

Institution: Kingston University		
Unit of Assessment: 33 – Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Philosophical Screens: Bringing Philosophy into the BFI's Educational Mission		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011 – 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name: John Ó Maoilearca (formerly Mullarkey)	Role: Professor of Film	Period employed by submitting HEI: Nov 2010 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Aug 2013 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Since October 2013, the British Film Institute (BFI) has hosted twenty-six events in the Philosophical Screens series - established by Ó Maoilearca. This series has, according to the Head of Cinemas and Events, 'put film philosophy at the heart of the BFI Southbank programme'. Ó Maoilearca's research into how cinema not only illustrates philosophical ideas but generates its own original thinking has been shared with thousands of audience attendees. The box office success of this series, and its appeal to first-time attendees, has led to Philosophical Screens being part of BFI's blockbuster, major auteur and thematic seasons, and stimulating new, additional events.

2. Underpinning research

The emergence of philosophical cinema – films of ideas – has given rise to the view that films are excellent at illustrating or visualising the written ideas of philosophy. Thus, the dominant way of understanding philosophy's relation to cinema has been to treat it as a visual illustration of previously written ideas. Hence, a critic or philosopher might compare the textual plot of *The Matrix* with problems in epistemology; *Star Wars* (1977) or *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) with problems in ethics; *Being John Malkovich* (1999), with the question of personal identity; *Gattaca* (1997) or *Minority Report* (2002) with free will; *The Seventh Seal* (1957) with existentialism; and so on. Yet using film-imagery simply to illustrate the words of philosophy misses out on much of the rich visual underpinning of cinema that might also create new ideas out of images.

A number of publications by Ó Maoilearca have argued for a sustained use of the distinctive elements of cinema as an innovative non-textual means for philosophising. On this approach, films *can* think for themselves, *cinematically*, without merely illustrating written texts: film is no mere 'handmaiden' to philosophy that only illustrates the 'properly' written ideas of Plato, Descartes, or Nietzsche. In this new view film does more than entertain its audiences; rather, it too can think *in its own cinematic way*, utilising all of the resources of photography, performance, set-design, music, as well as narrative.

In [R1] (2011), through detailed reference to a number of films and philosophers, he began by taking seriously the philosophical proposition that film can think for itself without formal philosophy. In [R2] (2013) he went on to argue that André Bazin's interest in analogue reproduction and other technical aspects of film-making leads to a distinctive phenomenological experience of cinema available to philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

In [R3] (2015), a major work, Ó Maoilearca (2015) followed the structure of a film, Lars von Trier's documentary *The Five Obstructions*, as an example of the non-standard method of

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philosophizing adopted by Francois Laruelle, showing how the film offers a meditation on its own creative limits, technologically and aesthetically, as a type of philosophical experience. In [R4] (2019) he explored the implications of this way of thinking about film, or rather of the distinctive experience of cinematic thought, for both continental and analytic traditions of philosophy. The result of such research is a new way of linking film and philosophy that shows how film thinks in its own way – in images as much as in words. It also shows how cinema can be understood as a popular form of philosophical practice, one that operates in a far more accessible and mainstream part of our visual culture.

3. References to the research

R1 – Mullarkey J. (2011) Film Can't Philosophise (and Neither Can Philosophy): Introduction to a Non-Philosophy of Cinema. In: Carel H., Tuck G. (eds) *New Takes in Film-Philosophy*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. DOI: [10.1057/9780230294851_6](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230294851_6)

R2 – Mullarkey, John. 'What Does the Cinematic Background Demonstrate? Depth of Field Thinking in André Bazin', in *How To Do Things With Pictures* Benedek, A., & Nyiri, K. (Eds.). (2013) Bern, Switzerland. ISBN: 978-3-653-03620-6 DOI: [10.3726/978-3-653-03620-6](https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-653-03620-6)

R3 – Ó Maoilearca, John, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy*, 2015. Book. ISBN-10: 0816697353 REF2ID: 33-30-1807

R4 – Ó Maoilearca J. (2019) When the Twain Shall Meet: On the Divide Between Analytic and Continental Film Philosophy. In: Carroll N., Di Summa L., Loht S. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of the Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. DOI: [10.1007/978-3-030-19601-1_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19601-1_12) REF2ID: 33-07-1808

4. Details of the impact

Philosophical Screens was established by Ó Maoilearca. He has first approached the BFI about such a discussion series in 2011. The series has now become a permanent feature of the BFI's seasonal programming, with thirty events in eight years. Each event contained an introductory talk, film-screening, and follow-on public discussion. Frequently attracting audiences beyond seating capacity, the events featured a standing panel of four presenters sharing insightful perspectives, leading to engaging discussion with members of the public.

The series of talks and film screenings originally ran alternately between London at the BFI and Paris at Cinéma Méliès. The French connection was in deference to the original 'Ecrans philosophique' series that had been organized by the *Collège International de Philosophie* in Paris for many years. Their purpose was to act as both a showcase and public experiment in popular, visual philosophy. In 2013, more UK-based film philosophers came on board, and the selection of films was opened out to slightly more mainstream works. The central plank of the experiment was always to demonstrate that philosophical thought could be found in all cinema, not just esoteric or art-house cinema (especially where the latter was considered only in virtue of its textual likeness to written philosophy). From 2012-2014, the BFI kept Philosophical Screens in its own programming silo: films would be selected by the presenters and screenings would be small. From October 2013 to October 2014 over 270 tickets were sold for five screenings and post-screening discussions [S1].

By the end of 2014, the BFI were convinced to move Philosophical Screens into its main programmes, on account of audience numbers and feedback saying that the discussions were relevant to attendees' everyday lives, rather than simply abstract and esoteric philosophical talks. As Ó Maoilearca's research had argued, seemingly less 'reflective' films could be discussed philosophically alongside more 'intellectual' fare. Also, films could be discussed in terms of the philosophical potential of their inherently cinematic qualities: for example, the use of *colour* in *Betty Blue* (as a form of phenomenology); the moral nihilism of film noir as a *genre*; the

contingency of existence in *plotting* (*Something Wild*); the comedy of exaggerated *performance* (*To Be or not To Be*; *This is Spinal Tap*).

From 2015, Ó Maoilearca, and other scholars he had engaged to work with him - Catherine Wheatley (Kings College, London), Lucy Bolton (Queen Mary, University of London), and William Brown (Roehampton) - made a collective choice of films in line with the seasons the BFI had programmed. These included those based on auteurs (such as Fassbinder or Scorsese) or themes (such as 'Love' or 'Comedy') [S2]. The BFI Southbank Head of Cinemas and Events and the Events Programmer [S3] describes the BFI's '*willingness to fully integrate the series into the BFI Southbank programme*', and states that '*over the last 5 years, the Philosophical Screens group has successfully and meaningfully supported a range of BFI Southbank programmes*', noting '*the importance of film philosophy to appreciate diverse work*'. The success of this decision was demonstrated in 376 tickets being sold for a single event alone [S1] – a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's 3D film *Goodbye to Language* in March 2016 [S2].

For the BFI, '*the Philosophical Screens series has been vital in bringing philosophical perspectives on cinema to BFI Southbank audiences and introducing philosophical ideas and concepts in an accessible yet profound way*' [S3]. Those attending the films have free access to the Philosophical Screens discussion, with tickets available for Philosophical Screens alone. The accessibility of the series has benefitted BFI's appeal with 46% of the ticketed Philosophical Screens audience being non-BFI members, and 15% of the ticketed Philosophical Screens audience being first time attendees [S1]. The post-screening discussions are now larger events in their own right, which helps the BFI in their educational mission. They now take place in the BFI's Blue Room, where up to 100 people discuss their own philosophical interpretations of



Standing audience at La Strada philosophical screens event
(picture provided by BFI [S4])

these films with the panelists over a one-hour session. Many of the events have reached full attendance. The BFI Events Programmer has spoken of the talks having broken '*another record*' and being full enough to have '*standing audience members*' [S4]. She has described these events as '*truly insightful, thought—provoking and extremely rich*', noting that '*one important development that I've noticed over the last couple of sessions is increased audience engagement with you and your ideas, which results in so many questions that we seem to be needing more time*' [S4].

Following the BFI's 'Big Thrill' season in 2017 and Bergman season in 2018, the series incorporated expanded events [S2]. In 2017, four panelists presented on a number of films, such as *The Birds* and *Jaws*, over an afternoon. Similarly, an expanded Philosophical Screens took place during the BFI's Bergman season in February 2018, with a whole day dedicated to his cinematic philosophy, titled 'Bergman And The Cinema Of Existence'. BFI believed '*This extended format is a testament to the key role the series has played in our programme.*' The BFI Events Programmer described the day as '*rich, insightful and engaging*' [S4], which is in-line with the BFI's current policy statement, 'BFI2022' [S5]. This policy promises to '*deliver a rich and thought-provoking programme*', including retrospectives '*celebrating the centenary of Ingmar Bergman,*' and Fassbinder (who Philosophical Screenings discussed in May 2017). In 2019, Philosophical Screens '*further contextualised*' the re-release of 'A Clockwork Orange', during a Stanley Kubrick season, '*exploring the ethics of watching violence onscreen, the representation of violence in the film, and its impact on such issues as censorship*' [S2]. This also supports BFI2022's priority to celebrate creative talents and find '*new ways of examining their work – for example ... Kubrick*' [S5].

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Reflecting on the impact of Philosophical Screens, BFI stated that the Philosophical Screens series has '*put film philosophy at the heart of the BFI South Bank programme*' and that '*the work with this group over the years has helped us engage with the area of film philosophy in a deeper way, and realise the potential of philosophy to interpret and engage with the cinematic art form*' [S3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 – BFI Box Office Data

S2 – Collection of BFI Programmes and Press Releases

S3 – Testimonial from the Head of Cinemas and Events and the Events Programmer at BFI

S4 – Emails from BFI Southbank's Event Programmer

S5 – BFI 2022: BFI's 2017-2022 Plan