasks essential to advancing game play such as calling your horse, changing from night to day, opening doors and travelling through time. Like all the "Legend of Zelda" games the music has standard narrative functions; character themes, action music, and location themes. All these types of music help to advance the narrative and help the player make connections just as film music does. The game's message about the flow of time and good defeating evil could be delivered without the musical mechanic but by having the player create the music the soundtrack becomes more prominent, the player becomes more immersed in the game world and the affect the music has is made stronger.

Consider the game "Mass Effect 2." In the chapter "A House Divided" the race of sentient robots, the Geth, has divided into two sects. They used to be of one mind, a shared consciousness; now they have a small sense of individuality. While they still share data, which they begin to refer to as memories, they also act independently. Now, half of them are determined to help the player and humans while the others believe that god wants the player and all humans destroyed and they have developed a virus to do so. The Geth who remain loyal to humanity refer to the others as heretics. The player is then presented with a choice, by one of the loyal Geth, to continue with their plan to destroy all the heretics or to repurpose the virus and use it to reprogram the heretics so that they will rejoin the other Geth. The player's character wants the loyal Geth to decide but they cannot reach consensus, half prefer destruction and the other half reprogramming, and thus leave the decision to the player. The game, in this sequence, is presenting the player with more than a narrative choice but also with philosophical questions of ethics and what it means to be human. The player must decide if the heretics, being sentient, are

entitled to their opinions and beliefs and that that choice cannot be taken from them or if reprogramming them for their own good, to prevent their destruction, is morally acceptable? While they are machines, have they achieved enough individuality to be considered living beings and would their destruction thus be genocide (Extra Credits)? Between being presented with the options and having to choose the player is presented with information to help. We are told that the Geth share their thoughts and memories and the player's character questions how one of them can remain itself while being part of the collective. We are also told that they don't experience pain as humans do and that they question how their race has divided so violently. When the Geth that is with you questions the power and worth of individuality his lack of understanding makes him seem like a machine, but his need to question makes him seem human. From the moment the question is presented up until the player makes a choice the music is quiet and subdued. There are minor chords building tension and fear but no distinct melody to guide the tune. The music alone leaves the listener with a sense of unease and ambiguity. These qualities make the music perfect for the time in which the player is contemplating the decision. Even though some action occurs in this time the question remains in the players mind and music remains the same, quiet and subdued unlike the usual battle music from the rest of the game. The ambiguity and lack of melody emphasize both the difficulty of the choice and the idea that there is no correct answer; both choices seem immoral in some way. The tension and dissonance of the minor chords help the player to feel the weight and burden of the choice they are being asked to make.

Philosophy on the Big Screen: Film

Still a relatively new medium, film has undergone many changes since it was first introduced. Film has seen advances in technology as well as changes in technique, industry and style. It took time but film was accepted as a unique art form and as such became subject to scrutiny and theorizing. Philosophy has addressed film as an art form but also as a means of representing and creating philosophy.

Filming Philosophy: How Films Inspire Philosophical Thought

One strong argument for the viewing of films as philosophical works is presented in Thomas Wartenberg's article, "Beyond Mere Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy." In this article Wartenberg argues that films can both illustrate previously worked out philosophical theories and ideas and add something significant to the discussion, making them works of philosophy in themselves. One of the major distinctions between traditional philosophy and film is that philosophy is generally done in a linguistic manner where film is a visual medium. The question arises if linguistic form is necessary to the transmission of philosophical thought or if visual form can achieve the same affect? Wartenberg believes that this is possible and points out that written philosophy also has a long tradition of using images to convey its theories. Wartenberg specifically examines Plato's Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic* to demonstrate how this is done. What makes the allegory of the cave significant to the question of film being philosophy is both in the use of imagery and in the ideas conveyed.

The allegory of the cave begins as Socrates postulates a group of people who spend their entire lives in a cave. They sit and watch the cave wall where shadows are projected. The shadows are generated by people, who the group can't see, carrying artifacts in front of a fire.

The group of people who live in the cave believe that the shadows are reality. Socrates then asks what would happen if one of the group escaped the cave. They conclude that upon leaving the cave the person would be blinded by the light of the sun. Once their vision cleared they would see real objects instead of shadows and would be hesitant to accept these objects as real. Finally, Socrates concludes, that if the person were to return to the cave and tell the others what he had discovered they would not believe him but would rather think him mad.

Plato uses this allegory to illustrate his theory of the forms and his belief that the truth, found through philosophy, is better than the illusions we perceive. This can be taken as an argument against film, it being a series of images and illustrations, often about fictitious characters and events, would clearly be viewed by Plato as less than philosophy. However, Plato's aesthetics aside, this allegory is an excellent demonstration of the philosophical use of images. As is often the case, Plato uses this allegory to illustrate his ideas about the forms and our perceptions. The first part of the allegory is only an illustration of this theory; it makes it easier to understand and follow. In this sense the allegory isn't philosophical in and of itself but is simply a means to inspire philosophical reflection. In much the same way, film can use images to convey philosophical ideas and cause the viewer to think and reflect. The second part of the allegory is different; as the person escapes the cave we enter into a thought experiment, which is both a form of narration and a technique of philosophy. The allegory tells us things that Plato, otherwise, did not; the illustration tells us why people will not easily accept Plato's ideas about the forms and why Plato feels that he must persist in teaching these views despite how most people view him (Wartenberg, 22). Film may also use its images to convey new ideas. Finally, the allegory tells us that no one would believe the man who left the cave and that the people must not simply be told, but must instead be shown the truth. This is the strongest argument within the

allegory for the use of images in philosophy. While some people may be convinced by purely linguistic form many others need to see something, be shown in order to believe. Plato understood this and used imagery and the dialectic form as a means of showing people what he meant. Film makes showing philosophy possible in a different way, by playing out a situation for the audience and leading their minds to a conclusion.

What Wartenberg's analysis of the allegory of the cave tells us is that philosophers use images and illustrations to reiterate and clarify their arguments as well as to convey new ideas that they haven't stated otherwise. While these images are linguistic, what is relevant is that philosophical content is being conveyed through the image and that such content can be conveyed through an image, regardless of the image's form, be it linguistic or visual. This is an important indication that films can be philosophy if they can convey new ideas and add something significant to a philosophical conversation. This idea, that the ability to add something significant to a philosophical discussion is the mark of a work of philosophy, is the basis for Wartenberg's argument in favor of films being considered works of philosophy. The question then becomes, by what criteria should a film's philosophical content be categorized as either illustration or illustration with a significant contribution?

Wartenberg examines the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times* in order to address this question. Wartenberg considers *Modern Times* to be an example of a film also being a work of philosophy. He begins by describing the opening sequence in which the image of sheep is juxtaposed with the image of workers leaving the subway in a fashion similar to Eisenstein's montage theory. The juxtaposition of these two images implies that the workers are like the sheep and then relies on the audience's associations with the notion of sheep to tell us something about factory works. One common conception about sheep is that they must be led and herded,

the image the film uses of the sheep in a tight, confined space may lead the viewer to believe they are being led to the slaughter (Wartenberg, 28). This first sequence shows us how film can use its unique methods to associate ideas and convey coherent thoughts to its viewer without the use of any linguistic means. The film does something with those images that written philosophy could not. Text could have given us something like, "Factory workers are like sheep, they must be herded by a shepherd" or, "Factory workers are like sheep being led to the slaughter." Using imagery to bring the audience to this conclusion on their own has a much stronger and more profound effect. This is because after being told, or reading, a statement like the ones above we can choose to agree or disagree. However, when we look at the images of the sheep and the factory workers, it is our own minds that make the connections and the comparisons. The film images guide us toward a specific idea but the logical process is being done by our own minds as we put the piece together. Though we are being guided, we still make the connections ourselves and thus trust them more.

Wartenberg then moves through describing important pieces of the film's narrative, beginning with a description of Charlie on the assembly line. Wartenberg believes that this image of Charlie working on the assembly line is a commentary and visualization of Marx's theory that factory workers are turned into machines. At first this would be easily categorized as the illustration of a philosophical idea but Wartenberg notes that the assembly line was an innovation that occurred after Marx wrote the work that is referenced. This is important because now we can see that the film has changed the previous theory by putting it into a new context and commenting on the theory in a new way. The film isn't simply restating Marx's assertion that men become machines but is commenting on the, then modern, innovation stating that the assembly line is the next step in Marx's prophecy coming true. Wartenberg goes on to describe

other instances in the film which comment on the assembly line as the next step in Marx's mechanization of man including instances in which Charlie leaves the assembly line but cannot stop his arms from continuing to move in the motion of tightening nuts even though he isn't actually performing the task at the time (Wartenberg, 29).

Finally, Charlie begins seeing nuts everywhere, not just on the assembly line, and he attempts to tighten these imagined nuts, which are really buttons and noses. Here again we see the illustration of the Marxist idea of man becoming machine as well as the addition of a new context. While the previous examples Wartenberg listed displayed man physically being mechanized, this final example adds a mental mechanization as well since Charlie is no longer able to make the distinction between nuts and other items which fit the general pattern of his work on the assembly line (Wartenberg, 29-30). Distinguishing these two levels of mechanization gives Marx's theory a dimension the original text did not have. While Marx speaks of the man physically acting like a machine and performing his duties as a machine would he does not anticipate the mental affects this would have as well. *Modern Times* is clearly a comedy but these serious issues are still being addressed and examined. Though Charlie Chaplin demonstrates Marx's idea in a humorous way and with humor adds that the effects of the assembly line are not only physical but mental as well, the philosophical content and impact is not diminished.

From Wartenberg's analysis of *Modern Times* we can infer some criteria for establishing if a film's philosophical content is adding something significant to the discussion of a topic or is only illustrating the ideas. First, if the film shows us a way to think about a philosophical theory which the original text alone doesn't contain as *Modern Times* applies Marxist theory to the assembly line which did not exist in Marx's lifetime. Second, if something is added to the

illustration of the theory either by way of new context, dimension, information or ideas such as how Chaplin adds the mental impact of mechanization to Marx's discussion.

Getting the (Philosophical) Picture: Comics and Graphic Novels

Comics and Graphic Novels are the most recent art to become the focus of an intense academic gaze. Part of that gaze is focused on defining it as an art form. It is difficult to describe the distinct artistic qualities of this medium because of the unique interplay between the words and the pictures. It is clear that comics involve art but what wasn't widely accepted until recently was that they were an art capable of academic-style thought. However, that has changed as comics are used as educational tools, graphic novels are used as a medium for recording history and philosophy begins to examine the medium and its works.

Like other art forms, comics and graphic novels are not immune to the medium specificity argument. Medium specificity means that in order for a new medium to qualify as an art form there must be artistic elements which are unique to the medium. Comparisons can be made with painting, cartooning and animation for the graphic elements as well as dialogues and playwriting for the text elements of graphic novels. Comparisons can even be drawn with film since it has been noted that comics have a great deal in common with film storyboards. It is the combination of the graphic and text elements in the comic, however, that makes it unique; not only in merely putting the two together, but in their relationship and how they work together to tell the story. As Thomas E. Wartenberg states in his article, "Wordy Pictures: Theorizing the Relationship between Image and Text in Comics," "in a comic, neither the text nor the image provides an independent constraint upon the other" (Wartenberg, 87). Comics are more than stories with illustrations and more than pictures with captions. There is a type of synergy between the two elements that creates the art form of the graphic novel. The story could not be the same without this combination and something intrinsically powerful about the form of the comic would be lost.

How Philosophy is making the Medium its Own.

Can comics and graphic novels be works of philosophy? A work of art as a work of philosophy can take two forms; representing and illustrating philosophy or creating and doing philosophy. Comics, or any art form, representing philosophy is the easier case to make. When speaking about film, Wartenberg, in his article “Beyond Mere Illustration: How Films Can Be Philosophy,” reminds us that the use of imagery to communicate an idea is a popular and common tradition in the history of philosophy. He cites Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (see chapter 2). The purpose of this image is to illustrate that perceptions aren’t necessarily realities and that it is a virtue to be shown the proverbial light. In the case of this and other allegories used by Plato and later philosophers the reader is asked to use his/her imagination in the service of philosophy rather than being shown an actual image. But Wartenberg believes that film can serve a similar function. The images on the screen can depict and clarify philosophical arguments through the use of image and dialogue. In much the same way, comics can use images to demonstrate philosophical ideas and inspire philosophical reflection. In similar fashion to film, comics visually show us the images and narrative, which can be used to guide the reader through a philosophical discussion. This allows the form to be a means of communicating, explicating and clarifying existing philosophical theories and ideas.

Wartenberg takes the comparison between Plato’s allegory and film further though. The second part of the allegory is a thought experiment which is both a form of narration and a technique of philosophy. The thought experiment gives us information that Plato otherwise does not. Wartenberg’s analysis is meant to demonstrate to us that Plato and other philosophers use images not only to reiterate and clarify their arguments but also to convey new ideas that haven’t otherwise been stated, and that perhaps could not be clearly stated otherwise. Again, Wartenberg

believes that the same can apply to the images of the film screen and, in kind, we can extrapolate to the images of the comic pages. If the comic medium is used to convey a new idea or add something significant to a philosophical discussion then it is capable of making original philosophy.

The first version of art as philosophy, where the art represents philosophical ideas, is exemplified in the ways philosophy has made the graphic novel form its own. One example of this is in the “Graphic Guide” series of books published by Icon Books. This series uses the graphic format to introduce a variety of topics including many about philosophy. Each small book contains a wealth of information and makes that information easy to understand and digest through the use of the graphic format. Take, for example, *Introducing Aristotle: a Graphic Guide* which begins with some brief biographical information on its subject, explores Aristotle’s education and time at Plato’s academy and then goes into his philosophy and works. This book, like the others in the series combines brief paragraphs of prose with illustration. Often, the speech bubbles in the illustrations are used to continue the prose rather than to speak in the character’s voice and thus do not fully embrace the style of the comic form. The series doesn’t only focus on prominent philosophers but also gives overviews of specific fields such as is the case with *Introducing Ethics: a Graphic Guide*. This book reviews a variety of topics and theories relevant to ethics. Again, this is done by combining brief prose with illustrations. The “Graphic Guide” series introduces the reader to an important topic or figure in philosophy and breaks down the key points, making them easy to understand by juxtaposing illustrations and prose. The graphic medium offers more than illustrating prose however and philosophy goes further into the medium in another series.

Another example of comics representing philosophy is the series *Action Philosophers!* created by Fred Lente and Ryan Dunlavey. Each issue of the comic takes on a different prominent figure in the history of philosophy; they tell a bit of that philosopher's life story and give an overview of their philosophical theories. The art is playful and comical; Plato, for example, in *Action Philosophers #1* is depicted as a mask-wearing wrestler with dizzy eyes as he imagines the "realm of forms." This depiction is related to Plato's youth during which he, like most young ancient Greeks, would wrestle. His comical attire and dizzy eyes also, more subtly, reference the way philosophers were often viewed in ancient Greece; as the ancient joke goes, the philosopher was so concerned with the stars that he fell in a well. These comical depictions, though based on historical facts ease the reader into each philosopher's theories. What's more intriguing about this series, however, is how well the deep, often difficult to understand, theories are briefly condensed and explained in a way that makes it both an easy and informative read. For example, the extreme skepticism with which Rene Descartes begins his *Meditations on First Philosophy* can be difficult to follow for the first time reader but the issue of *Action Philosophers!* dedicated to him, *Action Philosophers #8: Hate the French! (not really)*, makes the ideas evident in a way only a comic could. The first panel of the issue is blank. The next few panels continue to be white space now with floating word bubbles as the voice of Descartes explains why he can't come out to be seen just yet, since he isn't sure yet that he even exists. Finally as the narrators word box asks Descartes if his doubting doesn't count for anything there is an explosion in the white space, in the next panel a light bulb shining fills the space and now Descartes' word bubbles aren't floating but are pointing to their origin in the light bulb as Descartes comes to his most famous conclusion, Cogito Ergo Sum, I think therefore I am. In the next panel other light bulbs surround Descartes' and finally, in the following panel, Descartes

himself appears. What took Descartes himself the entire first meditation to explain and can take multiple readings to thoroughly understand, the comic explains quite clearly in only three pages. While, of course, the explanation is not as in-depth as Descartes' original work or many subsequent essays written on it by others, it does still serve to get the basic philosophical theory across to the reader while disguised as comical entertainment. While *Action Philosophers!* may not be an ideal candidate as a textbook for philosophy 101 it does give the casual reader a basic understanding of the core concepts of each philosopher's work which is what is at the core of art representing philosophy.

Comics can also go beyond representation of philosophy and become philosophy themselves. This can be done in a similar fashion to film, through the use of images. It is also possible that the ways in which allegory is used as philosophy can extend to comics; it is possible for graphic novels to present allegories with philosophical content.

The Philosophy of Superheroes

What is likely the most popular form of the comic medium, the Superhero comic, is also the one usually seen to be the most frivolous. A deeper look, however, reveals that Superhero comics are filled with subtle, intellectual content and a wealth of philosophical theory.

DC: the New Frontier created by Darwyn Cooke and Dave Stewart is rich with philosophical theory boiling under the surface. For example, examine the beginning of Chapter Eleven where the Centre speaks of the Earth's history and the history of humanity. This scene goes into the philosophical debate between the merits of the past and tradition versus the advancements and technology of the present and future. This debate takes many forms and the vague way it is addressed, the subject is never the direct topic of any sequence but is rather

subtly underlying most of the work, in *New Frontier* is interesting. The comic is drawn in the style of the golden age as the artist calls us back to another time, perhaps a more ideal time. The Centre tells us that the early days of the Earth were far better than the eras that followed the presence of humanity. However, we can't simply conclude that the stance of the comic is that the past holds more merit. The Centre is the villain of this story and the Justice League is fighting to stop it and preserve the present. Evidenced by the title and the ending of the series is that the events of the story have led the superheroes, humanity and the Earth into a new era. It seems implied that this is a bright new era but that isn't made clear. While *New Frontier* is vague about the conclusion it does give us a representation of both sides of this debate between past and present.

Continuing with *New Frontier*, look at the Martian's thoughts in Chapter Seven as he describes how humanity fears that which it doesn't understand. Few themes have as much lasting and repetitive power as that of fearing the unknown "other." The Martian describes how he and Superman share the trait of being aliens on Earth but tells us that humanity accepts Superman because he looks like them but couldn't accept him as he truly is because he is so different. Acceptance of the assimilated other in opposition to fear of an overwhelmingly different other as a concept is no stranger to the philosopher. Just as the Martian watches horror films, in Chapter Seven, about bug-looking aliens invading Earth in order to understand how humanity might respond to him, philosophers, such as Eugene Thacker in the book *In the Dust of this Planet*, discusses the terror of the human race at the very idea of the unknowable, non-human other and how it is expressed in our tales of horror. The underlying philosophical themes present in comics can often easily be linked to the more traditional representations. It isn't simply the Martian's words that convey these ideas however, but is also made clear by the graphic elements. Consider

Chapter Four where the Martian watches television and practices taking different forms including Bugs Bunny and a Native American Chief before he settles on the form of a human detective and takes that on as his disguise in the world; without the narration it is still clear that the Martian is experimenting with different forms he can take and finally finds one that will allow him to blend in. When the Martian is watching the horror film, compare the face of the alien of the movie to the Martian's true face and you will see that they are similar despite the other distinct differences between them.

As Wartenberg said about films, so too do comics go beyond the mere illustration of philosophy. Comics engage us in ideas and concepts in ways traditional prose philosophy never could. They inspire philosophical reflection and play out thought experiments in ways the academic essay never can. Many thought experiments have been proposed in the prose form but when it is done visually, as with film and comics, it is in some ways more powerful. The visual thought experiment doesn't ask you to imagine a given scenario, as prose does, but instead shows you that scenario and only asks you to consider that scenario as a possible reality. While some visual thought experiments, like their prose counterparts, leave the determination of the conclusion up to the audiences reasoning others use the visual format to demonstrate what the creator believes to be the logical chain of events. These two possible versions of the thought experiment can have different effects. As stated with film, when the visual images are strategically placed together by the creator in order to guide the thoughts of the viewer and it is the viewer's own logical reasoning that draws the conclusions the viewer is more trusting and accepting of those conclusions. The difficulty with this is that each person has a different frame of reference and thus not everyone will make the same connections, not everyone will conclude what the creator might have intended. When the visual format is used to play the scenario out to,

what the creator believes to be, the logical conclusion the uncertainty of the viewer's reasoning and connections is removed but it is a more difficult task to convince the viewer that the conclusion drawn by the creator is the correct one.

Here is an example of one such thought experiment: what if a man could fly, and was incredibly strong, and almost completely invulnerable to harm? Would he use that power for good and stand up for the defenseless or would he be a tyrant? Would he end wars and keep the peace or go on a mission of conquest? It is obvious that this thought experiment has already been explored numerous times on the pages of Superman comic books. The canon of the DC Universe tells us that such a man, if raised on earth, would be a force for good. Alternate-reality comics, such as *Crisis on Earth-Three* play out scenarios where such a man becomes evil. All the possibilities can be explored between the pages of the comic.

In the article, "What If? DC's Crisis and Leibnizian Possible Worlds," Jeff McLaughlin examines DC Comic's multi-verse and how it plays out in the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series. The idea of the multi-verse has a long tradition in modern philosophy beginning with William James in 1895 and thus DC's multi-verse is representative of this type of philosophy. The DC multi-verse began with the creation of the second Flash. The second Flash was Barry Allen who was inspired to become the lightning bolt wearing superhero by the comics he read about Jay Garrick, the first Flash. There was a problem though. Both Jay Garrick and Barry Allen joined the Justice League and worked alongside other heroes such as Superman but in Barry Allen's world, Jay Garrick was a fictional character. This problem was solved by creating multiple Earths. The world in which Jay Garrick was the Flash and joined the Justice League became Earth-2 and the world in which Jay Garrick was a fictional character who inspired Barry Allen to become the Flash was Earth-1. This was the start of the DC Multi-verse which expanded greatly

from here (McLaughlin). When DC's multi-verse became too large and convoluted to handle they decided to create the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* story. The series explains how the multi-verse was created and how it is now being destroyed by the evil Anti-Monitor. By the end of the series only one universe remains. The philosophical question that is raised is if the universe that survives is the best of the infinite possibilities that could, and prior to the catastrophes of the series did, exist. McLaughlin cites Leibnitz's theory that what does exist is the best world that could possibly exist. Leibnitz's argument is based on a proof of the existence of a perfect god. McLaughlin finds flaw with Leibnitz's argument, noticing that it would not apply in the comic since the choices were made by imperfect mortals. Instead, McLaughlin leans toward a theory of actualization; what does exist is intrinsically better than what could exist on the basis that one exists and the other does not. It's a confusing theory to grasp and doesn't really help make much sense of *Crisis on Infinite Earths'* ending. Rather, it seems that the series has something more beyond both these theories that is being examined.

Why is the universe that comes into existence after the death of the Anti-Monitor the only one to survive? While it can't be known what the author's actual reasons for choosing the specific configuration of the surviving universe were, we can see a variety of possible philosophical answers in what made that version of Earth and the universe develop out of the events of the *Crisis*. While McLaughlin is correct that *Crisis on Infinite Earths* does not take the stance of Leibnitz, the outcome is not the best possible reality but rather the best that our heroes could salvage, the comic seems to take a stance different from McLaughlin's actualization as well. In the end what exists is not better simply because it exists. The characters are aware of what was lost including friends as well as other versions of themselves. While everyone is happy that the Anti-Monitor was defeated and at least one world saved there is still a sense of lost for

what has ceased to exist. This seems to say not to say, as McLaughlin does, that what exists is best because it exists but rather that it is better for something to exist than for nothing to exist.

Consider that both Supergirl and the Flash must sacrifice their lives along the way in order for the final defeat of the Anti-Monitor to be possible. Here we are addressing questions about morality and how much someone is required to give in the name of the greater good. In utilitarian ethics it is clear that since their sacrifice served the most good for the most people it was the morally correct thing for them to do. However, we must consider the problems with utilitarian ethics. In his criticism of utilitarianism, Bernard Williams poses his own thought experiment. He asks us to imagine a young American man, Jim, who is walking down the street in a foreign country and passes a group of six men about to be executed. The six committed no crimes, they are innocent and their execution is arbitrary. Jim is then offered the chance to save five of them if he personally kills one. If Jim refuses to kill one of the men, then all six will die. The purpose of Williams' thought experiment is to demonstrate the flaws of utilitarian ethics. The utilitarian would not hesitate to kill one of them, either at random or by somehow measuring the value of each man based on their utility and killing the least useful of the group. Williams argues that the utilitarian cannot be of strong character because character would prevent him from doing the supposed "right thing," in this case killing one man to save five. Why this is a problem is ever more evident when we put it in the context of comics. Killing one man to save five is not the kind of moral judgment we expect of our superheroes. We won't see Batman or the Green Arrow, who have no superpowers and could themselves be killed, choose one to kill so the rest can live but rather would see them risk their lives to fight the executioners and save all six. The question that arises is which is the moral choice or perhaps, which choice is more moral;

killing some to save others or never killing at all? While it may not be feasible for the average person to stand up to the executioner, the question remains, what is morally required of us to do?

This dilemma is also examined in the story arc of *Batman: Under the Hood* in which Jason Todd, once Batman's side-kick Robin, comes back from the dead and assumes the alias of the Red Hood. As the Red Hood, Jason seeks revenge against both the Joker, who killed him, and Batman, who he believes should have killed the Joker after Jason's death out of revenge. Jason attempts to force Batman to choose between killing the Joker or killing him, but, as expected, our hero wants to find a solution in which everyone lives. Here is a core philosophical debate of the superhero comics' genre. Should super villains be killed for the greater good or should our heroes never be killers and thus send the villains to Arkham Asylum where they will inevitably escape to terrorize the innocent again? Is Batman responsible for every death the Joker causes because he refuses to kill him? Comics don't always give direct answers to these questions but rather present one possible outcome and leave both the character and the reader wondering if they made the right choice. Leading us to ask these questions and ponder these philosophical paradoxes while playing out the different possibilities for us to consider is what make comics philosophical at their core.

Focusing in on one character may make it easier to see the philosophical ideals they embody. Let's take Superman for example. Grant Morrison, in his book *Supergods*, describes Superman's changes through the eras as he evolved each time to represent the mindset of the people in that era. The easiest philosophical claim to make about Superman across the eras is that he is a representation of morality. Some interesting claims can be made here. For example, when Superman must make a choice of who to save, Lois Lane or a bus full of school children, what does he do? Of course in most of these instances the hero finds a way to save both but the far

more interesting stories, both in terms of narrative and philosophy, are the ones in which the hero really has to choose one or the other. Does Superman do the utilitarian thing and save the children? Does he succumb to his personal feelings and save Lois instead? In these cases it isn't a matter of which philosophical school of ethics we think Superman subscribes to that matters but his ability to make moral judgments. Mark D. White, in the first chapter of *Superman and Philosophy*, "Moral Judgment: The Power That Makes Superman Human," states that the ability to make these kinds of tough judgments is "what brings all superheroes down to Earth, and what ultimately makes them relatable to their fans despite their fantastic abilities" (Irwin, 5). This is at least partially true; without having to make tough decisions and impossible choices, there isn't much else about the Man of Steel that an ordinary human can relate to and there isn't much of a story to be told. While most humans will not have to choose between saving the love of their lives or a bus of school children we must each make moral judgments. It is in the choices that Superman makes where he reveals his morality and becomes the beacon of goodness we all expect him to be. If Superman decided to kill Lex Luthor that decision would completely change our perception of him as a paradigm of morality. That Superman, who kills, would not represent the philosophical ideal he always has but instead would represent a much darker urge in our collective consciousness to eradicate all evil from the world. Most people don't have to make moral decisions on the scale that Superman does, but we can look to him as a picture of our morality writ large.

There is more to Superman's morality than just his judgments though. Superman's past, his origin story, plays a significant role in the way he interacts with humanity. The ever present debate of nature vs. nurture can be explored in the comic form by examining "what if" scenarios in alternate universe comics. What if Superman were raised by Lionel Luthor instead of the

Kents (“Luthor”)? What if he landed in Germany instead of Kansas and was raised by Hitler (like the Superman of Earth-10)? What if he landed in the Soviet Union and became Stalin’s protégé? This third question is explored in the pages of *Superman: Red Son*. In this universe Superman is a socialist working for Stalin and wears a hammer and sickle on his chest instead of the classic S. He still flies around preventing accidents and saving lives but he is also part of Stalin’s inner circle. Eventually, Stalin dies and Superman takes his place as leader of the Soviet Union and the nation thrives under his rule. In this timeline, by the year 2001 most of the world is part of the Soviet Union and under Superman’s control.

Robert Sharp examines how story lines like this one present and address thought experiments about the influence of upbringing and early education on morality in his chapter of *Superman and Philosophy*, “Could Superman Have Joined the Third Reich?: the Importance and Shortcomings of Moral Upbringing.” Superman maintains a strong sense of justice and morality throughout *Red Son* and, just as in the standard version, he is driven to act on behalf of the human race as their protector and savior. The difference here isn’t in the basic principles of Superman’s ethics but in how he saw fit to exercise that morality. Whereas the Superman we all know believes in freedom, as any farm-boy, raised in Kansas would, the Superman of *Red Son*, raised in Soviet Russia as the protégé of Stalin, believed that strong government control would bring peace and wealth to the people. There is a clear theoretical, philosophical foundation in *Red Son* that at his core Superman is good and no change to his background story can change that. The nature of Superman’s being, possibly combined with his father’s recorded teaching within the spaceship, is to be a protector of humanity. What his circumstances in life can affect is how he proceeds in making his ideals manifest (Irwin, 40-41).

There's more to Superman than morality, however. It isn't simply his morality that makes Superman so popular but rather his humanity. The ways in which this superhuman alien from a distant planet is more human than some of us is what makes his character so powerful across generations. Compassion, sympathy and empathy, his love of humanity and his respect for all life in general are what make Superman a unique example of what it means to be human even though he is Kryptonian. In the chapter "Can the Man of Steel Feel Our Pain?: Sympathy and Superman" of *Superman and Philosophy*, Andrew Terjesen examines how sympathy makes Superman one of us. He considers the stories in which General Zod comes to Earth and experiences the powers the yellow sun gives to their species. Zod has no sympathy for humans because he sees them as lesser beings while Superman sees them as equals. Zod wants to rule over the human race while Superman's goal is always to save and protect them. This is what makes Superman a reflection of humanity. Empathy on the part of the reader is also key, according to Terjesen, because without being sympathetic to Superman's internal struggles, his decisions and what he gives up in order to be the hero, the true nature of his message is lost. Without empathy Superman is just an unbelievably powerful alien who is unrealistic and far too dissimilar from us to teach us anything about ourselves. As the Martian states in *New Frontier*, humans will fear what is too dissimilar and unknown. It is only when we look at Superman with sympathy that we understand him as being a pillar of humanity (Irwin, 191).

Superman reflects to us our best possible selves and shows us what makes us distinct from other forms of life. The question of what trait is distinctly human is another philosophical inquiry that dates back to ancient Greece where Aristotle wrote that the quality that is distinct to humans, and makes us higher beings than plants and animals, is our reason. Over the years the belief that our reason and intellect were the qualities that make us distinctly human remained a

very popular one. Other models have argued that morality and ethics make us distinctly human and Superman stands as an image for compassion and sympathy to be the qualities that make us distinctly human.

No Capes, no Tights: Philosophy in Comics without Superheroes

While Superheroes are helpful tools in comics for embodying philosophical ideas and ideals they aren't necessary for philosophy to exist within the graphic novel. While less widely known than their Superhero counterparts, graphic novels without Superheroes can tell deep, meaningful and philosophical stories. Take, for example, the work of Jhonen Vasquez in his graphic novel *JTHM: the Director's Cut* where he uses the character of a homicidal maniac named Johnny to explore questions of sanity and violence. As the story goes on, the philosophical nature of the work reveals itself.

Consider one particularly gruesome scene from Part 3 in which the young boy, Squee, is at the mall and becomes separated from his mother. This boy and the failings of his parents to care for him are important parts of the story; it is almost a darker turn on Philip Larkin's poem "This Be the Verse." In this scene as Squee is on the verge of being attacked the title character of the series, Johnny, appears and hits the man about to attack Squee with a pipe, saving Squee from being molested. As Johnny goes about torturing, murdering and dissecting Squee's would-be attacker he says that he wants to show Squee that it is just a man, a flawed human and not a monster. Johnny goes on about the dual nature of humanity; the few who he states are truly human, and the rest who are flawed and defective. Here the character summarizes his personal philosophy about the nature of humanity that is evident throughout the book and while some might say that the profound content written here is only distracted from by the gore of the

graphic elements it is in fact the graphic elements that makes the message so clear. Throughout the book Johnny admits to being disturbed and groups himself in with the defective parts of humanity and his displays of violence make the message evident.

In Part 6 of *JTHM: the Director's Cut* Johnny dies and visits heaven and hell before being returned to Earth. This part of the graphic novel is more than a plot development however. After dying Johnny first reaches heaven, which is drawn to be an open space of clouds where everyone is sitting quietly in chairs. Johnny is surprised by this but his tour guide tells him that these people aren't bored or catatonic but are simply content; they all have great mind-powers but don't have the compulsion to use that power. When Johnny realizes that he can access these mind-powers while in heaven as well, he uses them to explode the head of one man. The man's head immediately grows back so Johnny does it again and again until the man retaliates by doing the same to Johnny. It only takes a few panels for all of heaven to get involved in exploding each other's heads and the peace and contentment is lost. The message here is clear; even in the most perfect of situations, even in heaven, it only takes one wrong action by one person to cause chaos and that chaos spreads quickly and without limitation.

It is also significant to note that while in heaven Johnny meets god who is a disturbingly drawn blob, not interested in doing anything but sleeping, who refuses to answer Johnny's questions about why he is the way he is. After god's refusal to answer his questions Johnny rants about the horrors and suffering of the world but god falls asleep during his tirade. This is an interesting metaphysical proposition; the assertion that god exists and created the universe but that he has also abandoned the universe and left his creations to fend for themselves while he does nothing. While several philosophers have pondered the question of god as something other than a benevolent being, such as Descartes who explores the possibility of god as a deceiver but

decides that isn't the case, god isn't often viewed solely as creator with no other purpose. This is a very existential moment in the story. Throughout the story Johnny has wondered why he became the homicidal maniac he is and why the world is in such disorder but at the moment the answers should be given to him, there are none. This is reminiscent of Camus stating that absurdity is caused by our need to look for answers and the fact that the world holds none for us.

After heaven, Johnny is sent to hell where he meets Satan and is told that he has been living in a house meant to store the residue and sewage of "the human negative" and that is was his job, though he wasn't aware of it, to keep it all locked up there and prevent it from seeping out into the rest of the world. "Know that, for all its trouble, the world is perfect; flawless in its beauties and turmoils. Violence and nightmares being a natural product of humanity" (Vasquez, chapter 6). This line, spoken by Satan, is referencing the philosophical theory that all the suffering in the world is the result of humanity. Johnny then gets to go on a tour of hell which is an ever changing city. The people there are constantly trying to build something better and abandoning the old. He is told that hell is full of people "who couldn't handle inconvenience" and who all believe that the eye in the sky, which is replacing the sun, is watching just them. This version of hell is comparable to the life of gratification described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. "The many, the most vulgar, would seem to conceive the good and happiness as pleasure...In this they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals" (Aristotle, 4). This is clearly the life chosen by the people Johnny meets in hell. They all continue to live, now in hell, as they did before by living only to satisfy their own desires. According to Aristotle this will only lead them to unhappiness which Vasquez seems to agree with as he depicts them as all being miserable.

After his visits to heaven and hell Johnny is forced to return to life. He has to live again, back in the same house, in the same life, doing the same things, but now with the knowledge that there is no good reason for the way things are and without any way to escape the life he's been living. Once back on Earth, Johnny goes back to living, but now with a more secure sense of self. Though he didn't get the answers he was looking for he no longer is searching for them, he is in control of his own life. In this way Johnny becomes the existential hero that Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. As Camus retells the story of Sisyphus, punished by the gods and forced to spend eternity rolling a rock up a mountain, watching it roll back down to the bottom and rolling it up again, he also notes that Sisyphus has no hope for the future because he is aware of his fate and is yet still happy (Camus, 119-123). This is what makes Sisyphus the absurd hero for Camus; he is fully aware of the absurdity of his existence but he continues on, living with the absurdity and letting his knowledge of it be his victory. In this same way Johnny is the absurd hero of *JTHM: the Director's Cut*. After his return to Earth, Johnny is aware of the absurdity of his life, and existence in general, but this does not leave him disheartened but rather gives him a renewed sense of life. He continues living and doing the same things he did before but now with the knowledge of the absurd and a confidence gained only through that knowledge.

All these examples make it clear that comics can represent and illustrate philosophical ideas but, are they capable of adding significantly to philosophy in order to become works of philosophy themselves? What makes *JTHM: the Director's Cut* different from the philosophical theories it references is the way in which the theories are intertwined. Existentialism is combined with Aristotelian virtue ethics as well as other theories in order to form a complete belief system for the character of Johnny. Johnny, like any real person, holds a variety of ideas to be true some of which may even conflict. Johnny's combination of Existentialism and virtue ethics creates an

interesting point of view from which to explore the theories. While Aristotle tells us that virtue is the key to happiness, Camus tells us that life is absurd and that we must find a way to be happy with the absurd. By placing these two theories side by side *JTHM: the Director's Cut* gives the implication that virtue, despite their being no purpose or meaning to life, will give us happiness in the face of the absurd. Johnny's story also gives these theories a new context. This comic develops an underlining theme against dualism. Many types of duality are presented in the pages; Aristotle's moderation versus excess, good versus evil, heaven versus hell, sane versus insane. The character of Johnny stands between all of these. When Johnny dies he is told that he doesn't belong in heaven or hell, he performs actions that are evil but serves a greater good by keeping the evil from seeping out into the world. What *JTHM: the Director's Cut* adds to each of the philosophical discussions it takes on is the third option, the place between the extremes often spoken of by philosophers, that is more accurately descriptive of humanity and the grey area in which most of us inhabit.

Conclusion

Art and philosophy have always been intertwined. Philosophy questions art and explores how we create, view and understand art. Art can represent to us the ideas of philosophy and in some cases add new material to those discussions. Popular music, film and graphic novels all have the ability to represent philosophical ideas and in some cases add new content to the discussion making them works of philosophy.

Through the use of image and allegory art presents philosophical ideas and explores new ways to view these theories. As each new medium gets examined by philosophy, its merits as a unique art form are debated and these arguments extrapolate to include how the artistic may encompass the philosophical. The unique qualities of an art form, be it the power of music, the juxtaposition of images on film or the relation of image to text in comics, allow it to convey theories and in some cases explicate and create philosophy in ways prose cannot.

Appendix

Pages 3-6: Kunal Singh is a musician and music educator in New York.

Page 11: Diegetic sound refers to sounds whose sources are part of the on-screen world. For example this includes dialogue, weather sounds, and music coming from instruments within a scene. Non-diegetic sound refers to the music which is recorded separately, and has no source within the scene itself, and placed onto the film.

Pages 16-17: The philosophical dilemma presented in the 'A House Divided' chapter of "Mass Effect 2" is discussed by the Extra Credits team in their online episode "Enriching Lives" which can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Tp8JopdIc> or on their site here: <http://extra-credits.net/>

Page 20: Eisenstein's montage theory refers to the belief of director Sergei Eisenstein that film montage could create ideas and have an impact beyond the individual images. By linking images he believed it was possible to influence the emotions of the audience and create film metaphors. This is similar to the Kuleshov Effect (of director Lev Kuleshov).

Page 33: The thought experiment by Bernard Williams is referenced here from course discussions but can be found in his work, *A Critique of Utilitarianism*.

Page 35: The story of what would happen if Superman killed Lex Luthor is explored in the animated series *Justice League* episode "A Better World."

Pages 35-36: The idea of Superman being raised by the Luthors is explored in the television series *Smallville* in season 10 episode 10 titled "Luthor."

Page 36: The Superman of Earth-10, sometimes referred to as Overman, appears in various comics including *Countdown to Final Crisis* Vol. 1 Issue 16, *Final Crisis* Vol. 1 Issue 7, *Justice League of America* Vol. 2 Issue 43 and 52 Vol. 1 Issue 52 as well as others.

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