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RESPONSE TO MARK VOROBEJ'S "FALLACIES ON FILM"

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Mark Vorobej's "Fallacies on Film," can be read in three ways: as a characterization of filmic argument, as an approach to argumentation pedagogy, and as an expression of an attitude toward argumentation. Each reading sheds light on its counterparts, suggesting ways in which film can serve as a prompt to enrich not only the study of fallacies, but to situate argumentation in a broader set of pedagogical and interpretive purposes. I will examine each reading separately, relating one to another toward the close of this discussion.

Filmic Argument

The first reading is the most obvious, and foregrounds the other two. Less obvious is determining whether Vorobej's notion of "filmic analysis" involves a special case of argument, or an approach to studying argumentation overall. He says that his "purpose" is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of *The Gorgon* or of any particular fallacy, "but merely to suggest what is possible, and to encourage others to explore the enormous potential inherent in the filmic analysis of argumentative discourse." This passage strongly suggests that filmic analysis is a tool and not a type of argumentative discourse.

The method of filmic analysis presented throughout the paper, however, depends on the placement of discourse within the confines of an actual film. Though the basic approach is expansive,

anything in a film, at any level of presentation—whether it involves dialogue, character development, sound, music, cinematography, lighting, costumes, set design, iconography, special effects, generic conventions—is fair game to be considered, and demonstrated to be relevant to the interpretation of an argumentative exchange,

it nonetheless requires that the unit of argumentative discourse to be examined exist within a particular sequence of dialogue and images in the context of a specific film.¹ The notion of filmic argument would appear then to incorporate not only an approach to the study of argumentation, but a site from which to derive examples of argument.

The question is important because it provides some sense of how the techniques described in the paper might be bounded. Could we replicate the conditions necessary for the application of filmic argument as it is described in this paper by filming students arguing in class and then analyzing the resulting "movie?" Perhaps, but at the very least, the repertoire of filmic elements would be much more narrowly delimited. The lighting would be incidental, character development more or less non-existent, iconography haphazard, irrelevant, or impoverished, special effects sparse, and generic conventions moot (in any explicitly filmic sense). To tap into the richer interpretive cues discussed in "Fallacies on Film," we would seem to require something that at a minimum more closely resembles a scripted, staged, commercial film.

For working purposes then, filmic analysis of argument refers not only to an assemblage of tools, but a site of argumentation as well. It involves leveraging the rich interpretive resources of film (and by extension, film theory and criticism) to avoid grounding an analysis of fallacy on passages "so violently wrenched out of context that it becomes difficult to believe either that anyone could be stupid enough so as to actually commit an informal fallacy, or that the study of fallacies might have any bearing on one's own life, one's own cognitive deliberations, or one's personal relationships with others." As Vorobej illustrates in the considerable detail of his own analysis, film provides an attractive mid-point between the relatively unbounded quality of real-life argumentative context and the abstracted excerpts of so many informal logic texts. The narrative is finite but rich, verbal, but informed by images; it participates in a larger family of discursive events that while broad, is nonetheless finite and subject to generic classifications that are often well understood by film makers and viewers alike.

I find Vorobej's discussion of the virtues of film to be quite persuasive as a corrective for deracinated argumentative analysis. His expansive approach to argumentative analysis can, however, be exploited more fully than it is here. I would like to raise two cases in which he might have pushed harder on the contextual cues that he works with elsewhere in the paper: 1) the question of Heitz's expertise, and 2) Namaroff's acknowledgment of the threat posed by the Gorgon.

Vorobej reconstructs a number of reasons why we should be more tolerant of Heitz's thesis about the Gorgon than we might be were we to base our discussions solely on the kind of evidence presented at the inquest into the deaths of his son and Sacha Kass. The Professor is indeed educated, articulate, restrained, and acknowledged even by his antagonists to be a respected member of the academy. We learn a good deal more, however, through some of the cinematic side-conversations to which we would never be party were we encountering Heitz through some medium other than film. In a scene based at the University of Berlin, for example, we learn that Heitz is not merely knowledgeable about mythology, he understands myth deeply. Even more telling with respect to locating Megera in Vandorf is Heitz's familiarity with a book, *The Vandorf Legend*, that we see him reading in his dead son's house. Heitz is not leaping to bizarre explanations on a whim; he is drawing conclusions based on apparently extensive study of specific local circumstances, an expertise that is never offered as proper "evidence" in his own statements, but which is made plain enough in the larger context of the film.

Similarly, I have to question Vorobej's characterization of Namaroff's skepticism about the Gorgon based on the character's readily identifiable expressions and behaviors throughout the first half of the film. During the meeting with Heitz that Vorobej transcribes, Namaroff spends most of his time looking away from Heitz, but toward the camera. We see that he is deeply discomfited by Heitz's allegations, and that they come to him as no surprise. Namaroff says that he cannot help, but he does not explicitly deny Heitz's theories. He denies a belief in "ghosts or evil spirits," but Megera is much more than that for him; he is largely convinced that Megera has a flesh-and-blood manifestation in his beloved.

We see Namaroff examining gorgonized bodies and behaving both protectively and mysteriously toward Karla Hoffman, the Gorgon's vessel. His attitude is, in scene after scene, an index of complicity unmistakable in the horror genre. He knows what is happening. He seeks not to disprove the Gorgon thesis, but to find a way to save his beloved's life. He knows that if Heitz or Professor Meister were to confront and kill the Gorgon, that it would mean Karla's death as well as the monster's.

In the cases of both Heitz's superior knowledge and Namaroff's involvement in the secret of Megera, we rely on the omniscient perspective afforded us as viewers (happily, *we* do not turn to stone), and easy interpretive opportunities framed by the genre. These are faculties afforded us by film that would be difficult to replicate in

another medium. Verbal narrative could provide us with the genre, and still images with important visual evidence, but they achieve in tandem a richness of interpretive possibility that they could not by themselves.

Argumentation Pedagogy

It goes without saying that this sort of analysis opens up the study of argumentation to a range of signs and significations that are more difficult to establish than the semantic and grammatical patterns many of us find so useful. The virtue of those snippets of poor reasoning that populate the textbooks is that most of them illustrate their points without requiring the student (or the instructor) to sift through the complicating details of circumstance, incomplete locution, and possibly fractured interpretations of genre. We can then focus neatly on the "rules" of reasoning rather than sorting through the faint trail of argumentation in discourse devoted—at least on the surface—to other pursuits.

The clean, surgical character of a pedagogy based on these argumentative excerpts sacrifices (at least some degree of) verisimilitude for legibility. If Vorobej is right in his assertion that many if not all deracinated fallacies are inherently laughable, then perhaps our students learn the wrong things from them. They learn not to avoid fallacy, but to avoid having their fallacies stand out, clearly marked for ridicule.

Vorobej's expansive approach has much to recommend it. Properly executed, it is also very demanding. It requires that students be prepared to make sophisticated arguments about difficult critical constructs. For example, in my minor quarrel over Namaroff's complicity, I rely on what I take to be hallmark gestures in the horror genre. Am I right? Have I placed the film in the proper tradition? I feel fairly confident about my assertions about *The Gorgon*, but other films are much more challenging. Film makers such as David Lynch and Jean-Jacques Beineix purposely play with the genres of horror and mystery in a way that profoundly decenters organizing narratives. An instructor using film in the argumentation course would have to be prepared to lead students through not only the scenes represented on-screen, but the meta-critique of film making itself that is sometimes embodied in contemporary cinema.

In the process, it is probably necessary, to fully exploit the use of film in the classroom, to talk about the uniqueness of film. As Vorobej makes clear, genre is only one of many frames that can be built around filmic interpretation. Technical considerations (when is lighting truly noir?), dialogic conceits (how does one read banter in screwball comedy?), and special effects (does the plasticity of a morphed character make an argument about its soul?) pose difficult questions for interpretation.

Which leads again to the question of what makes film a better vehicle for exploring argumentation than books, short stories, plays, or television sitcoms. Vorobej's case here is quite ambitious, relying on film's ability

to fully engage a student's entire being, and allow her to integrate her visceral, emotional, moral, and possibly spiritual responses to the argumentative context, along with her cognitive appraisal of it.

Leaving aside the question of whether these other forms are capable of producing such engagement, it seems clear that the central impetus is quite different from the textbook author's goal of carving away "extraneous" material and showing the argumentative quality by itself. Vorobej wants to reintegrate not only the case under study, but the students' full participation as human beings. I will discuss this broad purpose below under Vorobej's overall approach to argumentation.

Before leaving the matter of pedagogy per se, however, I have a set of very practical questions about the extent to which it might be possible to keep the level of engagement high while exploring the nitty-gritty details of argumentation necessary to discharge our roles as instructors in the field. This is famously not a problem for argumentation alone, but any discipline in which a compelling form—literature, theatre, music—must be brought to a standstill for critical analysis. The professor is always in the position of having to schematize in some fashion to make the material digestible for classroom purposes. Given that such paring is necessary, how rich does the prompt material have to be? Might there be some virtue in the narrower frame provided by leaner contexts?

I strongly favor Vorobej's approach. Yes, professors will always have to impose some limits on the range(s) of signification to be argued in class, but with richer sources, they can choose from among a wide range, adapting to particular lessons and particular students as they see fit. Further, the very fact that there are so many different kinds of prompts in a single film makes it more likely that reticent, uninvolved, or confused students could find a way into the discourse of the classroom. It is somewhat messier, to be sure, but it is also more flexible.

Attitude Toward Argumentation

In advancing the notion that the study of fallacies should engage a student's "entire being," Vorobej sketches an integrated agenda for argumentation pedagogy. In his classroom, students should do more than understand what a fallacy is, or even learn to recognize one in a complex, synoptic context. Professor Vorobej wants to

lead students away from a stark, binary, formulaic approach to the study of fallacies . . . to a more mature and more nuanced understanding of fallacies as argumentative moves which, like life itself, are full of grey areas, ambiguities, and reasonable temptations."

Practicing this approach students become "more likely to respond to the fallacious inferences of others in a charitable and judicious manner."

Argumentation studies would be seen then not as a way to expose and avoid error, but a way to encounter other people as well as to understand more about the self. Vorobej writes,

Fallacies must be understood holistically as a reflection of the troubled and tortured nature of the human condition. Each of us partakes of this condition, and if the horror genre teaches us to recognize the alien (the enemy) within, informal logic, when properly taught, should sensitize each of us to our own logical vulnerabilities, and to appreciate the rich repertoire of fallacies that lurk and thrive within.

Here we find a darker side to the prior depiction of fallacy as "reasonable temptation." Argumentation pedagogy provides self-knowledge at the same time that it endeavors to improve that same self. In order to do so, it must engage more than cognitive activity, it must consider as well the circumstances that lead us to flesh out a given locution in a given way, as well as to the desires that force our conclusions past our reason.

Reframing his argument somewhat: for Vorobej, fallacies are an index to at least a species of motive. A focus on motive joins his notions of the acceptable and transgressive impulses that underlie this argumentative pathology. His approach suggests that fallacies are more than errors, that they are rather the residue of something important that deserves attention in its own right. A fuller discussion of the ways in which fallacy can be used to work with

questions of this sort points the way toward use of argumentative pedagogy in a wide range of disciplinary (and even therapeutic?) contexts. Taken in this way, Vorobej's approach can be read as a complement to Wayne Brockriede's work on the relationships between and among interlocutors.[2](#)

"Fallacies on Film" is, in this sense, less about film per se than about a) the need to engage students in b) a practice that is wider than chasing error if c) they are to learn more about themselves and d) others. I very much look forward to Vorobej's further meditation on these issues; every aspect deserves considerable amplification. At this early stage, it is a great pleasure to see such a profoundly humane approach to argumentation studies.

Notes

1. Most of the qualities of film discussed here could be extended to videotape and to other motion video technologies as well. Generic considerations and image quality, however, can vary considerably from medium to medium. These issues are well worth exploring in some detail, but I will confine this discussion to film per se. 

2. "Arguers as Lovers," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 5 (1972), 1-11. 

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