

## Plato's Academy Awards

Plato founded his school for thinking more clearly in about 387 B.C. in the groves of the hero Academus, just two miles from the Parthenon in Athens. The English word academy descends from that woodsy origin, and has even escaped the bonds of university life to include the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and the Oscars they bestow on the best and the brightest of their stars — and occasionally on just their most profitable or best connected.

*The Economist*, many years ago, summed up the movie business as “taking our dreams and our nightmares, and giving them back to us with better bodies and bigger budgets.” Not that there is anything wrong with that. But since Plato even worried out loud about the corrupting influence of lyric poetry, it may seem inappropriate for me to steal his name and attach it to Academy Awards of any kind.

As you will see, though, there have been quite a few inappropriate directors, screenwriters, actors and even producers who were out to subvert the most effective elements of telling stories through film by harnessing movie images to cause their audience to think subversively. That is, to think conceptually, rather than in images.

Choosing to use an artistic medium designed to tell stories in a series of scenes and images as your means to provoke an audience into thinking conceptually is bold, daring, and sometimes even highly rewarded when pulled off successfully: that is, when the audience hardly notices what is being done to them.

So let's play Plato's Eternal Ideas game and ask ourselves: What is the pattern in all the usual forms of communication in movies? This is not a difficult question to answer. The pattern is quite obvious: film is an image-laden medium. And with the increasing popularity of cartoons for adults, and cartoon-like movies about superheroes, Hollywood seems to be dragging us back into thinking solely in images.

That has never lost its popularity, of course, but the inroads made by the pursuit of clear conceptual thinking, under the influence of Plato's Academy, are once again being shoved aside in our culture.

Long, long ago Plato noticed that most people think in images, rather than conceptually, and also noticed that this made it very difficult for us to see the incongruities in our own thoughts — to see our own internal and external inconsistencies. So he encouraged clearer thinking, more conceptual thinking, because it is far easier to line up first principles, and to see where they conflict with each other, than it is to juggle a series of images and determine where the fault lies, what the reasons are that those images don't all add up to a convincing argument. Of course, just looking for those reasons is a form of conceptual thinking, which is why even the attempt to find reasons can cause headaches for the blind believer in imagery who embarks on that endeavor.

Not to worry, though. Popular technology always seems to return us to our preferred mode of thinking in images. But since Plato pushed in the other direction, swimming upstream, as always, Plato's Academy Awards are being handed out to films which also swim upstream — as Plato would have advised.

The usual Academy Awards are called Oscars. Plato's Academy Awards I call Socrateses. Each Socrates is awarded for an artistic achievement in film which inspired clearer conceptual thinking. That is, a Socrates rewards those movie cowboys and cowgirls who hijacked an artistic medium designed to evoke emotional responses, and used it to inspire more conceptual, and therefore more effective, responses to the human dilemma.

So, without further ado, these are Plato's Academy Awards — and the envelope, please — no, no, not the physical envelope — the other envelope — the spiritual one.

- 1) The Socrates for Political Realism goes to *A Man for All Seasons*, which asks the very Socratic question: Who is the real winner, and who is the real loser, in this story? And, in spite of Hilary Mantel's recent preference for the social-climbing and highly-compromised Thomas Cromwell, the playwright and screenwriter Robert Bolt answers that question clearly.

Of course, we all know men of principle like Thomas More are a pain in the neck. That is because they are such bad examples, being such good examples. And our discomfort is made even worse when we realize the pain in his neck was momentary, while ours lasts, and lasts. But understanding that clearly requires conceptual thinking. Otherwise, the image of having your head chopped off is so overwhelming that it destroys all understanding.

- 2) The Socrates for the Most Thought-Provoking Final Plot Twist goes to *The Devil's Advocate*, a film which both flatters and demonizes lawyers. Screenwriters Jonathan Lemkin and Tony Gilroy transformed an occasionally clever, but spiritually mundane, novel about the seductive power of evil into a very clever, sometimes even subtle, meditation on human vanity and morality.

Of course, as should be expected when telling a myth, there are lapses in logic. But by Hollywood standards the storytelling is suprarational. Keanu Reeves plays a young defense attorney seduced away from his Florida practice by promises of wealth and the opportunity to put his unbeaten trial skills to their ultimate test in Manhattan. Making sure the seduction sticks is John Milton (played by Al Pacino), the managing partner of a law firm devoted to smoothing the progress of villains, thieves and scoundrels worldwide.

In his spare time, John Milton is Satan.

*The Devil's Advocate* is not for the faint of heart. It effectively uses images that have scared people silly for centuries. And, as should be expected in a film about Satan, profanity, sensuality, full nudity, explicit sex, intoxication, madness, suicide, incest, sadism and smoking are all featured in a plot revolving around child molesters, animal sacrificers, gun runners, drug dealers, murderers and real estate developers.

The movie's message, that human vanity is the only absolute Satan can really rely on, is hammered home both bluntly and subtly. That point is reinforced most poignantly by the producers' ability to persuade both Senator D'Amato and Don King, in exchange for momentary walk-on parts, to play themselves literally shaking hands with the Devil. And getting a chance to show off his decadent penthouse lifestyle was all The Donald seems to have required in exchange for his incredible cooperation in the glamorization of a shallow real estate developer who murders his third wife just prior to the expiration of her prenuptial agreement.

But it is in the film's final minutes that it erases millennia of images about good and evil when, after having given poor Keanu Reeves a second chance to not fall for the seductive life of a high-flying, lying lawyer, Satan reveals that Keanu's choosing the life of a do-gooder, honest lawyer instead is just as vain, and therefore just as sure a bet for the devil to retain control of his soul.

- 3) While we are on the destruction of sacred imagery, the Socrates for the Boldest Producer goes to George Harrison for rescuing *The Life of Brian* when Monty Python's funding evaporated halfway through production. The Monty Python troupe played naughty British school boys yet again, overturning everything sacred with contrary imagery. Their satirical targets are so universal that YouTube clips from this movie still resonate with one generation after another. I mean, who else protests empire by complaining "what have the Romans ever done for us — besides the aqueducts, sanitation, the roads, public health, wine, the baths, public safety on the streets at night, medicine, irrigation, cheese, education, and the Circus Maximus — what HAVE the Romans ever done for us?"
- 4) The Socrates for the Most Subversive Adaptation of Children's Literature goes to the eight *Harry Potter* movies. The number of brilliant image subversions JK Rowling smoothly inserted into her masterpiece would take too long to detail, but here are four outstanding examples.

Everyone tries to forget Socrates's argument that, in living life, one should neither be a victim nor a victimizer. But if forced to choose, Socrates advised always choosing to be the victim, as it is less destructive to your personality than being a victimizer. JK Rowling illustrates this unpopular observation in how she presents the followers of her ultra-wicked wizard, Lord Voldemort. They are called Death Eaters, and although Voldemort bullies them mercilessly, they humbly accept his dominion for one reason, and one reason only: he gives them permission to be cruel, to be victimizers. The victims of the Death Eaters' cruelty are all either sadly destroyed or heroic in their resistance. But the victimizers themselves are all far more effectively diminished by unleashing their desire to be cruel.

JK Rowling also blithely destroys a century of images designed to deter smart girls from competing with male students. She did this by creating the totally lovable, adventurous and resourceful Hermione Granger, who nonetheless fits the stereotype precisely by raising her hand in class to answer every question and by worrying herself sick over her exams — which she usually aces with 112%.

JK Rowling also quietly slips in one of the most subversive scenes in any children's film when Ron Weasley, Harry Potter's best friend, discovers after saving Harry's life that being a hero is something you just have to do sometimes, that it is not nearly as admirable as people usually think, and that it is certainly not a goal to pursue in life.

And on top of all that subversion, she also lays out with her imagery the best method for dealing with evil: try to understand its sources, but no matter what, don't try to kill evil in a righteous fury. Instead, set evil up to destroy itself. It will most likely do that.

- 5) The Socrates for Revealing that Chaos is Spiritually Unenlightening goes to *Apocalypse Now*, where Francis Ford Coppola led his cast and crew deep into a drug-riddled, chaotic Philippine jungle, and emerged with a movie masterpiece which, most likely unintentionally, demonstrates clearly to outsiders that this is no way to pursue enlightenment — artistic or spiritual.
- 6) The Socrates for the Most Patience Demonstrated Under Extreme Circumstances goes to *The Razor's Edge*. Bill Murray plays a seeker of truth from the Chicago suburbs who makes it all the way to Paris and the Himalayas in this 1984 film adaptation of the Somerset Maugham novel set just before and after World War I. In one Parisian scene, his ex-fiancée's inability to see the emotional truth of the situation causes him severe emotional harm, but that still does not overwhelm his patience. Bill Murray's character simply says to her "you just don't get it," while expressing both the extremity of his pain and his imperturbable patience for yet another Muggle who does

not understand the deeper emotional realities — oops, not the right movie for calling someone a Muggle.

- 7) The Socrates for Illustrating How Much Patience is Required to Fix a Man's Personality goes to *Groundhog Day* (that makes it two in a row for Bill Murray). As always, Murray plays an exhausted optimist and, in this role, a toxic young male on the make as well. The number of times he has to live that one day over and over again before he finally learns how to win the charming young woman is convincing imagery used to reveal just how much reeducation most men need.

I played with similar imagery in my 1996 novel, *Bob and Charlie*, which is a Quixotically humorous story about two Baby Boomers who are reluctantly turning 50. One is an energetic pessimist, which I hoped Robin Williams would play. The other is an exhausted optimist, which I hoped Bill Murray would play. Well, that didn't happen. But maybe it will eventually become a nostalgic Netflix series instead, with millennials playing Baby Boomers.

- 8) The Socrates for the Best Walk in Another's Shoes goes to *The Americans*, the FX cable television drama series created by Joe Weisberg about Soviet moles who pretend to be suburban Americans for years and years. Weisberg employs a very tough-love approach to their life, to their devotion to the worldwide spread of communism, and to the personal sacrifices they continually make to achieve their goal, making it clear that these violent idealists are not all that different than other people we know who have subordinated their personal lives to an ideology.
- 9) The Socrates for Destroying the Glass Ceiling goes to *The Queen's Gambit*, a Netflix series whose heroine is a female version of Bobby Fischer. Beth Harmon eventually pits her chess skills against the Russian grandmasters and wins. Cleverly, the series first creates spectacular images, one after another, of 1950s America, and then 1960s America, before recreating the late 1960s Soviet Union, with its grinding poverty but very charming street chess culture. And then the heroine, Beth, in her triumph, smashes all that comparative imagery by preferring to play chess on those Soviet streets rather than catch a jet to her White House honorary dinner.
- 10) The Socrates for the Pleasure of Rewriting History goes to *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*, a Tarantino film whose strongest appeal is to all those who were seduced by hippie culture as youngsters — by allowing them to vicariously share in their comeuppance, and to rewrite the tragic history of Sharon Tate in the process. Leonardo DiCaprio is the star, but Brad Pitt is his charming stunt double who saves

the day by demonstrating that the Manson hippies were not flower-power idealists after all, but just easily-defeated, drug-addled fools.

- 11) The Socrates for Double Disillusionment goes to *Little Big Man*, where Dustin Hoffman switches back and forth between living in white and Native American cultures, and has trouble buying either one because there is so much hypocrisy in both. I saw *Little Big Man* for the third time when I was living in Hong Kong in 1975. The movie theaters there were ruthless about making sure every movie was under two hours in length, so that the new showing could always start on the hour. So they just snipped out whatever was necessary from the end of the movie to make it fit. In this case, Old Lodge Skins begins his ascent of the mountain to die, and then there is a cut to the credits, where Jack Crabb and the Chief are walking down the mountain together in silence. Entirely missing is what happened on the mountain top, and the explanation for why the Chief is still alive. Even his famous line: "well, sometimes the magic works, sometimes it doesn't," ended up on the cutting room floor.
- 12) The Socrates for Minimizing Misery with Music goes to *Les Miserables*, whose passionate music and images of human despair are made palatable by kindness and even the creation of a factory to employ people productively. But the most striking role reversal imagery, in a film filled with such reversals, is the inability of Inspector Javert to live with the idea that he has been wrong his whole life about how to deal with criminals like Jean Valjean.
- 13) The Socrates for Facing Unthinkable Atrocities with Humor goes to *Life is Beautiful*, which breaks a sacred social barrier about the Holocaust to demonstrate that keeping humor alive, even under the most awful circumstances, is sometimes the most humane thing you can do.
- 14) The Socrates for Rethinking War goes to *Patton*. George C. Scott plays General Patton as an eternal warrior who can't help but love leading men into battle. Does this mean that there will be no end to war because such eternal warriors will always make wars happen? That would be a painful truth indeed. But *Patton* certainly makes its case for the extreme value of enforcing the military honor code even under the most difficult circumstances war can impose on soldiers. And *Patton* made this point right in the middle of the widespread protests against the Vietnam War. That took conviction.
- 15) The Socrates for the Limits of Loyalty goes to *Breaker Morant*, set in the Boer War in South Africa, where soldiers realize they are pawns in a political game beyond their control, and that neither their military honor code nor their loyalty to the crown

will save them. But their own personal honor code will. Socrates himself would be proud of the way they faced undeserved death.

- 16) The Socrates for the Most Creative Image Makeover goes to *Meet Joe Black*. Before this movie, the main images of Death were the Grim Reaper, a gaunt, hooded, black-robed man with his scythe ready to reap his harvest of death, or a skeleton to remind us how we really look without all that biological makeup, or a ghost to let us know how insubstantial we will feel without our bodies. But now, after watching *Meet Joe Black*, we all know that Death is kind, patient, loving, and respectful, and looks just as handsome as Brad Pitt did in his prime. That radical image makeover may even have been responsible, in 1998, for the increase in death wishes among almost half the women — and five percent of the men.
- 17) The Socrates for Undermining the Appeal of Lust goes to *Carnal Knowledge*, starring Ann-Margret, Candice Bergen, Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel. I have always thought that the images from this movie would be carnal education enough for most people. But it seems that nothing can dissuade the human race from ignoring carnal education. I was confirmed in this unfortunate truth several years ago, when Art Garfunkel came to San Francisco to hawk his autobiography. During the Q&A, I asked him if transitioning from being a college student to being middle-aged in his role in *Carnal Knowledge* had taught him anything that he had then applied to his own life as he got older. He admitted that that was a good question, thought about it for several seconds, and then said, “well, we really don’t learn anything at all in life, do we?”
- 18) The Socrates for Best Anti-Pornographic Love Scene goes to *Cloud Atlas*. I realize, of course, that Platonic love has never stood a chance in the competition for human attention, but millennials seem to have entered yet another new phase in the age-old conflict between the sexes. Consent has finally gained the front and center position, but so has pornography. Tweens now usually get their first sexual imagery from pornographic films, which has led to a vast increase, among other actions which used to be called perverse, in choking during intercourse — ironically, it has been completely untethered from its asphyxiating climactic purpose, and has become just another signifier of the intensity of a somewhat cruel pornographic passion.

This puts parents in a very uncomfortable situation: forbidding porn just increases the interest in it. But allowing your children to watch porn at such a young age provides them with a very distorted perspective about what sex is like — that is, what it is like for the vast majority who perceive the passion involved as other than pornographic. That is why this Socrates is awarded to *Cloud Atlas*, as it has a very tender love-

making scene, which certainly would be a far better first image of sex than the more popular pornographic options. Unfortunately, the question of when even tender sex becomes age-appropriate will probably always remain fraught with parental anxiety.

19) The Socrates for Rescuing Love from the Dustbin of History goes to *Casablanca*, whose continuing popularity should give everyone hope that deep romantic love can be transformed into Platonic love under the right circumstances, making everyone look like a hero. Even kicked-in-the-teeth Rick's humanity was restorable by understanding the other (in this case Ilsa) and then deciding to do what would maximize everyone's happiness, not just his own. And in his generosity, he even includes Captain Louis Renault.

20) The Socrates for Unsolvably Ethical Dilemmas goes to *Dr. Zhivago*. No matter how you parse it, Dr. Zhivago could not make a decision based on normal social rules that would be ethical, given the circumstances of the Russian Civil War. And it makes it so much harder for him that he was a poet.

Situational ethics usually does not have the emotional appeal of Omar Sharif, Julie Christie and Geraldine Chaplin, all under David Lean's direction. Nor the sweeping Russian winter landscapes. You really wish that the civil war would just move far away and that the three of them could live happily ever after in that frozen dacha.

So, those are the Socrateses I imagine Plato would have handed out. In real life, though, if you are looking for an award for your clear conceptual thinking, it would probably be wise to not attract too much attention by demanding a televised awards show to give it public recognition. The clear conceptual thinkers who have stood out in human history have usually not passed away quietly in bed at an advanced age. So one last piece of Platonic advice: if you have personally adopted clear conceptual thinking to any degree, it is always wise to remember the primary importance of Free Will. So don't be like someone who has recently quit smoking, and just can't stop themselves from scolding others to do the same. Image-based thinking gets most everyone through their day-to-day life just fine.

Socrates was right about many things, but his bold statement that "the unexamined life is not worth living" can best be understood as Socrates egging himself on to ever more thorough personal examinations, and not as a cause for despair for the billions who live cheerfully enough without examining much at all.

The point is, thinking conceptually is a personal advantage, not a social necessity (though it can certainly be socially helpful). Which is why one of my favorite Pythy Maxims is:

**Think more interestingly more clearly more often, because life is more interesting than you think.**



## Comments

Now it is time for your comments. Let's do something a little different this time. Everyone can comment however they want, of course, but may I suggest that you think of a movie that you learned something from. And then make your comment about what you learned from that movie.

I will start with my own mother, who is most easily understood by the fact that, if she hadn't been the mother of 12, she would have been a Catholic nun. She was raised a strict Catholic on a Wisconsin farm. She was well-educated, though, by Dominicans, I think, and she was her high school class valedictorian. But at that time farm girls still did not go to college. Years later, in the late 1960s, she saw the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, and walked away a bit perplexed, although she enjoyed it tremendously. So I asked her what was confusing her. She said, "I knew that Christians did not really want to marry Jews. But I had never thought that maybe Jews didn't want to marry Christians either."

## Appendix

This essay was delivered on the occasion of the Chit Chat Club's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The following list of current Emeriti and Regular Members of the club is therefore included for its historical interest — if any.

### Chit Chat Club Emeritus and Regular Members in Order of Seniority (November 2024/150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary version)

#### Emeriti (2)

1995 — Frank Seidner  
2002 — Marc Cruciger, M.D.

#### Regular (25)

1996 — John Schram  
2000 — Richard Reinhardt  
2005 — Kirk McKenzie  
2005 — Michael Thaler, M.D.  
2009 — Rabbi Stephen Pearce, Ph.D.

- 2009 — Charles Sullivan, Ph.D.
- 2012 — Vincent Resh, Ph.D.
- 2012 — Morton Rivo, D.D.S.
- 2012 — Paul Karlstrom, Ph.D.
- 2012 — Warner North, Ph.D.
- 2013 — Donald McQuade, Ph.D.
- 2013 — F. Roy Willis, Ph.D.
- 2013 — Charles Stephenson
- 2014 — George Hammond
- 2015 — Max Neiman, Ph.D.
- 2016 — Noah Griffin
- 2017 — Jay Turnbull
- 2017 — Jeff Gunderson
- 2017 — Dennis Letbetter
- 2019 — Michael Humphreys, M.D.
- 2019 — Kenneth Quandt, Ph.D.
- 2022 — Gary Wasserman, Ph.D.
- 2023 — Peter Robinson
- 2023 — Wesley Higbie
- 2023 — Malcolm Young, Ph.D.