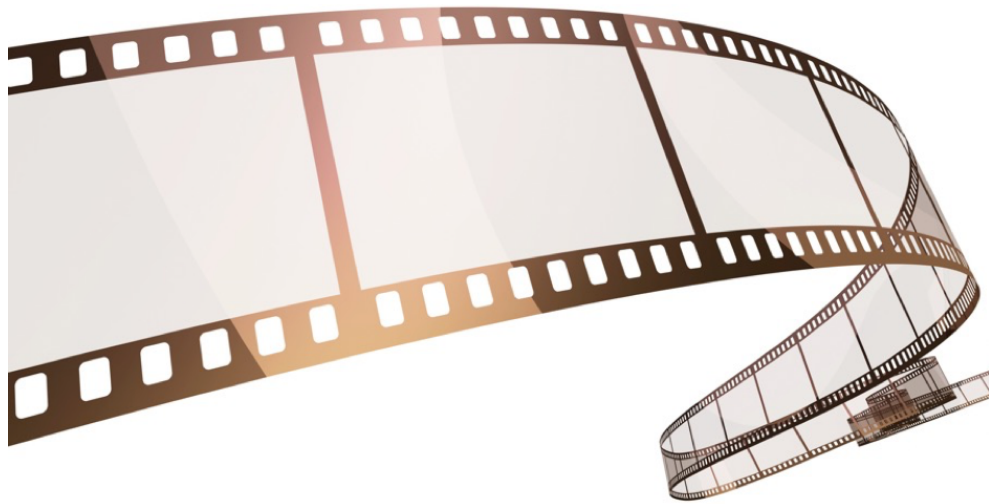


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## Ordinary Language Film Studies

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**Abstract:** This essay explains Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP), because it is relatively unfamiliar to those working in the field of Film-Philosophy, and proposes it as beneficial to film study. OLP provides us with a method of philosophising in relation to films that (1) is not theoretical, paradigmatic or thematic, and is therefore potentially unrestrained because it is not *a priori* or determining; that (2) is context sensitive, proceeding on a case-by-case basis, while also capable of synoptic overview (through connective analysis); that (3) encourages conceptual clarification and responsive articulation in order to present a perspicuous picture of individual films and our experience of them; and that (4) can act therapeutically by uncoupling us from unhelpful linguistic attachments that may restrict, helping us to see anew.

## INTRODUCTION

If we are hoping to study film philosophically but not theoretically then I advise that we look to a practice within philosophy that is not theoretical.<sup>1</sup> That practice is called Ordinary Language Philosophy, widely referred to as OLP (an acronym I will use in this essay). It developed as a philosophical practice from the 1940s to the late 1970s, most prominently in the United Kingdom, and most particularly at the University of Oxford. Many of the underpinnings of OLP can be found in the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, most significantly in the *Philosophical Investigations*. The celebrated practitioners of OLP were J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle, and their teaching and writing represents the purest form of the pursuit. Peter Strawson is also an important figure although he offers a less pure form. Stanley Cavell, who studied under Austin, is associated with OLP, and his early work in particular engages directly with it (for example, the essays ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ and ‘Austin at Criticism’).<sup>2</sup> Cavell’s work has been important in influencing a small, but growing, band of contemporary philosophers who value OLP.

In this essay I want to propose the usefulness of an OLP approach to film studies. Some limitations of theoretical methods will be voiced, but my main purpose is not to present a critique of theory, nor imply its worthlessness. It is to offer a productive alternative. I think this approach has been important to my academic practice in teaching and writing over the years, although I had not realised how close my practice was to OLP, and I had not, therefore, explicitly explored the link with this philosophical tradition. OLP works particularly well in an applied form because it is inherently methodological and purposefully transferable. I can testify to it offering both practical benefits for film analysis and a secure explanation for adopting it as an approach (and the relinquishing of other approaches). Nevertheless, it has not, I hope, been the only part of my practice, and I do not think it should operate in a vacuum. It aids, rather than usurps, other methods and skills associated with observation, anatomisation, interpretation, and evaluation that are equally important for film study.

### I. WHAT IS ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY?

OLP is a form of linguistic philosophy and was part of what was known as the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy. Sally Parker-Ryan explains:

Linguistic philosophy may be characterised as the view that a focus on language is key to both the content and method proper to the discipline of philosophy as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

This might appear an odd basis from which to propose a philosophy suitable for the study of film. After all, film is made up of images and sounds. Language, often manifesting in the form of dialogue or voiceover, is only one small

part of the art. There are two responses to this apparent oddity. Firstly, the ‘language’ to which I will be referring is the language we use in film study. OLP believes that the world, life, and reality are well understood and revealed by the examination of our language use. Equally I am proposing that films can be well understood and revealed by the examination of our language use (about them). Secondly, I will be proposing an analogy with the ‘language’ of film, and by ‘language’ I mean the entire audio-visual form by which a film expresses itself. I do not think that all our relationships to films will be enhanced by using an OLP approach – indeed many forms of everyday enjoyment of films can exist untouched by it – but I do think that the study of film can be enhanced. Hence the label: ‘ordinary language *film studies*.’

Although classic OLP was short-lived and was only practised by a relatively small group of philosophers, it was for a while *the* preeminent mode of doing professional philosophy in Britain. It now appears to be a minor, idiosyncratic tributary of analytic philosophy, as distinct from continental philosophy in so far as the distinction can be maintained, but it offers something different to the standard characteristics and practices of both. OLP was a stage in the linguistic turn that analytic philosophy had already made, and yet it rejects that core ‘analytic’ feature namely ‘decompositional analysis’: ‘the decomposition of facts into their ultimate simple constituents and the revelation of their logical forms.’<sup>4</sup> (It is, nevertheless, ‘analytic’ in a more ordinary sense because it closely analyses the placement and use of words in specific expressive contexts.) OLP was criticised from within analytic philosophy and much contemporary analytic philosophy, aside from passages of necessary terminological or conceptual clarification, does not resemble OLP, or fundamentally incorporate its method. It is worth noting that the title ‘Ordinary Language Philosophy’ was originally a derogatory designation employed by those who opposed it, although like some other terms of abuse it has been, on the whole, quite happily co-opted and redeemed by proponents of OLP. Although meant condescendingly and dismissively, OLP is an accurate and pithy description outside the abusive perspective. But the term ‘ordinary’ can also be misleading. Therefore, it is worth clarifying what is at stake in the term, what one means by it, and the context from which it arose.

Ordinary Language Philosophy developed in response to what has been called ‘Ideal Language Philosophy’. ILP proceeds on the basis that philosophy requires the development and utilisation of an ‘ideal’ language. It sees ‘“ordinary” language as obstructing a clear view on reality – it is thought to be opaque, vague and misleading, and thus stands in need of reform (at least insofar as it is to develop *philosophical* truth).’<sup>5</sup> Within analytic philosophy, the aim of an ILP was to uncover a supposed ‘depth grammar’, a prevailing structure and logic, pure and unsullied, that was presumed to underpin language and therefore representation. (Wittgenstein’s early work was arguably engaged in this uncovering.) The mistrust of ordinary language, the sense that it obstructs a truthful understanding of the world, and obscures

philosophical clarity, encouraged the desire for philosophy to adopt, and work in, a meta-language, or artificial language. Rudolph Carnap wrote, 'Since in our view the issue in philosophical problems concerned the language not the world, these problems should be formulated, not in the object language, but in the meta-language.'<sup>6</sup>

OLP is sceptical of this: it is the construction of an ideal language or meta-language that is 'opaque, vague, and misleading'. However, 'ordinary language' should not simply be equated to the language of the 'common' man or woman, or that used by so called 'ordinary' people. For OLP, 'ordinary' refers to an established type of occurrence, and in many cases that will mean an everyday or commonplace occurrence, but the emphasis is on occurrence. How might language ordinarily be used, and make sense, in various contexts including specialist ones, for example in science and sub-cultures. Indeed, although OLP is impatient with the importation of specialist terminology into contexts where non-specialist language would be more functional, it is not against such terminology *per se* because this could equally lead to precise specification.

Use within context is prioritised by OLP and it shares the idea of language that Wittgenstein sets out in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein rejects the notion that words have a fixed meaning, and instead emphasises the variation in meaning that depends on, for example, situation, placement, address, and tone. We should not assume, according to Wittgenstein, that because a word means something then there must be one thing that it means, something definitive. The 'family resemblance' idea helps explain this point. There are many 'proceedings' we call games – 'board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games' but there is not necessarily something 'common' to them all, and we may seek in vain for some single commonality.<sup>7</sup> Even if we found a commonality it would not necessarily be the most productive end point because we will have arrived at a banal generality. Instead Wittgenstein writes that 'we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' which he characterises as 'family resemblances'.<sup>8</sup> The word 'game' does not have a single meaning, each game is not something of the same kind, and each use of the word 'game' will have contextual dependencies. Ryle thinks that many of our expressions are of this nature: they have what he calls an 'elasticity of signification'.<sup>9</sup> Many words do not stand for something or refer to something in an obvious, direct way. They do not straightforwardly designate.

This understanding of language underpins the various aspects of OLP. OLP engages in delineating the variety of meanings that a single word, and its derivatives, can have depending on context, and concomitantly is attentive to the confusions arising from this 'elasticity'. Ryle wrote about expressions that become part and parcel of our assumptions but which can be 'systematically misleading'.<sup>10</sup> One of the central problems in traditional philosophy, for OLP, was the reliance on customary senses of words while simultaneously

using them in non-customary ways (for example, ‘looks’, ‘seems’, ‘appears’ or ‘perceives’ in sense-data theory). Non-specialist language being put to work it was not capable of doing, or losing its sense in inhospitable contexts, was more of a problem for OLP philosophers than the adoption of specialist language. According to OLP, traditional philosophy wants, and needs, to take advantage of ordinary phrases like ‘to know’ to investigate what we ordinarily understand by knowing and knowledge, but then does not use them in ways we ordinarily would. There is therefore an inconsistency in the procedure.

At the same time as monitoring the circulation of one word, OLP was attracted to the precision of specification offered by the variety of words that any context might deserve. OLP commends ‘our common stock of words’ which as Austin famously proclaimed ‘embodies all the distinctions [people] have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the lifetimes of many generations’ and which ‘have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest’.<sup>11</sup> For Austin, ‘our common stock of words’ gifts us with the opportunity for subtle and finessed reference and distinctions.<sup>12</sup> This valuing of the ‘common stock’ does not mean, however, as some have taken it to mean, that OLP’s recourse to ‘ordinary’ language is in some way a covert or even overt way of confirming the status quo through the reinforcement of mainstream linguistic practices. On the contrary, OLP invites us to be vigilant about language: to show sensitivity to contextual suitability and to scrutinise taken-for-granted assumptions about meanings and usage encrusted through habit.

## II. TESTING OF LANGUAGE

Most, if not all, of us in film studies are using language to analyse films and therefore the testing of our language will have direct disciplinary benefits. The method proceeds by asking ourselves why we are using a certain word or phrase. Why have we chosen it? What do we mean to say? What work do we think it is doing for us? Might it be substituted or added to? Might it be inconsistent or incompatible with other words we are using? As is commonly the case with OLP a pedagogical dimension is never far away, and accounting for the method from a pedagogical point of view is instructive. Within film studies I have long advocated and practised a form of seminar which consistently keeps film sequences in view, preferably on some sort of large screen, where they are played, paused, and rewound. Teacher and student move through the sequences together, over the time of the seminar, cooperatively developing and refining the articulation of descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations. Together they remain orientated either to test pre-existing claims or more importantly to generate grounded insight. This procedure is coupled with the more familiar one of teaching through questioning – the Socratic method – but it is not simply equivalent to it because the Socratic method need not necessarily examine language use. Nor should it be equated to what

we might call a literary or fine-writing purpose: speaking and writing more beautifully, evocatively, or resonantly (which may or may not be desirable depending on the context). Firstly, through the testing of language use, the student (and the teacher) are encouraged – platitudinous as this may sound – to think, speak, and write clearly, and to make sense. Geoffrey Warnock reports that for Austin and Ryle

above all things obscurity was to be avoided . . . the philosopher's first duty, prior even to that of being right . . . was to be clearly, plainly, and readily understood.<sup>13</sup>

P.M.S. Hacker, following the OLP tradition, understands philosophy to be the 'tribunal of sense', and although some philosophical practice refutes this, I think this could be regarded as one respectable aim of philosophically orientated film study.<sup>14</sup> Avner Baz helpfully frames the matter of sense less dutifully or judicially, and more sympathetically, as something continuous with the 'everyday' flow of interpersonal communication: 'OLP is a natural extension of perfectly ordinary and everyday attempts to become clearer about what we or others are saying or thinking.'<sup>15</sup> Clearly and plainly communicating something is of limited value, however, if the insight is limited. Therefore, a student is equally encouraged to be *alive* to words, expressions, phrases, and concepts that will enable illuminating distinctions, discriminations, characterisations, connections, and categorisations concerning their object of study.

Understood through the lens of OLP, this would be considered a particularly philosophical way of teaching, although it would not appear to be teaching philosophy or philosophical subjects or being philosophical about film. From a pedagogical point of view, I suppose it might be called a skill-based form of learning, and indeed Austin, following Wittgenstein, wrote about words being 'our tools'.<sup>16</sup> He then went on to write, 'as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forearm ourselves against the traps that language sets us.'<sup>17</sup> However, proceeding in this way can appear as if substantive matters are being ignored, and the risk is student bewilderment and irritation as we fiddle while Rome burns.

Ignoring substantive matters was a criticism of OLP philosophy itself (and of Wittgenstein's philosophy). The objection is true in so far as OLP does not feel obliged to *directly* philosophise about, for example, reality or being or mind or existence or the existence of deities as much philosophy has and does. Nevertheless, it is interested in examining how we speak about these things; indirectly therefore it does aim to be insightful and illuminating about them, about the world, about reality. Parker-Ryan explains that

for the Ordinary Language philosophers, [although] the aim was to resolve philosophical confusion . . . one could expect to achieve

*a kind* of philosophical enlightenment, or certainly a greater understanding of ourselves and the world, in the *process* of such resolution.<sup>18</sup>

For Strawson, ‘this did count as new knowledge – for it made possible [a] new *understanding* of our experience of reality.’<sup>19</sup> In terms of film study, I would argue, following Strawson, that adopting an ordinary language approach makes possible a ‘new understanding’ of our experience of films or film. There can still be a desire, perhaps heartfelt, to be revealing about phenomena, but via a linguistic route.

The sense of ‘enlightenment’ through the analysis of language opposes the image of OLP as conservative. This image is based on the argument that because of its reliance on ordinary language, OLP ends up being ‘a defense of ordinary beliefs.’<sup>20</sup> I would argue the contrary: OLP tends to shine a light on the problems in our beliefs, and our articulation of them, problems which accrue as misappropriations and vagueness are layered and *conserved*. A related charge is that OLP is quietist. David Macarthur has recently proposed that OLP *is* indeed quietist in the sense that it is ‘non-doctrinal’ and suspicious of ‘the disengagement of some thinking from a proper sensitivity to the empirical.’<sup>21</sup> OLP’s quietist mentality should not be seen therefore as an ‘end-of-philosophy philosophy’ or as ‘defeatist’ because it can help unbind us from ‘fixed convictions . . . [in] ethical, social, and political reflection.’<sup>22</sup> To this I would add aesthetic reflection. Ridding oneself of philosophical doctrine, of ‘illusions and fixations’, is understood as enlightening and therapeutic.<sup>23</sup>

### III. AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF PHILOSOPHISING

One mainstream strand of Film-Philosophy treats films as being philosophically meaningful, not merely as cinematic presentations of some pre-existing philosophy but as philosophically expressive in a distinct and equally creative way. According to this point of view, Philosophy, with a capital P, is not brought to film, rather films can be fundamentally philosophical or discover for themselves what Philosophy has discovered or is discovering (a Cavellian formulation). In this way films are said to ‘do’ philosophy. I have no problem with the idea that films can be philosophical or ‘do’ philosophy because my experience has shown me that films can be and do any number of things. They can be philosophical, and they can also be emotional, political, comical, beautiful, fanciful, fantastical, skilful, and so on (or if you like they can do emotion, do politics, do comedy and so on). Many of my own interests in film study relate to achievements of film form which need not, and often are not, philosophical. Excellent timing, for example, of a gag, or of a shot transition, or of a physical gesture, or of a dance step, is not philosophical (or need not be for it to be excellent). One advantage of an OLP approach is that it is non-denominational. Because its approach is methodological and pedagogical, it does not require a film to be philosophical (formally or the-

matically). An OLP approach would not feel the need to address the form and content of films in philosophical terms.

Another prominent mode of Film-Philosophy, and Film Theory before it, is directly philosophising or theorising about, for example, film as a medium, film ontology, film images, film narratives or film meaning. This philosophy aims to provide a revelatory interpretive picture, schema, or paradigm by which to perceive, understand, or experience, or explain how we perceive, understand, or experience. It provides ways of labelling and classifying; permits a detached overview; and identifies overarching forces, underlying structures, or prevailing systems. From a theoretical point of view, a dedicated attention to individual films may make one oblivious to these things. Furthermore, although any person may theorise independently, quite often they do so by way of individual philosophers and theorists, who may or may not have examined film themselves, for example, Judith Butler, Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, Sigmund Freud, Emmanuel Levinas, Karl Marx, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey (via Jacques Lacan), or by way of working within a particular field of theory, for example, Apparatus Theory, Cognitive Theory, Ontological Theory, or Affect Theory. In addition to theorising of a more metaphysical bent, and arguably more commonly practised now, philosophies and theories are also applied to individual films (for example, a Heideggerian interpretation of *The Thin Red Line* [Terrence Malick US 1998]).

An OLP approach does not intend to offer an explanatory or interpretive paradigm or picture in the way these approaches intend to do, and powerfully have done. This alternative approach would offer opportunities. One would be to operate on a smaller scale, and to be free from the pressure for claims to be all embracing. OLP prefers a form of manageable investigation of phenomena and associated concepts through localised observation. In film study this means building one's thoughts out of the close analysis of, and articulations about, passages of individual films. There is also the opportunity to be responsive to matters arising without needing to establish a position and perspective too prematurely, and then requiring the film to conform. The flip side of a theoretical paradigm being widely explanatory is that it can be, as Warnock says, 'potentially distorting, inhibiting clear . . . perception of the actual phenomena under consideration'.<sup>24</sup> The theoretical 'picture', in Wittgenstein's sense, takes too strong a hold, leading to precipitous generalisation and formalisation. To be fair, however, it is not only theory that may encourage these tendencies. A theme, an argument, or any extrinsic concern having too great a grip on our thinking may overdetermine our perception and cognition.

And overdetermine our vocabulary too. I explained earlier the desire within philosophy for an ideal language to replace the inadequacies of ordinary language. This desire for an improved or different language by philosophy resembles the desire by many working in the humanities, especially from the



late 1960s/early 1970s and onwards. From their point of view, film criticism that used ordinary language was obstructing a clear view of individual films and of film as a medium. As a result, they introduced their own favoured terminology and locutions, often by way of theoretical paradigms, which would better, more rigorously, and more systematically, account for the nature and expression of art, including film. As the paradigms are utilised, a set of words is deployed, and quite often a narrow set because the intention is for different phenomena to be brought into the same descriptive fold to signal similarity. The desire for an encompassing vocabulary can be contrasted to the desire for an individuated vocabulary to signal difference. The OLP approach affords the opportunity to adopt a wider range of words varying according to film and viewer. One problem with the locutions of theory is that they can become tired from over-extended employment and may then restrict thought (even if they once enabled it). By introducing words which offer variation and gradation into a stale discourse ‘new decisions, beliefs, acts, and critical appraisals [are made] possible’.<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Rée explains that for OLP ‘the idea was to reveal the intellectual riches that were sedimented in natural languages’.<sup>26</sup>

Another branch of the philosophical study of film, one that associates itself with contemporary analytic philosophy of art, also arguably adopts a theoretical methodology. It is not, however, often recognised as doing so, especially by its practitioners. This might be because they have been keen to differentiate themselves from some of the theoretical tendencies I have outlined (for example, the application of the work of individual theories or theorists to films). In his recent trenchant study of OLP, Baz puts forward the argument that contemporary analytical philosophy can be understood as broadly theoretical.<sup>27</sup> A theory about a subject such as knowledge, justification, causation, necessary truth, or belief is proposed – for aesthetics these subjects might be medium specificity, realism, spectatorship, moralism, intentionalism, or fictionality – and then various ‘cases’, or examples, are offered to support or not support the theory, or to test the theory. These ‘cases’ give the appearance of a certain empirical authority, but for Baz the method is a reduced, detached, and disorientated abstraction; not orientated to, and not naturally emerging from, a reality which the analytic philosopher is often trying to explain. An ordinary language approach would build from the ground (of the film/s) upwards. Instead of looking around for examples or ‘cases’ to test or answer a theoretical question, it would let its questions and analysis arise from out of the actuality of the films and the experience of them.

This does not mean that an ordinary language film study would reject all generality. This is because, firstly, insight based on a theory can serve an interpretation of a film where it seems appropriate to do so. Theories contribute to our picturing of the world, and they become part of the generative cultural life and a way of understanding aspects of it. If I think that a scene in a film

that uses a mirror is illuminated by citing the Lacanian mirror phase, then all to the good. However, this need not mean that the scene is necessarily determined in some sense by that Lacanian theory; nor need it mean that *my* reading is determined by the theory (or in opposition to it); nor need it mean that every mirror scene, or even all of this particular scene, would be illuminated by the theory; nor need it mean that there was something ‘essentially’, or even commonly, Lacanian about the film apparatus and its expression; and nor need it mean that the surrounding analysis will require a Lacanian vocabulary (as distinct from using the Lacanian vocabulary when I thought it was a revealing way of describing an aspect).<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, generality is required because the assessment of any object partly operates by recognising and understanding its place in a variety of categories or families. The OLP method is ‘comparative-descriptive’ and any descriptive approach is refined by comparison.<sup>29</sup> The families need not be tight, well established, or even consciously recognised and explicated in the culture. Films from different places and periods may be involved in a productive comparison depending on the investigation. Ordinary language film study recognises ‘the worth or significance of a family of contingent instances’.<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, ordinary language film study embraces generality by giving us a synoptic ‘overview of a concept’ or ‘a surveyable representation of the relevant field of concepts’.<sup>31</sup> It studies and clarifies concepts, and how we do, and how we might, usefully employ them. Ryle has an essay trying to get to grips with the term ‘feeling’: so as to better understand and clarify our aesthetic claims, it examines a range of ways in which we use the word ‘feeling’ in different contexts.<sup>32</sup> In film study, there may be something in a film we are trying to explain or understand or evaluate. For example, we may think that a film has a part which is anomalous, and which apparently contradicts its formal scheme. We want to work out if this is indeed the case or whether the part fits in a way we have not yet perceived. In a forthcoming publication, Dominic Lash shows the profit in distinguishing between ‘coherence’, a commonly used aesthetic concept from ‘cohesion’ and ‘consistency’ (which are less frequently used aesthetic concepts).<sup>33</sup> Lash develops these variations in response to the formal choices of a variety of films. These are the sort of linguistic distinctions that help me think through the matter under examination. They unblock my thought and then provide a way through. Wittgenstein compared this ‘to drawing a map – a map that will help us find our way around in the field of our concepts and conceptual structures’.<sup>34</sup> This has therefore been referred to as ‘conceptual cartography’: Ryle talks about the ‘logical geography’ of concepts; Strawson calls it ‘connective analysis’.<sup>35</sup> This method contrasts to the decompositional and reductive analysis of analytic philosophy in its early and later phases. It is neither ‘decomposing’ nor ‘constructing’, neither breaking something down nor building something up (for example a theory).<sup>36</sup> It aims to become aware of, and benefit from, the network of our conceptual

scheme, the connections between adjacent words and concepts. Ordinary language film study is underpinned by an engagement with concepts – albeit worked through in material, concrete, contextual ways – and provides another reason why it can be understood as philosophical.

To get to grips with general matters or ‘problems’ that occupy us or puzzle us either about a film or film as a medium there is an alternative route to the one that has been commonly pursued. We do not need to approach the questions that occupy us in an abstract or general manner, even if the questions are relatively metaphysical in orientation: ones, for example, about ontology, being on film, presence, existence, space, time, or cause and effect. We can also pursue ‘big’ questions from the ground up through perceptive articulations of local specificity hand in hand with connective analysis. Although the insights of theory like any piece of knowledge may aid our investigation, we do not need to apply, or work within, or *through*, the paradigms, schemes, and themes of theorists, or theoretically minded philosophers, in order to pursue these questions about films. Oswald Hanfling writes,

Wittgenstein ... directs our attention to “the particular case” ... the remedy must be sought within the situation ... as when we ask a person to explain what [they] mean ... There is no *general* problem, requiring a general (theoretical) solution, about determinacy of sense.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than, for example, applying a theory of beauty, or constructing one, we would attend to beauty when we felt the ascription might be called for and examine its suitability, particularity, and the associated ascriptions which ensue. We are then involved in a mutually informing scrutiny of object and concept.

#### IV. FILM EXPRESSION

OLP regards language as an expressive human action rooted in situated contexts of delivery and reception. As Baz clarifies, OLP is not interested in just any context, but the ‘specific context of significant use’.<sup>38</sup> Austin thought that traditional philosophy was obsessed with objective and abstracted propositional statements that are, for example, judged on a true/false basis. This distorted philosophical analyses because it overlooked the variety of ways language can be, and is, commonly used, notably for what he called illocutionary and ‘performative’ purposes: for example, promising, warning, implying, teasing, or seducing. Alice Crary and Joel de Lara use the example of ‘to know’: we do not simply use ‘to know’ to express epistemological certitude or lack of it (“I know this keyboard sits on my desk in front of me”), but also, for example, to ‘reassure’, to ‘acknowledge’, to ‘protest’ and to ‘jest’.<sup>39</sup>

[S]ensitivity to what ... a speaker is doing with her words ... is internal to our ability to grasp what she is saying with those words on a particular occasion.<sup>40</sup>

And ‘what she is saying’ is nothing less than what she *means* to say.

In line with this, Toril Moi thinks that artworks should be treated as ‘expressive actions’ rather than simply objects or representations (and representations of meaning) that are perceived.<sup>41</sup> For Moi they are ‘utterances’, and we might consider artworks, including films, as illocutionary utterances endeavouring to make us laugh, or cry, or think, or understand, or sense, or appreciate, or more fundamentally to make us see and hear (certain things rather than others). In this way, films can be responded to and evaluated as expressive actions corresponding in some respect to how we respond to and evaluate other expressive actions made by human beings. This encourages us to embrace the context of the engagement between film and any individual viewer: what a film *means*, to put it in the terms of Austin’s critique, is not a neutral fact, something that is simply true or false, but rather response and respondent dependent. It will require, evoking Crary and de Lara, a ‘sensitivity to what ... [a film] is doing ... our ability to grasp what [it] is saying with those [images and sounds] on a particular occasion.’ I think the acknowledgement of film as action also encourages us to engage with the form in which a film is *expressed* and with its *address*: how it is expressed, the way it is, its attitude, its tone, and its qualities.

OLP is attuned to how words variously combine with each other, and how this adjusts meaning and effect. This combination was what Wittgenstein understood to be the sentence’s grammar, and the resulting analysis of its form would be a ‘grammatical investigation’. According Arata Hamawaki, this attention to a word’s positioning and the way it interlocks (‘the horizontal dimension of meaning’) replaces a more traditional emphasis in philosophy on what a word refers to (‘the vertical dimension of meaning’).<sup>42</sup> OLP’s alertness to the context-variant quality of spoken and written language can be transferred to the analysis of film language. Therefore, with a film we would try to assess, for example, this facial expression, by this female performer, after she has been addressed in this way, in this scene, in this film, in this narrative, in this form, and in this style. The comprehension, the interpretation, and the evaluation will take place in a specific combinational or relational context. A similar expression in a different scene and in a different film would need to be assessed differently, just like the same or similar word, expression, or concept in the language. Any aspect of a film’s form – the closeness of the camera, the gesture of a performer, the music on the soundtrack, the tonal address, the pacing of an action – will adjust its meaning and value depending on its use (in the sequence and the film). The interpretation and evaluation of a similar feature would be different in another film. Attention to relations, in-

deed to the form in which any work is configured, is the bedrock of aesthetics, and aesthetic criticism. The aesthetic study of a film's form can therefore be understood as a grammatical investigation.

For OLP the import of phrases can be obscured by, as Hacker writes, 'misleadingly similar grammatical forms of expression' and as an example he contrasts "I have a pain" with "I have a pin", two phrases with a similar surface grammar, separated in fact by only one letter, but which express quite different things.<sup>43</sup> Hacker argues that if you understand language to have depth structure you may be inclined to make the type of mistake that in this case would 'project the grammar of ownership ("I *have* a pin") on to the 'grammar of sensation'.<sup>44</sup> One influential strand in film studies has believed that there is a 'depth structure' to the language of film, one that carried over from film to film. Examples of 'structuralist theory' in film studies might be Metz's "Grande Syntagmatique", psychoanalytic film theory, and Marxist film theory. These theories proposed that although individual films might appear to differ on the 'surface', there was a consistent logic to the way they worked, a permanent and fundamental 'depth grammar'. We can also see a version of this structuralism in the influential work by David Bordwell and colleagues such as that found in *Narration in the Fiction Film* or *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (although this takes a more logically positivist or empirical form than first-generation structuralism).<sup>45</sup> Here the 'Classical Hollywood Cinema', for example, has a depth grammar which determines the narrative and stylistic strategies of individual films. Apparently anomalous features are skin deep or can be accommodated. The focus of these approaches is on the identification and examination of similarities of structure, on the repeat, and the 'depth grammar' was fundamentally important to the nature of any individual film. Surface variations might be recognised, but the identification of these structures was rarely a starting point to highlight, focus upon, and ultimately value difference.

In contrast, for OLP, difference is recognised where there does not appear to be any, for example, in the exposure of a word's diverse qualities, subtly adjusting its meaning across its varying applications (for example in Ryle's variegating of 'feeling'). Ordinary language film study would still recognise prevailing forms: styles, conventions, and behaviours across genres, oeuvres, and periods. This recognition would be, however, to understand the different and distinctive uses to which they may or may not be put. Moreover, structure and logic within a film are also recognised. The OLP approach is not radically discrete, expedient, or momentary. Sandra Laugier claims that OLP does not discard logic when it rejects an ILP but redefines logic within ordinary language.<sup>46</sup> Adrian Martin has referred to the 'poetic logic' of a film, and an OLP approach is attentive to whether, and in what way, and to what end, features *across* a film fit, cohere, pattern, and rhyme.<sup>47</sup>

## V. REVELATORY ARTICULATION

OLP believes there are opportunities for philosophical insight by utilising our expansive vocabulary and richly varied modes of expression. An essential practice for Austin and Ryle was deliberating over terminological differences, repeatedly drawing attention to closely related words which allow for a more accurate characterisation. For example: the differences between ‘doing something deliberately, intentionally and on purpose’ or perhaps ‘doing something recklessly, heedlessly, and thoughtlessly’ or perhaps ‘doing something absent-mindedly, inadvertently, and unwittingly’.<sup>48</sup> For Austin these made all the difference in understanding and evaluating human action and responsibility. Connolly asks us to

consider the distinctions among leaving, departing from, forsaking, abandoning, fleeing, and retreating from another. All of these actions can involve moving away from another; but the differences among them are differences in the intentions, beliefs, and responsibilities one agent can be said to have with regard to the other.<sup>49</sup>

Laugier explains how Austin thought these distinctions were superior to the philosopher’s traditional distinctions, because they are less artificial, more natural.<sup>50</sup> Much traditional analytic philosophy used language in a ‘rigid, one-dimensional, rather blunt’ manner, such that it lost its ‘descriptive power’ and therefore had less capability to make sense of the matter in hand.<sup>51</sup> For OLP, our linguistic distinctions reflect, and have evolved along with, shared judgements about the world; capturing and constituting the ongoing discriminations and discernments that we wish to make and articulate. Laugier, therefore, understands Austin’s pursuit of linguistic distinctions as his ‘realism’ and his own ‘form of empiricism’.<sup>52</sup> Austin writes in ‘A Plea for Excuses’, the essay where he most straightforwardly states his position, ‘we are looking . . . not *merely* at words . . . but also at the realities we use the words to talk about: we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as the final arbiter of, the phenomena.’<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Austin called this method, with a little embarrassment, ‘linguistic phenomenology’.<sup>54</sup>

This ‘linguistic phenomenology’ can be, and has been, practised in relationship to films (allowing us to better perceive them). The OLP method has remarkable affinities to the practice we commonly call ‘close reading’, and indeed Austin talked about ‘hounding down the *minutiae*’.<sup>55</sup> There is no doubt, as any practitioner will testify, that it is a difficult activity. It is difficult partly because of that ‘bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language’ about which Wittgenstein wrote.<sup>56</sup> V.F. Perkins announces that one of the biggest challenges for the study of film is the ‘problem with oneself, of finding the words that fit one’s sense of the moment or the movie’.<sup>57</sup> I have noted before in my academic work that I understand a principal discipline of film study to be the training of oneself, perpetually, to translate a medium which is visual and aural, *and* moving, into words and sentences whether that be for

conversations, inside or outside of a seminar, or for essays, books, or blogs. Therefore, film study is not only about providing knowledge and understanding about another artform, but the process of translation into different forms. Although the purposes of the translation could vary, the primary purpose *for me* would be to better understand and articulate my aesthetic experience, that is trying to find the words that best help me make sense of, characterise, interpret and evaluate the film or films in question.

This process of translation consists of testing a range of words and expressions until we find those that are sympathetic to the context (of film and viewer). Finding the right expression, a suitable match in language, allows a latent or unformed sense to achieve greater clarity, like finally bringing to mind a proper name one could not quite recall. Moreover, we try to express our perceptions and our assessments accurately because we want to communicate them reliably. I do not think, however, that the activity is only a matter of simply matching word to film by some measure of correctness. Tick. It is a continual process. Describing can lead us to sense more and then notice more, and leads us to adjacent articulations, and helpful discriminations (that make all the difference). One articulation, in conversation or criticism, may lead to another that is more revealing, or differently apt; initially unforeseen articulations can lead to the realisation of unforeseen aspects. Trying to find the appropriate words, or deciding between words, or simply acknowledging the exact place in a film that we are lost for words, or admitting that some vagueness of response might be faithful and useful – *coming to terms* with our perplexity – is all part of a process of understanding and evaluating the work (and our experience of it). This means that ordinary language film study is not simply calling on articulate speakers or fine writers (in a literary sense, for example). I have taught many students who would not deserve those accolades, but whose communications have been alert, responsive, and authentically self-reflexive. And I have read professional writers with developed linguistic skills and wide vocabularies whose accounts of films are sealed off, critically inert, and lacking in perspicuity.

Wittgenstein encourages us to present a ‘perspicuous’ description of the thing we are trying to understand.<sup>58</sup> This descriptive frame of mind is also a philosophical frame of mind because it is about trying to make sense of the phenomena – in our case a film – by reconceiving it. For Wittgenstein, meaning is not deep, hidden, or invisible, yet the relational elements of any statement, the surface grammar, may still need elucidating. As Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey write, ‘[A]s language users we come to master the grammar of our language and operate with ease within it, [but] we typically lack the ability to give a clear survey of it.’<sup>59</sup> Wittgenstein says, ‘we do not *command a clear view*.’<sup>60</sup> This may be precisely because of the mastery, or simple familiarity, and is analogous to film viewing. We are familiar with the various grammars of film expression, especially the common ones, for example Hollywood storytelling, and we can often view films with ease, even those that are

challenging in their narrative discontinuities. Nevertheless, we ‘typically lack the ability to give a clear survey of [this grammar]’, and this is what ordinary language film study wishes to do. Allen and Turvey go on to say that the ‘perspicuous representations’ that Wittgenstein encourages ‘draws our attention to aspects of our use of language in practice that we have overlooked, or not paid sufficient attention to.’<sup>61</sup> Correspondingly, I have often highlighted that one important purpose of film criticism is to ‘draw ... attention to aspects [of the film] ... we have overlooked, or not paid sufficient attention to’. It aims to give a perspicuous survey and representation of a film.

Wittgenstein’s provocative admonition that for all our perplexity ‘nothing is hidden’ connects fascinatingly with a crucial statement made by Perkins in his essay entitled ‘Must We Say What They Mean?’<sup>62</sup>. In the essay, Perkins opposes the idea that films consist of implicit and explicit meanings where the latter are clearly open to everyone and the former, because they are buried, are dependent on the institutionalised procedures of the critic to unearth. Envisaged in this way, film interpretation is a matter of uncovering hidden meanings, and although it may take this form, for Perkins it need not. He therefore announces:

I suggest that a prime task of interpretation is to articulate in the medium of prose some aspects of what artists have made perfectly and precisely clear in the medium of film. The meanings I have discussed in the *Caught* [Max Ophüls US 1949] fragment are neither stated nor in any sense implied. They are filmed. Whatever else that means ... it means that they are not hidden in or behind the movie, and that my interpretation is not an attempt to clarify what the picture has obscured. I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of.<sup>63</sup>

Perkins ‘articulates in the medium of prose ... things that [he] believe[s] to be in the film for all to see’ but which we may not yet have seen, or not yet seen the significance.

Through their attention to formal configuration, Wittgenstein’s philosopher and Perkins’ film critic help us come to see ‘aspects of things that are ... important for us ...’, but which have gone unnoticed ‘because [they are] always before one’s eyes’.<sup>64</sup> I mentioned how Macarthur, in his defence of OLP’s quietism, described its therapeutic benefits, and this is the point at which OLP shares an ambition with psychoanalysis, which also wishes to rid us of established ways of seeing and characterising through a descriptive method (famously named ‘the talking cure’). Yet, the psychoanalytic connection would not be to ‘a theory of mind’ but rather to ‘psychotherapy as a practice’.<sup>65</sup> Gordon Baker has been influential in stressing the psychoanalytical aspect to Wittgenstein’s work: philosophical problems are like torments or mental disturbances which we cannot solve because certain ‘pictures’ hold us captive.<sup>66</sup> This in turn leads us to misuse our words. We are stuck –



with the same ways of seeing, and with the same descriptions. The philosopher becomes the therapist who helps us with this problem by ‘exposing’ established pictures and ‘winning acceptance of new ones’ through ‘inventive and imaginative’ handling of our concepts, meanings, and grammar.<sup>67</sup> For OLP, the psychotherapy metaphor need not be taken as implying a binary illness/wellness picture – one which takes us from sick to healthy, abnormal to normal – but rather it seeks to encourage a commitment to the potentially liberating power of an ongoing engagement in descriptive practices. We undergo ‘a kind of conversion’ perhaps with the help of our friends and teachers who through a process of ‘*rational* persuasion’ help us to see something differently.<sup>68</sup> This ‘rational persuasion’ has been conceived in aesthetic terms as ‘analogous to getting someone to see a poem or a painting according to a different interpretation or to perceive an unnoticed aspect in an ambiguous drawing’.<sup>69</sup> And when Baker refers to ‘rearranging what is familiar’, ‘establishing orderings to dissolve particular confusions’, ‘making patterns or aspects visible’, and ‘gaining acceptance of alternative pictures’ he is unpacking Wittgenstein’s philosophical method, but he could be describing the fundamental features of the aesthetic criticism of films.<sup>70</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay began life as a keynote address for the conference ‘Philosophy of Film *Without Theory*’ held at the University of York in January 2019 organised by Craig Fox and Britt Harrison. I am grateful to them for creating the opportunities for me to carry out this work, and for suggesting invaluable refinements to this essay. A longer version which includes more extensive reference and commentary in notes can be found at my academia.edu page. As a film studies academic and not a philosophy one, I apologise in advance for any crudity, inexpert lapses, and stepping on better qualified toes. The perils of interdisciplinary work. I hope the philosophy will be considered admissible and applicable in the context of an appropriation.

<sup>2</sup>Cavell 1969a and Cavell 1969b.

<sup>3</sup>Parker-Ryan nd.

<sup>4</sup>Hacker 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Parker-Ryan nd.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Hacker 2013.

<sup>7</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 27, §66.

<sup>8</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 27-28, §66-67.

<sup>9</sup>Ryle 1971, 215.

<sup>10</sup>Ryle 1931.

<sup>11</sup>Austin 1964, 46.

<sup>12</sup>Austin 1964, 46.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Forguson 2001, 330.

<sup>14</sup>Hacker 1996, 230.

<sup>15</sup>Baz 2012, 38.

<sup>16</sup>Austin 1964, 46.

<sup>17</sup>Austin 1964, 46.

<sup>18</sup>Parker-Ryan nd.

<sup>19</sup>Parker-Ryan nd.

<sup>20</sup>Cavell 1988, 33.

<sup>21</sup>Macarthur 2017, 250, 265.

<sup>22</sup>Macarthur 2017, 269, 265, 262.

<sup>23</sup>Macarthur 2017, 250.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted in Forguson 2001, 330.

<sup>25</sup>Connolly 1993, 37.

<sup>26</sup>Rée 1993, 10.

<sup>27</sup>Baz 2012.

<sup>28</sup>See Klevan 2013, 41-44 about a moment involving a mirror in *Stella Dallas* [King Vidor US 1937]. Also see the related

short video essay entitled ‘Magnifying Mirror’ at <https://vimeo.com/76970307>. This example may serve more generally as a useful illustration of ordinary language film study in practice.

- <sup>29</sup>Hacker 2013.  
<sup>30</sup>Hutchinson 2010, 106.  
<sup>31</sup>Hacker 2013.  
<sup>32</sup>Ryle 1954.  
<sup>33</sup>Lash 2020.  
<sup>34</sup>Hacker 2013.  
<sup>35</sup>Hacker 2013.  
<sup>36</sup>Hacker 2013.  
<sup>37</sup>Hanfling 2001, 75, 77.  
<sup>38</sup>Baz 2012, 45.  
<sup>39</sup>Crary and de Lara 2019, 320.  
<sup>40</sup>Crary and de Lara 2019, 319-320.  
<sup>41</sup>Moi 2017, 196.  
<sup>42</sup>Hamawaki 2010, 177.  
<sup>43</sup>Hacker 1996, 108.  
<sup>44</sup>Hacker 1996, 108.  
<sup>45</sup>Bordwell 1985; Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985.  
<sup>46</sup>Laugier 2013, 108.  
<sup>47</sup>Martin 2007.  
<sup>48</sup>Almeida 2016, 33.  
<sup>49</sup>Connolly 1993, 37.  
<sup>50</sup>Laugier 2013, 68.  
<sup>51</sup>Parker-Ryan nd.  
<sup>52</sup>Laugier 2013, 68.  
<sup>53</sup>Austin 1964, 47.  
<sup>54</sup>Austin 1964, 47.  
<sup>55</sup>Warnock 1969, 101.  
<sup>56</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 40, §109.  
<sup>57</sup>Perkins 1990, 4.  
<sup>58</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 42, §122.  
<sup>59</sup>Allen and Turvey 2001, 10.  
<sup>60</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 42, §122.  
<sup>61</sup>Allen and Turvey 2001, 10.  
<sup>62</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 109, §435; Perkins 1990.  
<sup>63</sup>Perkins 1990, 4.  
<sup>64</sup>Wittgenstein 1953, 43, §129.  
<sup>65</sup>Read and Hutchinson 2010, 151; Adam Phillips, the psychotherapist and essayist, has referred to ‘ordinary language psychoanalysis’, and it was partly this label that influenced the title of this essay. Phillips 1997.  
<sup>66</sup>Baker 2006.  
<sup>67</sup>Baker 2006, 192.  
<sup>68</sup>Morris 2006, 11, 8.  
<sup>69</sup>Morris 2006, 11.  
<sup>70</sup>Baker 2006, 84.

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