

“Methinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance

Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being. In fact take my body who will, take it I say, it is not me.”

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*

“Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

So that we're all on the same page, I will briefly summarize Plato's Allegory of the Cave.* The allegory is presented in the work *The Republic* and is written as a dialogue between Plato's brother Glaucon and Socrates.

Socrates, as narrator, describes a cave where people have been imprisoned from birth. The prisoners are chained at their necks and legs and forced to look at the wall in front of them. The prisoners watch shadow puppets of men and other things passing in front of a fire. The shadows make up the prisoners' entire visual reality, since they cannot see the puppets nor fire behind them. They hear the echoing sounds of people talking, and believe these are the sounds of the shadows.

Socrates explains that the philosopher is a prisoner who is painfully forced first to face the fire, and then the blinding light of the sun. After his eyes have adjusted to the sunlight, the philosopher discovers that the shadows are a manufactured reality. Realizing that the world outside the cave is superior, the



visionary would attempt to bring his fellow cave dwellers into the sunlight. However, upon his return, he would be blind, since his eyes would have adjusted to the sun. The other prisoners would infer that the journey out of the cave had been harmful and would, if they could, kill anyone who attempted to drag them out of the cave. In essence, the prisoners have no desire to leave their prison since they do not know of a better life.

The allegory is an attempt to demonstrate that the physical world is an inferior copy of the perfect, rational, and eternal Form. The beauty of a flower or a sunset is an imperfect copy of Beauty Itself. According to Deleuze, the Platonic motive was “to distinguish essence from appearance, the intelligible from the sensible, the Idea from the image, the original from the copy, the model from the simulacrum.”¹ To Plato, a work of art is simply a copy of a copy of a Form.

Jean-Louis Baudry points out the significance of the fact that the shadows were not produced by real objects, but by representations of real objects:

Here is the strangest thing about the whole apparatus. Instead of projecting images of natural-real objects, of living people, etc. onto the wall-screen of the cave as it would seem only natural to do for simple shadow plays, Plato feels the need, by creating a kind of

conversion in the reference to reality, to show the prisoners not direct images and shadows of reality but, even at this point, a simulacrum of it.²

Perhaps more unusual, Plato never discusses the content of the puppet shows. Baudry observes that the puppet shows “do not have a discursive or conceptual role; they do not communicate a message.”³ However, is it possible to imagine a scenario in which the images produced in the cave are in fact what set the prisoners free?

Plato's allegory was an attempt to reveal an epistemological apparatus. The prisoners are “victims of the illusion of reality.”⁴ Baudry further suggests that Plato's allegory “quite precisely describes in its mode of operation the cinematographic apparatus and the spectator's place in relation to it”⁵ and attempts to sketch a meta-psychological analysis of cinema. To me, the cinematic apparatus described in the Plato's cave seems more akin to the rehabilitation scene in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange** (1971). If Plato had been slightly more sadistic, not only would the prisoners have been shackled facing the screen, but their eyes would have been held open with tiny clamps as well.

Still, if Plato's allegory can be read to describe the ideology of the cinematic apparatus, what role does the visionary play?

At this point, let's digress briefly from the cinematic apparatus and turn our gaze towards the cynic.

To the Cynic, the purpose of life is to live in virtue rather than to indulge in pleasure. Moreover, to live in virtue means to live in agreement with nature. Let us consider Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1860 painting of Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope*, the archetypal Cynic philosopher. In the painting, Diogenes is depicted mentoring unkempt dogs, seated at the entrance of his earthenware tub, lighting a lamp. The word cynic is derived from the Greek word *kynikos*, which translates as dog-like. Let us speculate and suggest that Diogenes' home, his barrel, resembles a cave. Diogenes is sitting at the mouth of his tub staring into the lamp, confronting the flame with his gaze, a gesture that can be read as a challenge to the artificial light necessary to produce the shadows in Plato's allegory. With this, Diogenes can be seen as Plato's visionary, standing at the mouth of the cave, breaking down both the apparatus of the allegory, and the allegory itself.

Diogenes is known to have spent much of his time in the sun. On one occasion, according to Plutarch of Chaeronea, when Alexander the Great stumbled upon Diogenes lounging, Alexander asked him whether he wanted anything. Diogenes replied, “Yes, I would have you stand from between me and the sun.” Alexander the Great, and the vice that he represents, was literally standing between Diogenes and enlightenment. Alexander was shocked, but also impressed by Diogenes' audacity, and responded that, were he not Alexander, he would choose to be Diogenes.

The path to Enlightenment, as every cynic knows, isn't as easy as lounging out in the sun, or gathering the courage to leave the cave. As Nietzsche suggests, to the philosopher, beyond the cave there exists “another deeper cave – a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish 'grounds.’”⁶

How does the visionary approach the unknown, or perhaps worse, the unknowable? When Plato's visionary looked out at the world, he was initially blinded. How do we approach this new world, to see it with new eyes? Is it possible to imagine a scenario where Plato's visionary captured the outside world in a way that would not only reveal this new world to others but to himself?

Let us, once again, return to Plato's allegory in a cinematic context. Sontag begins her seminal essay, “In Plato's Cave,” with the declaration “humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth.”⁷ For Sontag, in a contemporary context, the shadow puppets have been replaced by photographs. In her essay, she examines the ethical implications of the perceived truth associated with the photograph image. “In teaching us a new visual code,” Sontag states, “photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe.”⁸ But, is it not also possible for the photographic image or the cinematic image, at the very least, to have the potential to reveal new forms of knowledge?

Is it not possible for the images themselves to set us free? Sontag argues:

The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be knowledge at bargain prices – a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom; as the act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape. [...] By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is.⁹

Despite this compelling and provocative argument, I am not entirely convinced. As every adamant bargain hunter knows, quality is not always related to the price paid and, in fact, a lower price paid for quality items is a bragging right, a source of pride.⁹

Let us re-image Plato's allegory slightly. Imagine if Plato's visionary had a camera, or better yet, a moving image camera. Even if the visionary cave dweller was blinded by the outside world, the camera would be free to capture it. Moreover, the camera would allow the visionary to share his experience with his comrades and could, perhaps, be used to convince them to experience the world beyond the cave. It is quite possible to imagine that, upon seeing the images captured by the visionary, the cave dwellers would demand more of their own existence. They would see the world in a different light, and would be inspired to see the outside world for themselves, with their own eyes.

Is it possible to imagine that a miniature cave lies within every one of us; that every face, every raindrop, every moonbeam is a cave waiting to reveal a new realm of possibilities? *Welcome to the Cave.*

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* See last page for photos

1 Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum,” trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 27 (1983): 47.

2 Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” trans. Bertrand Augst and Jean Andrews, *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1976): 109.

3 Ibid, 111.

4 Ibid, 107.

5 Ibid.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 229.

7 Susan Sontag, “In Plato's Cave,” in *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1977), 3.

8 Ibid, 24.

9 It is perhaps worth noting that I am originally from Winnipeg where there exists a rich tradition of seeking out bargains. In fact, Winnipeg is often considered the bargain capital of the world.