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**'English, motherfucker, do you speak it?'**  
***Pulp Fiction* and the Future of Film-Philosophy**

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## Abstract

In recent years, film scholars have been increasingly preoccupied with questions as to how films can 'be' or 'do' or 'be used for' philosophy. From the 'be used for' position, films are seen as mere examples or jumping-off points to philosophy 'proper'; from the 'be' position, films are seen *as* philosophy, as simply another form of philosophical argumentation; and from the 'do' position, films are seen as examples or illustrations of preexisting philosophical positions/protocols. In this essay, I will operate primarily from the 'do' position and explore how Quentin Tarantino 'does' ordinary language philosophy. Renowned for his innovative and influential dialogue, I intend to shine a light on a neglected aspect of Tarantino's writing style and examine, with reference to the work of ordinary language philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell, the argumentative protocols discernible in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). More specifically, I will analyze the famous 'foot massage argument', utilizing such concepts as 'projective imagination', 'explaining the syntactics', and 'demonstrating the semantics', in the hopes of indicating the fecundity of the continued study of Tarantino's justly famous dialogue. I also intend to broaden my investigation to consider, in light of responses to this material during the IFVCR Network conference and in light of current discussions within film studies, the disciplinary implications vis-à-vis film-philosophy of conducting such ordinary language investigations of dialogue and communication in film.

## Contributor Note

Kyle Barrowman received his PhD from the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. In addition to his work on the philosophy of Ayn Rand and the possibilities of an Objectivist aesthetics of cinema, his research focuses on issues of philosophy and aesthetics throughout the history of film. He is also the editorial assistant of the *Martial Arts Studies* journal.

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## 1. Introduction

If what I have been aiming at is indeed some fragment of a view of expression ... the view is meant in service of something I want from moral theory, namely a systematic recognition of speech as confrontation, as demanding, as owed ... I might say that my view of the role of ordinary language in relation to the imperative of expression is that it is less in need of weeding than of cultivation. Otherwise, as we stand, we are stopped short in the obligation to make our desires, hence our actions, intelligible (and to ourselves) and hampered in our demand and right to be found intelligible in those desires and actions, to ask residence in the shared realm of reason.

– Stanley Cavell (2005, 196–197)

In recent years, film scholars have been increasingly preoccupied with questions as to how films can ‘be’ or ‘do’ or ‘be used for’ philosophy. From the ‘be used for’ position, films are seen as examples or jumping-off points to philosophy ‘proper’; from the ‘be’ position, films are seen *as* philosophy, as simply another form of philosophical argumentation; and from the ‘do’ position, films are seen as examples or illustrations of preexisting philosophical positions or protocols.<sup>1</sup> The stakes, ontologically speaking, of what film ‘is’ or ‘does’ in this respect are substantial; at stake, in the minds of some scholars, is the very identity of what has come to be known as ‘film-philosophy’.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For two particularly insightful considerations of these locutions and their implications for film studies, see Thomas E. Wartenberg (2007, 11–13, 117–132) and Daniel Morgan (2012, 25–27).

<sup>2</sup> Film-philosophy is still in the process of establishing itself as a viable alternative to film studies orthodoxy. For the probative value of film-

As near as I can tell, to worry about which one of these positions *alone* is right is to underestimate the range of things that filmmakers can do via film and that viewers can do with films, and, by extension, to impoverish the discipline of film studies. Contrary to such myopia, it is my contention that all three of these positions are valid and that it is possible for certain films to be approached from any single, any combination of, or all three of these position(s). For the purpose of this essay, I will ‘use’ film – the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction* (1994) in particular – to illustrate concepts in ordinary language philosophy as formulated in the work of such thinkers as Ludwig Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell. At the same time, I will demonstrate, over the course of an in-depth analysis of the argument between the characters Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Jules Winfield (Samuel L. Jackson) which I will refer to as ‘the foot massage argument’, how Tarantino ‘does’ ordinary language philosophy. Finally, I will explore the implications of conducting such ordinary language investigations of films for the future of film-philosophy.

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philosophy, see, beyond the individual contributions to the groundbreaking *Film-Philosophy* journal and the work of such philosophical heralds as Stanley Cavell ([1971] 1979, 1981, 1996, 2004, 2005) and Noël Carroll (1988a, 1988b, 1996a, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010), the work of contemporary scholars such as D.N. Rodowick (1997, 2001, 2007, 2015), Stephen Mulhall ([2001] 2008), Daniel Frampton (2006), David Sorfa (2006a, 2006b, 2016, 2018), Thomas E. Wartenberg (2007), Daniel Shaw (2008, 2012, 2017), Berys Gaut (2010), Robert Sinnerbrink (2011, 2015), Daniel Morgan (2012), Robert B. Pippin (2012, 2013, 2017), and Daniel Yacavone (2015).

Additionally, for my own take on film-philosophy beyond the scope of this essay, see Barrowman (2018b).

Casting just a glance at film studies scholarship, readily apparent is the almost complete absence of even passing reference to (much less serious engagement with) ordinary language philosophy; this in spite of the fact that Stanley Cavell has become, along with Gilles Deleuze, one of the avatars of film-philosophy.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this is due largely to the legacy of poststructuralism in film studies and the tendency on the part of film scholars to gravitate more towards work that is closer (or, in Cavell's case, to ignore the portions of people's

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<sup>3</sup> For my part, while I consider Cavell to be one of the most brilliant and provocative philosophers to have devoted time and energy to thinking about film, I consider Deleuze (as well as, to be perfectly frank, all philosophers who can be said to fall under the postmodernist/poststructuralist umbrella) to be *unreadable* in the sense given to the term by Ayn Rand (Rand [1973] 1982; see also Barrowman 2017). Beyond my antipathy for writing with obnoxiously profligate prose and insufferably labyrinthine 'logic' and which succumbs to/promulgates the illusion that complexity of argumentation is commensurate with complexity of thought (cf. Sokal and Bricmont [[1997] 1999]), Deleuze merely dresses up in idiosyncratic jargon rehashed arguments of classical film theory proposed with greater clarity and profundity by the likes of Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin and taken up subsequently with greater fecundity and erudition by the likes of Cavell ([1971] 1979), Dudley Andrew (1976, 1984a), and David Bordwell (1974, 1993, 1997). And this is to say nothing of the more recent work done on classical film theory which serves as a much more useful mode of scholarship exemplified by Miriam Hansen's work on Siegfried Kracauer (Hansen 1997, 2011), Daniel Morgan's work on Bazin (Morgan 2006, 2011, 2013), and Malcolm Turvey's work on Dziga Vertov (Turvey 2014) to cite but a few examples. Indeed, the Spring 2014 issue of *October* spearheaded by Turvey has paved the way for the path down which scholars interested in classical film theory and the possibilities of film-philosophy should travel rather than following people like Deleuze into the jargony abyss of 'rhizomes', 'arborescence', 'multiplicities', 'images of thought', etc. *ad nauseam*.

work that is not close enough) in spirit to poststructuralism.<sup>4</sup> In any event, the point is that, for as well-known as Cavell's writings on film have become, ordinary language philosophy is far from common coin in film studies. To that end, rather than rushing right into my discussion of *Pulp Fiction*, I must first provide a sense of the orientation and the method of ordinary language philosophy.

As it was famously described by Austin, ordinary language philosophy is concerned with establishing '*what we should say when*, and so why and what we should mean by it' (Austin [1956] 1961, 129). Perhaps the most lucid and succinct description of the philosophical orientation of ordinary language philosophy is provided by Cavell in the following passage from his book *The Claim of Reason*.

When ... any philosopher appealing to ordinary language 'says what we say', what he produces is not a generalization (though he may, later, generalize), but a (supposed) *instance* of what we say. We may think of it as a sample. The introduction of the sample by the words 'We say...' is an invitation for you to see whether you have such a sample, or can accept mine as a sound one ... An initial disagreement may be overcome; it may turn out that we were producing samples of different things (e.g. imagining a situation differently) or that one of us had not looked carefully at the sample he produced ... It is not a matter of saying something false. Nor is it an inability or refusal to say something or to hear something ... At such a crossroads, we have to

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<sup>4</sup> For elaborate philosophical investigations into the problematic legacy of poststructuralism in the philosophy of art generally and in film studies specifically, see Barrowman (2017, 2018a).

conclude that on this point we are simply different; that is, we cannot here speak for one another. But no claim has been made which has been disconfirmed; my authority has been restricted. Even if [an ordinary language philosopher starts] by saying 'We should like to say...'; then, when it turns out that I should not like to say that, he is not obliged to correct his statement in order to account for my difference; rather he retracts it in the face of my rebuke. He hasn't said something false about 'us'; he has learned that there is no us (yet, maybe never) to say anything about (Cavell 1979, 19–20).<sup>5</sup>

As for the method of ordinary language philosophy – if something so fundamental and commonsensical can even be referred to as a 'method'<sup>6</sup> – it has perhaps been most clearly and insistently put by Wittgenstein:

The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: To say nothing except what can be [sensibly] said ... and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something [nonsensical], to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a [sensible] meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person – he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy – *this*

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<sup>5</sup> For a more elaborate consideration of Cavell's conception of conversation, both in general philosophical terms and with specific reference to the disciplinary activities of film scholars, see Barrowman (2018b).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Austin himself felt that so commonsensical is ordinary language philosophy that it 'scarcely requires justification', for 'too evidently, there is gold in them thar hills'; more important to Austin was providing 'a warning about the care and thoroughness needed if it is not to fall into disrepute' (Austin [1956] 1961, 129).

method would be the only strictly correct one (Wittgenstein [1921] 2001, 22–23 [4.003], 89 [6.53]).

These two passages on ordinary language philosophy may serve as the conceptual anchorage for the ordinary language investigation of *Pulp Fiction* that I will undertake in the following section. Before proceeding with my investigation, however, I would like to make one further methodological point. With respect to the question of authorial intention, it is not my purpose with the following section, in which I will analyze the foot massage argument, to prove that it was Tarantino's express intention to 'do' ordinary language philosophy in *Pulp Fiction*, as if he had Wittgenstein and Austin open on his desk while he was writing the screenplay. The connection between Tarantino's dialogue and the practice of ordinary language philosophy is, I want to say (and will endeavor to prove), deeper than that, or, to put it another way, less extraordinary than that. It is my contention that Tarantino's style of writing, in which is manifest his philosophy of communication, is consistent with ordinary language philosophy; thus, by referring to concepts in ordinary language philosophy, I hope to enable fans and scholars alike to understand and appreciate the nature and the function of his dialogue generally, and the profundity of the conversations between Vincent and Jules in *Pulp Fiction* specifically, on a deeper level.

## 2. The Foot Massage Argument

In this section, I will analyze the early argument in *Pulp Fiction* between Vincent and Jules over the meaning of a foot massage. Both 'chapters' of the film

which feature Vincent and Jules, two hitmen who work in the employ of the notorious crime boss Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames), are fueled by an argument. In the first chapter, the argument is about foot massages (in the second chapter, of course, the argument is about miracles). The foot massage argument stems from Vincent's response to a story recounted to him by Jules about Marsellus and his overprotective nature when it comes to his wife Mia (Uma Thurman).

Vincent has informed Jules that, at Marsellus' request, he will be accompanying Mrs. Wallace on a night out while Marsellus is away on business. In an effort to warn his friend of the potentially fatal danger presented by this situation, Jules informs Vincent that it is the 'word 'round the campfire' that Marsellus allegedly took violent revenge on a man named Antwan Rockamora (a.k.a. 'Tony Rocky Horror') for giving his wife a foot massage.<sup>7</sup> The conversation over the course of which Jules tells Vincent this story and they find themselves at odds over the meaning of a foot massage runs as follows:

**Jules:** You remember Antwan Rockamora? Half-black, half-Samoan, used to call him 'Tony Rocky Horror'?

**Vincent:** Yeah, maybe. Fat, right?

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<sup>7</sup> Though I will not insist on always using the word 'allegedly' when referring to the foot massage in question, I will insist that it be kept in mind that Tarantino went to great lengths to not only preserve but to tease the ambiguity of this alleged foot massage, about which our only sources of information are Jules' 'campfire' tale and Mia's assertion to Vincent on their 'date' that 'only thing Antwan ever touched of mine was my hand when he shook it...at my wedding'.

**Jules:** I wouldn't go so far as to call the brother fat. I mean, he got a weight problem, but what's the nigga gonna do? He's Samoan.

**Vincent:** Yeah, I think I know who you mean. What about him?

**Jules:** Well, Marsellus fucked him up good. Word 'round the campfire is it was on account of Marsellus Wallace's wife.

**Vincent:** So, what'd he do? Fuck her?

**Jules:** No, no, no, no, no, no, nothing that bad.

**Vincent:** Well, then what, then?

**Jules:** Gave her a foot massage.

**Vincent:** A foot massage? That's it? Then what'd Marsellus do?

**Jules:** He sent a couple of cats over to his place. They took him out on his patio, threw his ass over the balcony. Nigga fell four stories. Had a little garden down at the bottom, enclosed in glass, like a greenhouse: Nigga fell through that. Since then, he kind of developed a speech impediment.

**Vincent:** That's a damn shame. But still, I have to say: You play with matches, you get burned.

**Jules:** What do you mean?

**Vincent:** You don't be giving Marsellus Wallace's new bride a foot massage.

**Jules:** You don't think he overreacted?

**Vincent:** Antwan probably didn't expect Marsellus to react the way he did, but he had to expect a reaction.

**Jules:** It was a foot massage. A foot massage is nothing.

Jules' purpose in telling Vincent this story is to warn him that Marsellus is psychotically overprotective of his wife and prone to violent jealousy. Vincent, however, responds in a way that surprises Jules. From Vincent's perspective, whether or not Marsellus' reaction upon learning that Antwan had given his wife a foot massage was right (i.e. was a justifiable response to Antwan's transgression), the fact of the matter is that Antwan has nobody to blame but himself. Jules is surprised by Vincent's cavalier attitude to what he considers heinously uncalled-for violence in response to what he conceives of as an innocent act, and what follows is an argument that has as its underlying point of disagreement the meaning of a foot massage.

At various points in *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell schematizes argumentative claims and potential grounds for doubt (e.g. Cavell 1979, 132). For the sake of my analysis of the foot massage argument, I am going to borrow his schema and lay out the terms of the argument as follows:

**Claim (Vincent):** 'You play with matches, you get burned ... You don't be giving Marsellus Wallace's new bride a foot massage'.

**Request for Basis (Jules):** 'You don't think he overreacted?'

**Basis (Vincent):** 'Antwan probably didn't expect Marsellus to react the way he did, but he had to expect a reaction'.

**Ground for Doubt (Jules):** 'It was a foot massage. A foot massage is nothing'.

The rest of the scene consists of Vincent trying to clarify his argument and to get

Jules to see that, in Wittgensteinian terms, he had failed to give a sensible meaning to one of the signs in his propositions (viz. 'a foot massage is nothing'). If Vincent is able to prove to Jules that his doubt is nonsensical – and thereby *remove* his doubt – then, in Cavellian terms, their disagreement may be overcome. The question at this point in my ordinary language investigation of the foot massage argument is: How exactly does Vincent go about clarifying his position?

Vincent is claiming that a foot massage, by its very nature, should obviously, in such a context as the one in which Antwan was massaging Marsellus' wife's feet, be viewed as something not merely *capable of eliciting* but *demanding* a reaction. *What* the reaction is – in this case, being thrown off a building – is a separate matter, and one with which Vincent is importantly not concerned (even though it is an issue on which Jules is clearly hung up).

Vincent is concerned with the implications of a man giving a woman a foot massage. In response to Jules' nonsensical claim that 'a foot massage is nothing', Vincent, according to Austin, has a couple of different response options. As Austin discusses in his essay 'The Meaning of a Word':

Suppose that in ordinary life I am asked: 'What is the meaning of the word *rac*?' There are two sorts of thing I may do in response: I may reply *in words*, trying to describe what raciness is and what it is not, to give examples of sentences in which one might use the word *rac*, and of others in which one should not. Let us call this *sort* of thing 'explaining the syntactics' of the word '*rac*' in the English language. On the other hand, I

might do what we may call 'demonstrating the semantics' of the word, by getting the questioner to *imagine*, or even actually to *experience*, situations which we should describe correctly by means of sentences containing the words 'racy', 'raciness', etc., and again other situations where we should *not* use these words ... And in the same way, if I wished to find out 'whether he understands the meaning of the word *racy*', I should test him at some length in these two ways (Austin [1940] 1961, 25).

As it happens, this is exactly what Vincent proceeds to do. He first explains the syntactics with respect to a foot massage: It is, as he defines it, 'laying your hands in a familiar way' on someone. But Jules is not conceding the intimacy that Vincent is alleging is part and parcel of foot massages. So, Vincent next shifts to demonstrating the semantics. His first attempt is to construct an analogy. He correctly senses that Jules feels that he is putting too much weight on foot massages. To help disabuse Jules of this, Vincent analogizes giving a woman a foot massage to giving a woman oral sex.

Here, Vincent is choosing an obviously charged act in order to bring into clearer focus precisely *how much* weight he is putting on foot massages. He very plainly states that a man giving a married woman a foot massage is not as bad as a man giving a married woman oral sex, but it is, in his words, in 'the same fucking ballpark'. Vincent has, in effect, produced a sample. He has, in Cavellian terms, extended to Jules an invitation for him to see whether *he* has such a sample, or can at the very least accept Vincent's as a sound one. Cavell probes further the nature and the stakes of this

invitation, which he calls, in a decidedly Austinian spirit, 'an invitation to projective imagination', in the following passage:

[Projective imagination is] merely a startling title for a family of the most common of human capacities, e.g. the capacity to 'imagine what would have happened if you had gotten there a day late', to 'suppose you have three rabbits', to 'think how you would feel if that had happened to you'. You may on a given occasion fail to meet one or other of these requests; but you won't, in failing there, have failed the way you would have failed to meet a request for a prediction when your prediction proves inaccurate. If your prediction fails you, you may have spoken too hastily, neglected considerations which are obviously relevant; or the most surprising eventualities (which 'couldn't have been predicted') have arisen. But if your imagination fails you, it probably will not be obvious why (Cavell 1979, 147–148).

Vincent has invited Jules to imagine foot massages as not identical to but at least analogous to – in Vincent's terms, in 'the same fucking ballpark' as – oral sex. But Jules' imagination fails him. He rejects that analogy immediately and vehemently. For Jules, there 'ain't no fucking ballpark'. Why not? Because, according to him, 'foot massages don't mean shit'.

Vincent realizes that Jules' imagination has failed him, although it is not obvious why. It could be the case – and, in *Pulp Fiction*, it proves to be the case – that Vincent has simply failed to make perspicuous his invitation to projective imagination, has failed to produce the right sample for his audience. As Cavell explains:

What will be story enough to get someone to imagine what you invite him to consider is not fixed. To get someone to imagine that he or she has three rabbits and that he is given three more, you will not need much more than those words themselves. To get him to imagine what he would do if he held such and such a bridge hand, you may have to include the information as to whether he or his opponents are vulnerable, and give more information about the styles of bidding of each of the players. To get someone to imagine how Hamlet felt at the play, you may have to tap your own imagination at a deeper stratum to find the relevant details of that situation and to find the corresponding experiences within your life and the life of your audience (Cavell 1979, 152).

Of course, it could have turned out that Jules had some sort of psychological blockage. It could have been the case that he was once severely beaten for talking to a man's girlfriend at a club, and now, faced with a situation so similar, is refusing to give an inch to Vincent out of anger at that past memory. Vincent, however, seems to think – and he is proven correct – that the problem is not so extensive, that he has simply failed to make clear the relevant details of the situation in question and to find the corresponding experiences within the life of his audience.

Given that Vincent knows Jules very well, he changes tactics. He not only invites Jules to *imagine* a context in which he is giving a foot massage; he invites Jules to *experience* giving a *man* a foot massage. If, according to Jules, 'foot massages don't mean shit', if there is nothing intimate or sexual about them, then it should make no difference to him

whether he massages the feet of a married woman, his mother, or Vincent...but it does. Vincent has found the right tool – homophobia, from which any hypermasculine heterosexual man, and especially the cool, Shaft-esque 'bad motherfucker' Jules, must immediately distance himself – to get Jules to see that, as he puts it later, 'there's a sensuous thing going on' when a man gives a woman a foot massage.

This is not to say that Jules is convinced. Vincent has forced him to acknowledge a contradiction in his belief system, but it remains for him to make perspicuous his central argumentative claim. Having reached this point of contradiction, Jules responds by saying that just because he 'wouldn't give no man a foot massage don't make it right for Marsellus to throw Antwan off a building into a glass motherfucking house fucking up the way the nigga talks. That shit ain't right'. It is clear to Vincent at this point that Jules has conflated the claim that Vincent is making – that a foot massage is, or at the very least can be, a suggestive and sexually-charged act – with another claim that Vincent is importantly *not* making – that Marsellus was right to throw Antwan off a building for giving his wife a foot massage.

As they work in this final exchange to clarify their positions and come to an understanding, the single most important phrase said by either man emerges. That phrase, which, significantly, each character says to the other in this final exchange, is, 'You know what I'm sayin'? This phrase signals their efforts to, in Cavellian terms, preserve the 'us' between them, to check whether they are able to speak for one another, to speak representatively, to share in what Wittgenstein famously conceptualized as

a 'form of life' (Wittgenstein [1949] 1967; Cavell 1979, 30–36).

Jules states that throwing a man off a building just because he gave your wife a foot massage is not right, and he asks Vincent if he knows what he is saying. Vincent assures Jules that he does, indeed, know what he is saying, and that, for his part, he is not arguing that Marsellus' reaction to his wife getting a foot massage from another man was right, but simply that *a* reaction should have been expected and, indeed, was warranted given the nature of foot massages. He then asks Jules if he knows what *he* is saying, and Jules assures Vincent that he does, indeed, know what he is saying. Over the course of their argument, they overcame their initial disagreement, clarified the terms of their positions, and reaffirmed that, between them, there is, in fact, an 'us'. More than merely a convenient example to illustrate concepts in ordinary language philosophy, the foot massage argument in *Pulp Fiction* is equally a model of how to argue, of how to have a reasonable disagreement while at the same time preserving one's relationship with one's interlocutor. If philosophy is, as Cavell conceives of it, 'the education of grownups' (Cavell 1979, 125), then, with respect to the ordinary language philosophy of Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction* is a lesson in how to have a grownup argument – a lesson, in short, in 'how to do things with words' (Austin 1962).

### 3. Film, Philosophy, and Film-Philosophy

The material in the previous section consisted of the content of my presentation at the IFVCR Network

conference, "You Talkin' to Me?": Dialogue and Communication in Film'. My modest aim was to demonstrate, first, that Tarantino's justly famous dialogue still has much to offer scholarly analysis, and, second, that ordinary language philosophy can serve as a powerful critical tool in the analysis of dialogue and communication in film. As a perk, I hoped to put film-philosophy on blast a bit. Recalling Wittgenstein's statement on method – in particular, his point about not being satisfied that one was actually being taught philosophy – I had the sense that my ordinary language investigation of *Pulp Fiction* might seem so straightforward (or so *ordinary*) as to not even qualify as 'properly' philosophical. But I thought that if this was borne out in the response to my presentation then it would indicate a problem with how scholars understand 'proper' philosophy, and, more specifically, 'proper' film-philosophy. To that end, I hoped to get a little pushback on what I was doing and the way that I was going about doing it.

Fortunately, my presentation had the desired effect. The conference organizer, Evelina Kazakeviciute, expressed to me that she felt that my presentation lacked something, that it was not philosophical *enough*. Expressing a similar sentiment, one of our conference keynotes, Dr. David Sorfa, asked me in the discussion period after my presentation, 'Why film?' The implication of this question seemed to me to be that perhaps I ought to be worried that I was 'reducing' *Pulp Fiction* to literature by separating off from the film *as film* its construction of dialogue at the level of the screenplay. In other words, it appeared that I was being confronted with the fact that not only was my philosophical orientation not *philosophical* enough, but moreover, my

film-philosophical orientation was not *film*-philosophical enough.<sup>8</sup>

At bottom, I think that the two questions animating these concerns are, first, 'What is film?', and, second, 'What is philosophy?' From these two questions, of course, springs the question that film scholars have in recent years been devoting more and more attention to, namely, 'What is film-philosophy?' To my mind, Cavell has provided the most thought-provoking answers to these questions. A film, according to his definition, is 'a succession of automatic world projections' (Cavell [1971] 1979, 72), a definition which he and a number of other scholars have gone a long way towards clarifying.<sup>9</sup> Philosophy, meanwhile, is for Cavell 'a willingness to think not about something other than what ordinary human beings think about', but rather, 'to learn to think undistractedly about things that ordinary human beings cannot help thinking about, or anyway cannot help having occur to them' (Cavell [1981] 2005, 92).

As for what film-philosophy is, or could/should be, Cavell has acknowledged that, 'since I find in

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<sup>8</sup> For the record, what follows is not meant as an assault on my colleagues for questioning my (film-)philosophical orientation. I did not take their questioning to be a rebuke. Rather, I took their questioning to be attempts to further this conversation and to encourage me to broaden its concerns in the interest of designating potentially insightful avenues down which scholars might travel in future film-philosophical efforts. For that, I am grateful, and I hope that this section may serve as a substantial return on their investments in my ideas.

<sup>9</sup>For elucidations of/elaborations on Cavell's ontology of film, see, among others, William Rothman and Marian Keane (2000), Rodowick (2007, 2015), Morgan (2015), and, for my own take, Barrowman (2019a).

movies food for thought, I go for help in thinking about what I understand them to be thinking about where I go for help in thinking about anything, to the thinkers I know best and trust most' (Cavell [1981] 2005, 91). On this point, it warrants mentioning that there is an unfortunate implication in Cavell's sense of how to proceed in a film-philosophy register. Cavell seems to be implying that, in every instance, the best option for understanding a film is to turn to 'the thinkers [one] know[s] best'. But that may not always be the best option. This was brought home for me in the discussion period after I gave my presentation, during which our other conference keynote, Professor John Mowitt, brought up the centrality of the voice – particularly the *sound* of one's voice and the need to not only understand what is said but to *listen to* and to *hear the way* that what is said is said – in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). For my part, I would like to stress that for me to automatically assume that just because I think that Tarantino's style of dialogue has a fundamental connection to ordinary language philosophy, and just because I am more familiar with the work of ordinary language philosophers than I am with the work of most other philosophers, that the best/only way to answer every question that might possibly arise as to the meaning/significance of something in one of his films, such as the centrality of the voice in *Inglourious Basterds*, is going to be with reference to ordinary language philosophy would be egregiously fallacious (not to mention affrontingly and inexcusably lazy).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, should one find intriguing the prospect of exploring the significance of the voice in *Inglourious Basterds*, I cannot think of a better place to begin one's investigation than Professor

In any 'act of criticism' (Cavell [1971] 1979, 219), as Cavell refers to them, one's 'elementary critical obligation' is the successful demonstration of the utility of one's critical tools (Britton [1986] 2009, 383). However, it is equally worth stressing that it is also crucially important that one be capable of recognizing when a particular critical tool is *unsuitable* for a particular critical job, for, as Andrew Britton averred, if one is incapable of doing so one risks debasing oneself and, indeed, debasing criticism as such. As he explained:

The interests of film theory are not served by finding in every 'realist' text a confirmation of the Lacanian (or Foucauldian or Derridean or whatever) 'problematic', or by proselytizing for the mass production of 'modernist' texts which flatter the presuppositions embodied in the attack on realism. Characteristically, and deplorably, such theory reduces the objects it purports to theorize to mere pretexts for rationalizing the validity of its own premises, and it makes a virtue of its refusal of all cognitive controls by denouncing any concern for the material integrity of the text as 'empiricism' (Britton [1986] 2009, 383).

Of course, to speak in such a register as this, with reference to critical 'jobs' and 'tools', is to presuppose that it is possible to (objectively) know the job (i.e. the film) before opening up one's toolkit. That is, it presupposes that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given critical tool (such as ordinary language philosophy) is determinable only with reference to the objective content of the film on which one plans to use that tool.

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Mowitt's own recent examination of 'sounds' (Mowitt 2015).

This, however, flies in the face of the received 'wisdom' in film studies according to which, far from the objective content of a film determining the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a given critical tool, the critical tool is (implicitly or explicitly) held to 'determine' the 'objective content'. This is what I refer to as the *paradigm subjectivity argument*, the terms of which have actually been explicitly laid out by Professor Mowitt himself:

Questions that bear on the institutional maintenance of the hermeneutical field as such [such as which critical tool is most appropriate for a given film] ... are not concerns which come *after* the particular text in question or which are properly 'extrinsic' to it – they are concerns which address the very definition of the textual artifact as an artifact. Insofar as the artifact is meaningful ... it is because [scholars] continue to support the [hermeneutical] structures ... which read the artifact on their terms (Mowitt 1992, 214–215).

The paradigm subjectivity argument has been running rampant in film studies for decades.<sup>11</sup> Dudley Andrew has argued that 'there is no objective truth about signification in films, only a tradition of reading them in such and such a way'

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<sup>11</sup>Even though I am remaining within the disciplinary confines of film studies, the influence across both the sciences and the humanities of Thomas Kuhn cannot be overstated, for it was Kuhn who gave currency to the paradigm subjectivity argument with the simple yet destructively mistaken postulation that 'a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself' (Kuhn 1970, 113; cf. Merrill 1991, 97–98, 170–172; Sokal and Bricmont [1997] 1999, 67–73; Hicks 2004, 74–83; and Binswanger 2014, 383–390). For more thorough refutations of the paradigm subjectivity argument, see Barrowman (2018b, 2019b).

(Andrew 1984b: 14). Likewise, Slavoj Žižek has argued that postulating the existence of a given film as an 'objective reality' merely 'begs the question of what "objective reality" means ... [for] the procedures of posing problems and finding solutions to them always and by definition occur within a certain [paradigm] that determines which problems are crucial and which solutions acceptable' (Žižek 2001, 17–18).

What is missing from the paradigm subjectivity argument is the concept of objectivity (hence its name). In addition to tacitly (illicitly) assuming that there is no objectively existing film to which scholars can refer in examining claims made following the use of a given critical tool, it is also tacitly (illicitly) assumed that conversation and debate between paradigms is impossible (cf. Carroll 1992). In the case of *Pulp Fiction*, if it is true that I have 'created' the meaning of the foot massage argument by virtue of my utilization of ordinary language philosophy, then it would be impossible for another scholar to falsify my claims beyond the coordinates of ordinary language philosophy (indeed, it would be nonsensical if not inconceivable for another scholar to even [want to] try to do so). Moreover, if another scholar were to advance a different set of claims having used a different critical tool, then it would be equally impossible/nonsensical/inconceivable for *me* to (want to) try to use ordinary language philosophy to falsify *their* claims. In short, the very concepts of true/false, right/wrong, good/bad, etc., would have no place in the conversation. Needless to say, this would make for a

film-philosophy rooted in very bad philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

But that is a fight for another day. For the moment, I believe that I have successfully alleviated any concerns pertaining to the potential utility of ordinary language philosophy in the context of film-philosophy. However, I have yet to address the related concern that, even if ordinary language philosophy may be useful in the context of film-philosophy, its utility comes at too great a cost. That is, if the utility of ordinary language philosophy comes at the cost of reducing film to literature, then the cost is clearly too high for *film-philosophy*. These worries seem to not only presuppose a very rigid 'essence' of film befitting the likes of a Rudolf Arnheim, they also seem to presuppose a 'proper', 'holistic' form of film criticism. On top of which, they imply that *Pulp Fiction* is a bad film *qua* film, for, if all that can be said about it can be said with reference to the screenplay, then what virtue is there in saying anything about it in the context of *film-philosophy*?

For me personally, as a die-hard Tarantino fan, this is a far more serious set of issues, for at stake is not only the validity of ordinary language philosophy as a critical tool for film scholars, but

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<sup>12</sup> For more detailed examinations of such bad philosophy, see Barrowman (2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019b). Broadly speaking, the 'logic' here is endemic of a virulent strain of irrationalism in academia that has already been criticized by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, who noted in their trenchant (and sadly still relevant) critique of humanistic inquiry the pernicious efforts to hive scholars off 'into cultures and groups having their own conceptual universes – sometimes even their own "realities" – and virtually unable to communicate with one another' (Sokal and Bricmont [1997] 1999, 92).

even more importantly, the status of one of my favorite films *as film*. These issues can be traced at least as far back as V.F. Perkins' landmark book *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, in which he expressed the following concern with respect to the analysis of film as film:

Balance [between cinematic elements] will go unappreciated unless we respond to movies as a synthetic form, since none of the elements in the synthesis has a separate importance. The parts are of interest as we relate them, not in isolation. A literary approach [such as my approach to the foot massage argument in *Pulp Fiction*] ... reduces the film [to literature] ... and then tries to assess the value and significance of the resulting form of words (Perkins [1972] 1993, 78–79).

While I agree with Perkins that to truly understand a film one must approach it synthetically – that is, one must analyze its elements in conjunction – I disagree that parts of films have no interest in isolation.<sup>13</sup> In fact, prior to isolating the dialogue of *Pulp Fiction* and conducting my ordinary language investigation at the level of the screenplay, I had never been able to appreciate the intricacy of Tarantino's *mise-en-scène*. In the discussion period, Professor Mowitt pointed out the subtlety of Tarantino's blocking as Vincent and Jules argued in the hallway of the apartment complex in which they were planning on executing their hit for Marsellus. Far from reducing the film to literature, examining the

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<sup>13</sup> And I am by no means the first scholar to explicitly or implicitly reject Perkins' position here. For philosophical justifications for what has alternatively been called 'middle-level' or 'piecemeal' scholarship, see Bordwell (1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1996) and Carroll (1996a, 1996b).

dialogue in *Pulp Fiction* in isolation from the rest of the film allowed me to achieve an *enhanced* synthetic understanding of and appreciation for the film *as film*, for it was not until I had fully comprehended the implications of the foot massage argument that I was able to understand and appreciate the significance of Tarantino's visual strategies.

In the early portion of their argument, as Vincent is explaining the syntactics and demonstrating the semantics of foot massages, he is walking behind Jules, as if trying to catch-up with him, as if trying to realign himself with Jules *physically* in a manner analogous to the way that he is trying to realign himself with Jules *conceptually* (while Jules, meanwhile, so sure of himself and so deaf to Vincent's claims, is not even deigning to look at Vincent, dismissing his claims with flippant hand gestures meant to wave him off). Added to which, it is not insignificant that, at the moment at which Vincent extends to Jules his invitation to projective imagination vis-à-vis giving a man a foot massage, they are framed in a two-shot so as to emphasize the import of the moment when Vincent steps forward, attempting to close the (physical and conceptual) distance between them, to ask, 'Would you give a guy a foot massage?' Also of note is the decision to shoot this sequence with a Steadicam and to avoid disrupting the flow of the conversation with cuts. By shooting this sequence as a long take, Tarantino was able to add dramatic weight to this moment, with the camera becoming stationary as they confront one another and only becoming mobile again after Jules retorts, 'Fuck you', and disengages, conceding Vincent's point.

And this by no means exhausts the aesthetic richness of this sequence, to say nothing of the rest of the film. *Pulp Fiction* is, synthetically, an extraordinarily well-crafted film. That said, it is nevertheless possible – and, as this example has hopefully demonstrated, potentially even incumbent upon scholars – to isolate elements of films in order to better understand the elements themselves, which, in turn, may produce more comprehensive understandings of how various elements function synthetically in the larger contexts of films as films.

#### 4. Conclusion

It goes without saying that, as a relatively new endeavor, the possibilities of film-philosophy are only just beginning to emerge. In this essay, I have tried to make a case for the utility of ordinary language philosophy as a critical tool for scholars interested in analyzing dialogue and communication in film. Additionally, in light of the conversations that were initiated at the IFVCR Network conference, I sought to expand this discussion of ordinary language philosophy in the context of *Pulp Fiction* to consider some broader concerns for the future of film-philosophy. It is with the future of film-philosophy in mind that I would like to conclude this essay.

In 1996, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll famously declared that the discipline of film studies had entered the ‘post-Theory’ age (Bordwell and Carroll 1996). This declaration was the culmination of two decades of intellectual combat within film studies centering on what was often referred to as ‘Grand Theory’ (or, more pejoratively, ‘SLAB Theory’, for Saussure, Lacan, Althusser, and Barthes

[Bordwell 1989b]) and which Bordwell and Carroll defined as that ‘aggregate of doctrines derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis, structuralist semiotics, poststructuralist literary theory, and variants of Althusserian Marxism’ (Bordwell and Carroll 1996, xiii). Surveying the last two decades of film studies scholarship, it seems to be true that film studies is by and large post-Theory. And, with the current popularity of film-philosophy, most contemporary film scholars seem eager to chart new territory and leave to the past the battles over Grand Theory. However, scholars would do well to remember Carroll’s insistence that, ‘however the demise of Theory came about’, the fact that film studies had entered the post-Theory age did not mean that there were not still ‘major obstacles’ in its path. In fact, Carroll warned that, ‘as long as these obstacles continue to grip the imaginations of scholars’, it is ‘unlikely’ that film studies will be able to escape the ‘legacies’ of Grand Theory and truly thrive (Carroll 1996b, 38).

For as much as the philosophical sophistication of film studies has increased since Bordwell and Carroll inaugurated the age of post-Theory, I have had the sinking suspicion that this is precisely the disciplinary drama that is currently being played out. The legacies of Grand Theory still seem to have a firm grip on the imaginations of contemporary film scholars (as evidenced by the lasting influence of the paradigm subjectivity argument and the zombie-like persistence of poststructuralism), and I think that film-philosophy presents scholars with the opportunity to distinguish between and hierarchically organize the philosophical and hermeneutic value of the myriad conceptual orientations and critical

methodologies on offer. Carroll once remarked (indicating his preference for 'robust pluralism' as opposed to 'coexistence pluralism' [Carroll 1996b, 62–67]) that, in the history of the still comparatively young and immature field of film studies, orientations and methodologies have been embraced and disavowed (with a randomness that I think is more befitting the world of fashion), yet, amidst this flurry of scholarly activity, 'what may be of use and what is plainly wrong has not been sorted out properly' (Carroll 1996a, 291).

I hope that, in this essay, I have sorted out the fact that, and how, ordinary language philosophy can be of use. As for the myriad orientations and methodologies that have at one time or another appeared on the film studies

stage – to say nothing of the myriad orientations and methodologies that have yet to receive a hearing – I think that it is safe to say that film-philosophy has its work cut out. I think that there is an untold number of conversations that need to be started/resumed in film studies. And some conversations will invariably be politer than others. Some conversations may be downright polemical. There may even be times when scholars will feel compelled to shout at one another in their loudest Samuel L. Jackson voice, 'English, motherfucker, do you speak it?' But I do not think that scholars should shy away from future battles in the spirit of the old 'Theory Wars'. After all, as Cavell once quipped: 'Lines are to be drawn, or what's a conversation for?' (Cavell 1981, 227).

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## Filmography

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