

## Something Sacred to Our Culture: René Arcilla's liberal education

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### **Abstract**

The present discussion is motivated by a broad sympathy for the educational commitments that run through René Arcilla's *Wim Wenders' Road Movie Philosophy* (2020). His framing of these commitments is imaginative, as is the invitation to Wenders' films that the book provides. It is, however, with attention to the figures of the frame and the line that I call into question some aspects of the account, especially regarding its conceptions of time and narrative, and of the relation of the photographic still to the moving image. While appreciative of Arcilla's faith in education and of the importance of film in this, I endeavour to show that a liberal education can be more broadly and more practically conceived than Arcilla is ready to suggest. I try to show how this might be done.

### **Parables of love and education**

The parable of love and education with which René Arcilla begins his book is something of a *tour de force*. We are to imagine two worlds, two planets. Earth is the world we are familiar with, in the form pretty much that it takes today. The other is a planet from somewhere in outer space, inhabited by aliens. Somehow the beings from each of these worlds meet, and—after the initial surprise—become interested in one another enough to agree to a mutual exchange of anthropologists. What do the anthropologists find?

The anthropologists from Earth discover a civilization that is, apparently, less different from their own than they might have expected. One thing, however, is noticeable by its absence:

The aliens, it appears, utterly lack the concept of romantic love. There is, to be sure, plenty of sexual activity, which their culture celebrates as a source of pleasure, health, and comic intrigue. . . . Associated with sex, then, is salubrious fun and a share in the responsibility of raising the next generation. Missing, though, is anything that we recognize as passion. There are no Romeos and Juliets; no one is dying for, or saved by, another's love. (Arcilla, 2020, p. 1)

It is not, so it seems, that romantic attachment has become taboo and obscene, as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but rather that it has faded from the scene—that is, if it was ever there. The disappointment felt by the alien anthropologists is, however, equally poignant: it is enough, so it transpires, to lead them to decide against further contact:

It was your, let us say, 'strange' approach to education. Believe me, the true scholars among us wanted to understand more about how it works and developed. But when most of our people got wind of what you were doing to yourselves and especially to your young, they flipped. No offense, but they didn't want to risk you contaminating

their kids. . . But when education is identified with this one practice entirely, when the devotion we have for the life of education is reduced to the transient pleasures of just learning, pleasures that a market fastens on to and exploits, well, we can't help but feel that something sacred to our culture has been trashed. (pp. 2-3)

The symmetry between the worlds—the absence of romantic love amongst the aliens, the absence of education on Earth—evokes the tension drawn by 'the golden thread linking eros to education', in Allan Bloom's classically inflected expression, in *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom, 1987, p. 134). Arcilla attended Bloom's lectures at Chicago, and the thread identified here retains its tension through their respective writings on education.

The idea of an element of eros in education runs through a number of Plato's dialogues, but the *Cratylus* provides a particular point of reference, especially with its suggestion of etymological connections: the noun *erôs* (love) and the verb *erôtan* (to ask questions) are explicitly linked (*Cratylus*, 398c5-e5). These are qualities that have been held to coalesce in some respects in the figure of Socrates.<sup>1</sup> It may be helpful to think of *erôs*, as opposed to a more purely sexual desire, as drawn forwards rather than pushed (as by instinct) from behind—drawn forwards by something outside, by the light from the mouth of the Cave or by a questioning that does not settle in a final answer but energises thinking in new ways.

The fine thread will extend also through the series of points that I want to raise in response to aspects of Arcilla's highly intriguing book, culminating in a direct consideration of its orientation towards liberal education. I want to begin, however, by taking some steps towards considering further the phenomenology of his topic, of films and roads, and the philosophy that links connects them, and by pausing to think a little about the frames that Arcilla brings to this work and the frames of the phenomena in question.

### **Enframing texts**

In *Alice in the Cities* (Wenders, 1974), Phillip stares disconsolately at polaroid prints as they emerge from his camera, the instant captured, almost immediately. He is a 31-year-old newspaper writer who has been road-tripping in the vain hope of writing an article on 'the American landscape'. Soon he is sitting listlessly in a Skyway Motel room watching John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* screened on tv—the framed images of that film framed within the box of the 1970s tv set, and then framed in the film we are watching. Later Phillip and Alice, the nine-year-old daughter of his friend Lisa, are peering down through a telescope from a viewing balcony in the Empire State Building. They see Lisa with packed bags leaving the hotel where they have been staying. She has evidently left Alice in his care. Recurrently through the film, Phillip and Alice are 'on the road together', in a car, a plane, a train. 'Throughout these sequences', Arcilla writes,

the camera intermittently turns from the characters to shoot out of the vehicles' windows or at rest stops. It records passing landscapes in South Carolina, New Jersey, New York City, Amsterdam, Wuppertal,

Essen, Oberhausen, Gelsenkirchen, and other places along this movie's road. And it responsively focuses on the smallest, most ordinary incidents chanced upon along the way: a blooming tree waves in the wind; cows graze in a pasture in front of a factory; a woman lifts a veil over her mouth; a boy bicycles on the sidewalk along a row of houses. . . (Arcilla, 2020, p. 19)

The windows of the car, then, front and side, provide further frames through which what is outside is perceived and recorded. The car also provides partial insulation from the sounds and smells and touch of the road, as in their different ways do the plane and the train. At the end of the film, Phillip is reading a newspaper article reporting the death of John Ford, with the headline 'Lost World'. And then when Alice asks what he is going to do in Munich, he replies 'I'm going to finish writing that story' (p. 34).

In recollecting these fragments of Wenders' films and of Arcilla's discussion, I can present only a collage of images, instants, disjointed episodes. Arcilla does this too at various points, but he also gives much time and space to the recounting of stories, drawing the reader into the films' narratives in seductive ways. The manner of this recounting extends the sense of the linear nature of time and experience. Roads—the long journey on the open road especially—and films themselves—especially the feature film of two hours and more—accentuate this quality.

Arcilla shows how the path to redemption is laid, in *Alice*, by conversation, and particularly, I would add, by the kind of conversation that takes time. Arcilla gives some attention to the particular comments and observations that Phillip and Alice share—her adaptation to him and his being drawn out of his self-absorption, his coming to accept her riddles and word games and crazy dreams. Through this, they arrive at an understanding of themselves as participants in 'something larger than each other'. It is the 'call-and-response nature of our lives', Arcilla suggests, 'that forms the basis of family in the film' (p. 37). The story that Phillip is 'ready to tell' has been drawn out of him by this conversation:

Once upon a time, he was lost; he had been rendered storyless, and virtually dead to the world, by the swarm of images that invaded him in America. On this wandering road, he ran into Alice. He entered into a dialogue with her, one that was driven by her distress, yet was also intermittently lifted by her vision of the world, one that turned their joint road in Europe into a quest. This quest was resolved when they were found. Her mother and grandmother, aided by the police and, of course, in his own blundering way, Phillip, find and send Alice back into the family. And she, as a seer of the appearing world, finds and sends him back into conversation with all his like who cannot help but feel that that world is their home. Responding to her, he now has something to introduce into the conversation. He can share, among other things, how she has changed him from a bag of elusive experiences into an author. This response will, in turn, call out for responses from still others, ones that extend and strengthen the meaningful existence of this family. (*ibid.*)

'Family' in Wenders' films is not so much the traditional family bound by genetic inheritance, but a family to be found amongst those with whom our lives can become meaningful, with whom we are in conversation. It is a perfectionist notion, the family always on-the-way. The fabular motif in these lines—of 'Once upon a time, he was lost. . . ' and later found, and of the quest that is resolved—can, however, give way, in my view, to a more robust or realistic sense of resolution. 'Resolution' calls to mind not the solving of problems but perhaps the resolution of an image as the lens of a camera is adjusted. The more agile eyes of the child, lacking the frames of expectation of the adult, see in a way that lets something new in the world appear.

Arcilla, it is important to note, is rightly concerned to head off the idea that Phillip's sense of a lost home, his alienation, his puzzlement over reality and representation are just further illustrations of the 'textbook problem' of scepticism (pp. 20ff). Consider then how far this can be illuminated with reference to a line in the *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein appears to face out his sceptical interlocutor: "§331. "But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?"—They've been shut' (Wittgenstein, 2009, p. 236<sup>e</sup>) What can this apparent evasion, this shutting of the eyes, mean? Stanley Cavell phrases his response by way of a contrast between the responses of the 'intellectual conscience' and the 'human conscience', favouring the latter and finding its expression of the human condition to be at risk of repression by the former:

'They (my eyes) are shut' as a resolution, or confession, says that one can, for one's part, live in the face of doubt.—But doesn't everyone, everyday?—It is something different to live *without* doubt, without so to speak the threat of scepticism. To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world (Cavell 1979, 431).

The juxtaposition of intellectual to human conscience is one move in resistance to the flight from the ordinary, a flight manifested here in part in self-absorbed failures of acknowledgement, of the other and of the world.

Phillip's falling in love with the world involves his return to Europe. With this return, the cars and the roads change, and Philip is now driving through a nondescript muddle of suburban streets in a humble Renault 4. Such has the road movie become. The car is given up for the train, and as the train winds its way through the countryside, an aerial shot from the bubble of a helicopter—ending the conversation, privileging again the sense of sight—signals the film's denouement, the resolution of the story.

It is surprising, then, that with Phillip's coming 'home' - in effect echoing a coming home repeated in the course of the director's career - Arcilla does not make more of the relation between America and Europe explored in Wenders' films. One thinks of the novels of Henry James, though Wenders' direction of travel is different. Those novels, like so much in American writing, ponder problems of inheritance and originality. In Wenders, this relationship is complicated by the recurrence of questions of

translation. While this is prominent in *Alice, in Paris, Texas* (1984) it is more like a sustained undercurrent. At a narrative level it is there in the accent and speech-rhythms of Anne, the French woman to whom Travis' brother, Walt, is married. It is there also in the fantasy Travis' father had entertained that his wife, from Paris (Texas), was a French fancy-woman. But it is prominent in the surprising title of the film. Does the title simply refer to this place in Texas or does it suggest rather 'Paris/Texas' as a contrast or juxtaposition or perhaps exchange between the two places, and surely it is an iteration of the tension between inheritance and originality? Is this location in fact a dislocation, for Travis' behaviour, through most of the film, imparts a sense of being out of place. And, strangely, Travis carries in his pocket a crumpled photograph of the vacant lot that he has bought in Paris, Texas, the place, he believes, where he was conceived, where perhaps his family will be restored.

The film is pertinent to my own discussion especially because of the way that it works with the contrast between visual recognition and conversation. Towards the end of the film, Travis drives with his son, Hunter, across wide Arizona landscapes reminiscent of a John Ford Western. They are heading for Houston, where he has been told his estranged wife, Jane, is working. In fact, she is working in a seedy peep-show booth. He pays to visit the booth but remains hidden from her behind a two-way mirror: he can see her, but she cannot see him. Jane does not know who he is until the story he tells her—in effect, their own story—leads to recognition. The point here is that this stage in their redemption takes place when the possibility of visual recognition is denied: it takes place through the pathos, extraordinary in this place of fantasy, of this revelation of truth: he addresses her in a kind of confession. At one point a dim reflection of his face in the glass is superimposed eerily on her face, as he looks at her through the glass. Arcilla writes of the ingenious 'visual conceit' of the superimposed images, seeing this as opening 'a passage of honesty around the image' (Arcilla, 2020, p. 53). But the spoken words here have particular power: what we see, for the most part, is Jane listening to the story Travis tells, and the slow dawn of recognition on her face registers the unfolding of the narrative. Shortly after she will tell hers, though by this time she has turned to sit down, her back against the wall just under the mirror, so that we see her face as she talks and his above. Travis is engineering the reunion that will take place between Jane and Hunter. He has arranged for this to happen at the Meridian Hotel—Room 1520, he tells her twice. We see Hunter alone there, perhaps unaware she will come, and then see the reunion, the child's tentative embrace of the mother. They are in an insulated room on the fifteenth floor, behind them a wall of windows opening to the darkness outside, to the lights of office blocks and to the traffic noise and recurrent police sirens from Houston's streets below. When she bends to pick Hunter up (her arms around him, his legs around her), their pale skin, blonde hair and similar dark green clothing make them seem almost as one. Hugging him, she spins around, accentuating the effect. Travis, who has been watching the window from the roof of a carpark somewhere below, gets in his car and drives out of town.

### **Images, still and moving**

Something like the tension between inheritance and originality is played out in the relation between still and moving images, and this is prominent in many of Wenders' films. In the still the moment is frozen, often in ways that we would never actually see. Ironically there can be a dynamism to this suspension of time: the photograph becomes an icon, a window onto a better world, as if, so it seems, onto time itself, onto its very form. The inclusion of some thirty stills in Arcilla's book, breaking the flow of argument and narrative, extends this experience to the reader.

The suggestion that there might be a redemptive power *in photography* recurs in Wenders' films, and this drives home the significance of the difference between still and moving images. His protagonists are often photographers, professional or amateur. *The Salt of the Earth* (2014) is a documentary about the life of the photographer Sebastião Salgado, whose son, Juliano Ribeiro, co-directed the film. Its story, Arcilla explains, 'is centered on a man whose encounters with death throw his life into crisis. Sebastião finds himself at a point where he despairs of his work because his soul has been sickened' (p. 116). The religious inflection in the idea of redemption is reinforced in Arcilla's remark that a 'kind of grace saves him' and that he 'ends up reaffirming and pursuing in a revised direction his photographic calling' (*ibid.*). The earlier film *Palermo Shooting* (2008) also plays out the story of a highly successful, celebrity/art photographer in the character of Finn. This film ends with a dedication to Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni, both of whom, coincidentally, had died on the same day, the 30 July 2007.

The ambiguity in the title *Palermo Shooting* echoes that of Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966), and further parallels quickly become apparent. Antonioni's photographer drives a convertible Rolls-Royce through the streets of London, stopping to spend the night at a doss-house where he will take undercover photographs. Wenders' protagonist drives his open-top car late at night through the streets of Berlin, holding his camera in movie-mode above the windscreen. But Finn loses control of the car and almost crashes. The sobering shock of the experience lays the way for his withdrawal to a different kind of life. He goes to stay in Palermo, and there meets Flavia, an art-restorer, who is working on an anonymous Renaissance fresco, *The Triumph of Death*.<sup>2</sup> Flavia embodies different values and a different rhythm of life. She opens the way for him to new possibilities. Towards the end of the film, Finn wanders the maze of the city's old streets taking, as Arcilla phrases this, 'shots of naturally happening life [that] powerfully recall those that graced *Alice* and *Lisbon Story* in the past' (p. 113). Palermo 'inspires him to devote himself to a more loving approach to photography. His responsiveness to the world is rekindled by the mortal beauty of Palermo's street life, in which he makes himself at home' (p. 116).

The allusions to *Blow-Up* in *Palermo Shooting* are multiple, and they are advertised early in the film by a stylised fashion-shoot. But the most striking is surely the sequence when Finn edits the pictures he has taken. The images are moved across the computer screen as they are compared, cropped, and modified. *Blow-Up*'s celebrated sequence shows David Hemmings' photographer working in his spacious dark-room, enlarging and

focusing the images, poring of the negatives, and then passing the sheets of light-sensitive paper through large trays of developer and fixer, in which the positive image appears before our eyes. In the blown-up images a gun can be seen, and it becomes clear that a murder has taken place. But the photographer, pursuing the clues his camera has revealed, is not able to resolve the story or solve the crime. In the end it is a stylised kind of closure that presents itself when he is invited to join the mime-game of a troupe of actors—drama-students, we might imagine—who are playing tennis with an invisible ball in the park in which the murder has taken place. The invisible ball is knocked out of the court, and they look to him to fetch it. He hesitates and then bends down to pick the ball up. He tests its weight in his hand, and then throws it back so that the game can resume. The narrative is sustained, but the story is not resolved. This is something other, I think, than the therapeutic closure that *Palermo Shooting* suggests.

*Blow-Up* is an adaptation of a story by the Argentinian novelist Julio Cortázar. In the following short passage from the story, this ambiguity of experience in relation to the still photographic image is suggested, and it is accentuated by the seamless shift in the narrative from third-person to first-person:

Michel knew that the photographer always worked as a permutation of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed upon it (now a large cloud is going by, almost black), but he lacked no confidence in himself, knowing that he had only to go out without the Contax to recover the keynote of distraction, the sight without a frame around it, light without the diaphragm aperture or 1/250 sec. Right now (what a word, *now*, what a dumb lie) I was able to sit quietly on the railing overlooking the river watching the red and black motorboats passing below without it occurring to me to think photographically of the scenes, nothing more than letting myself go in the letting go of objects, running immobile in the stream of time. And then the wind was not blowing (Cortázar, 1963, p. 103).<sup>3</sup>

*Now* is a dumb lie, I take it, because the present moment cannot exist as purely present—without, that is, memories of the past and anticipations of the future folded back into it. This is the human *now* (what other 'now' is there?), as opposed to the postulate of a pure presence and immediacy, independent of past and future. What the photograph records is the isolation of a moment whose isolation, other than in the image, is impossible; and yet it is in relation to such images that our letting ourselves go, our seeing ourselves 'as other than the camera insidiously impose[s]', can take place. There is a continuity or at least a connection here with the closure and non-closure at the end of *Blow-Up*, and this also is less therapeutic in kind than in *Palermo Shooting*.

Phillip's problem with the polaroids, as we saw, is with how image can relate to reality and how reality can become image. Around the time that he was making *Alice*, Wenders was presented with a polaroid camera as a gift, and he proceeded to use it enthusiastically. In an interview with Fatema

Ahmed in 2018, he refers to the time when polaroid cameras came on the scene as 'a strange little science-fiction period in the history of photography when you didn't have a negative or a file, you had "the thing"' (Wenders, 2018). A polaroid photograph, unlike a print that derives from a negative or an electronic file, is a unique object, and this gives it a special value, particularly insofar as it exists as a record of an instant; possession of a such a photograph therefore has a significance that will not attach to those that are reproducible. In response to the question, 'You've previously described photography as a way to stop seeing something. Could you explain that further?', he replies:

Seeing can also be a disease. There's too much to see, the world is too full of stuff. And then, a photograph is always an act of exorcising something, if you know it consciously or not. It's also a scary process. Because it produces something that lasts, it shifts the random process of looking around into something lasting. And then either there is a certain necessity in it and a certain truth, or there isn't. (*ibid.*)

The framing of the photograph is different, Wenders insists, from the composition of a painting.<sup>4</sup> The painter makes a more or less free decision about what to include, whereas for the photographer the decision pertains more directly to what is to be excluded. The exorcism is of that 'too much to see'. The framing is, it might be added, a shutting of the eye in the resolution of the image. What is not exorcised remains something *given*. Consider the following remark, from the celebrated photographer Sergio Larraín, makes clear: 'A good image is created by a state of grace. Grace expresses itself when it has been freed from conventions, free like a child in his early discovery of the reality. The game is then to organize the rectangle.'<sup>5</sup>

Apart from being a renowned photographer using conventional means, Wenders went on to take thousands of polaroid pictures. He was struck by the need to have the object of attention central in a polaroid photograph, and this gave precedence to objects without depth of field. Andy Warhol had already drawn attention to the power and effects of the reproduction of images, and it was partly in a pastiche of one of Warhol's works, and ironically using a medium that defied reproduction, that he took a polaroid photograph of Campbell's Soup cans neatly stacked on shelves in a supermarket. Some years later he discovered, to his amusement, that Campbell's Soup is made in Paris, Texas!

These matters of the framing, resolution, and fixing of the image need to be considered also in relation to recording, the preservation of a record. In 'As If It Were for the Last Time: Wim Wenders—Film and Photography', George Kouvaros draws attention, in particular, to 'the director's insistence on keeping two ways of treating the cinematic image alive' (Kouvaros, 2015, pp. 84). There is, he suggests,

on the one hand, the image as part of the telling of a story and, on the other, the image as the record of a particular time. Across Wenders' films, this approach gives birth to stories in which narrative



movement and character development are prone to suspension, stories in which nothing seems to happen, except the passing of time. (*ibid.*)

Wenders was influenced by the advice that the director Nicholas Ray gave to his actors: 'Even if you're only asking for a light, even if you're only saying good day, you have to do it as if you thought it could be the last time' (Wenders, 2000, p. 10). Of course the screen actor could perform the scene many times, but what cannot be repeated is the moment of any particular action, any instance. Photography and film capture instances: they 'preserve this unrepeatable moment'. And he goes on to suggest that, for Wenders, this is 'synonymous with seeing or doing something as if it were for the first time. The astonishing thing about film and photography is that everything we see has happened for the first and last time' (Kouvaros, 2015, p. 95). It is in the light of this, furthermore, that Wenders has been inclined to see films as having a documentary aspect, 'because almost inevitably and unintentionally they record what happens to be happening—a flock of birds somewhere in the background or someone walking by who doesn't notice he's being filmed' (Wenders, 2000, p. 10).

Kouvaros' closing words bring to the fore something of crucial importance, I think, in the understanding not only of the significance of Wenders' films but also of their particular pertinence to a liberal education. Kouvaros writes: 'The dilemma of coming after—of finding one's place and history already circumscribed and indebted—is thus not just about comprehending the legacy of the past but also about creating the possibility of a future' (Kouvaros, 2015, pp. 94-95). It is to the idea of a liberal education that I now turn.

### **Enframing education**

Arcilla hopes that his book will be of interest to educators and philosophers of education, 'particularly those who are concerned about liberal education, in the promise of cultivating the experience of being led out' (Arcilla, 2020, p. 18), and he makes clear that his focus on this body of film work will limit the scope for engaging with literature on the future of liberal education. I take it that it is in part the desire to foreground the films that also leads him to rely on both a stipulative distinction between 'education' and 'learning', and a four-stepped template<sup>6</sup> for illustrating the films' purchase on education.

With a similar but more welcome economy, he underlines his educational message by coming back at the end of the book to the parable with which it starts. This 'Coda' comprises a message sent to the alien planet's Senator 3, Congress 5, addressed here as 'Kert', from one of the party of anthropologists who a month previously had returned from Earth. The sender signs off as 'Rats'. The message reflects on the overwhelmingly negative judgement that has prevailed regarding the expedition to Earth: that the aliens have nothing to learn from Earth and, on the contrary, could be harmed by further contact.

The author, it turns out, however, is more nuanced in their position. They recall in particular their conversation with a professor they had

interviewed who was struggling over the absence of education on Earth. The predicament of the professor was of the kind expressed by the Earth philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's lament: in all of Christendom, where is there a Christian? Rats recalls how the professor

agonized over his limited ability to help his students live meaningful lives. Even when he made this aim the explicit theme of his courses, featuring it in class discussions and in reading and writing assignments, he again and again ran up against the fact that the students were already trained by the learning system's structural features to contain reductively the theme's seriousness, to repress it. (p. 151)

The professor had in fact invited the alien anthropologist to the cinema to see a film, *Alice in the Cities*, which was showing as part of a retrospective of the works of Wim Wenders. . . .

Clearly this teacher's commitment to a kind of education had left its mark, and Rats confesses to having been left wondering whether the aliens had not after all gained some benefit from what they had seen on Earth. There was, it was increasingly being noted, a tendency on their own planet towards a degree of complacency about the success of their education, a complacency that might be its undoing. Near the close of the message, Rats writes: 'The single most shocking thing I have to say to you, Kert, is hence this: the encounter with the aliens, I now realize, is for us grace' (p. 153).

A first moral of the story, and of Arcilla's account of Wenders as a whole, is that the education that counts does not come easily and that it can easily slip away. A second is that it does not come by design: it is not that one can simply plan a curriculum that will lead to the desired outcome. A third seems to be that there are limits to how far the content of such an education can be prescribed. That this can be done at all is shown by the fact that Wenders' films can themselves provide suitable content. Maybe Arcilla would bridle a little at my phrasing ('provide suitable content'): he would rather say that the films open a road. Certainly, the language of curriculum planning is now burdened by expectations of performativity that are anathema to his approach, and I have no wish to defend it in that respect. But a curriculum is originally a course to follow, a road to be run. Someone has to decide, at least in any institution of education, what that course is to be, so I think it reasonable to press the point about content further. This will lead into a fourth feature of Arcilla's account, which would seem to be that a liberal education is freely entered into.

While emphasis on the learner's freedom is seen classically as a defining feature of progressive (child-centred) education, accounts of a liberal education typically contrast with this through their conception of freedom as something that is to be achieved. The reason for this is that freedom depends upon the development of mind, and mind depends upon some kind of initiation into the cultural inheritance. This is true where culture is taken in the anthropological sense—that is, as being an essential quality of human societies—but it extends into the higher reaches of cultural achievement; academic subjects as well as refinement in the

creative arts would be examples. It is not easy to see how such goods can be entered into through 'learning by discovery' or in isolation from conversation with others: that conversation—the conversation of human kind, to adapt Michael Oakeshott's classic expression—is not confined to face-to-face dialogue but extends through the passing on of ways of thinking and practices of study from one generation to another, through lecture and discussion, but also most importantly through the written word, more recently through photography and film, and then through records and archives now available on an unprecedented scale. An extraordinary cultural accumulation.

Now Arcilla does indeed emphasise the importance of conversation in the process of leading-out. Although he is not describing a school or university context, his commitment is not inconsistent with what is being said here. The problem, I think, given the basis of Arcilla's argument, is whether he can allow that education in his sense might be realised where learners are required to study a subject or at least to follow a prescribed content, where they are compelled to work at things that they initially find tiresome or irrelevant or simply boring, but where, as they acquire knowledge and come to know their way around the subject better, they will discover forms of engagement and excitement that otherwise would have passed them by. This will open them to new paths of thought and experience, new possibilities of mind, without which they would have been less free.

The tendency on the part of some advocates of liberal education has been to express this in overtly intellectual terms and to envisage success at the level of schooling, at least, as requiring some accomplishment across the range of those principal forms of knowledge and understanding that are our human heritage. A notable individual accomplishment. But two points need to be raised against this picture. First, there are similar patterns of teaching and learning to be found in the creative arts, as indicated above, and also in relation to what might loosely be called 'craft activities', in traditional and new forms. Hence, I think it is possible to recast arguments in favour of initiation into forms of knowledge and worthwhile activities in more varied terms, academic and vocational, than is sometimes suggested, in ways that are sensitive to context. To the extent that these arguments hold, they militate against the obsession with learning that is Arcilla's target. They also strengthen the appreciation of teaching; this too would not be at odds with what Arcilla has to say, as the example of the troubled professor in the fable shows. But the point I am making invites a wider and more structured acknowledgement of the good life of teaching, within the kinds of educational institutions that are characteristic of our societies but without the life-sapping effects of pervasive accountability and performativity. I do not imagine that Arcilla will necessarily be opposed to much of what I have said here. His *For the Love of Perfection* (1995) and *Mediumism* (2010) are books in which he demonstrates appreciation of much that is learned in the academy and of its being learned there on the strength of earlier disciplined study in school. I believe also that his sympathies for Allan Bloom's work would extend to appreciation of the kind of 'general education' (liberal education by another name) whose absence is lamented in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

The second point I raise, however, concerns accumulation and accomplishment. The successful amassing of knowledge, the solving of problems, satisfaction of the desire to know—these are powerful pictures of plenitude that hold us captive, especially when there are technologies that so amply answer to these desires. That way hubris and complacency lie. At the close of Arcilla's fable there is more than a suggestion that it is not only that the Earthlings, ebullient with confidence in their successful management of learning, have disastrously mistaken it for education, it is also that an appropriate understanding of education has in fact escaped the aliens themselves. Rats is plainly moved by something other than the unquestioning confidence in education that prevails in the alien world, and there is a poignancy in Rats' response to the struggling Earth professor. This is an unsettling of experience that opens the way to a different economy of thought, to desire without satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> It suggests a questioning that draws the learner on, not to the accumulation of knowledge or its accomplishment, but towards the muted interrogative, receptive stance of a new humility.

Does this sound too high-minded? Too earnest? Professions of liberal education can, in my view, founder in various ways—for example, when, in 'forms of knowledge' conceptions, zealous commitment to systematic coverage predominates, or when faith in such conceptions is guided primarily by the belief that they provide the basis for rational autonomy; just as when, by contrast, the appeal of Arcilla's elaboration of 'education without learning' becomes too insistent and seemingly monological. My conception of a liberal education emphasises the value of disciplined attention to objects worthy of attention, as can be encountered across a range of traditions and practices. Against foregrounding the amassing of knowledge, achievement and accomplishment, it puts the emphasis on an energising of thought manifested in a variety of ways—inheritance and reception opening the way to imagination and originality. It encourages an experiment in living that is available alike to seriousness, irony, humour and fun. Does this not suggest the 'golden thread linking eros to education'?

Let me give this further context by recalling substance by recalling turning back to some of the draw this discussion to a close by identifying what I shall call some 'dualities of experience' that emerge in Wenders' films. These dualities articulate our relationship to past and future and our human capacities for understanding, and they seem to me important aspects of—or, to be more precise, factors in—education. They resist the pull of narrative. The films draw attention to tensions and paradoxes in human experience, fundamental aspects of our condition that are not to be resolved but whose acknowledgement is itself a characteristic of education. They provide particular endorsement for the role of the humanities—those subjects in which there is reflection on the nature of human experience and meaning-making. In Cortázar's story we saw the tension between the instant of the photograph and the flow of experience; in *Blow-Up* between the appearance of the gun as the photograph is enlarged and the story of a murder to be solved; in *Palermo Shooting* between the photo images on the editor's computer screen and the tide of events, of the car out of control, of the withdrawal to Sicily, and of the encounter with Flavia, the art-restorer. These are tensions in which we make sense,

remembering that—as Romance languages more clearly show—a sense is also a way.

It may be edifying also to see the ways in which these various tensions resonate with something fundamental to language or, more broadly, to human signs themselves. In the sign, upon which thought and culture overwhelmingly depend, there is a duality involving fixity of form (the structural consistency of the mark, whether spoken or written word, pictorial symbol, gesture. . .) and dynamism of use (the sign's availability to new usage, to new interpretation and connection). While this has been the nature of human signs and the condition for human meaning-making for as long as people have spoken to one another, it has expanded in recent times to new forms of influence. Today we are bombarded by representations, by ready-made images, types, templates, and models. It is relevant also to the unprecedented expansion and accessibility of the archive, of the multiple forms within which recording takes place, including the recording of non-verbal material.

This last point helps to show the qualified nature of the resonance and dissonance between the visual and the verbal in the dualities identified. Cortázar evokes in words a contrast in experience in which visual experience is pivotal. His protagonist, Michel, is not a professional photographer but a translator: he takes photographs to escape from his job, which suggests a desire for experience beyond the framing of words; but this then extends to a desire for experience without the framing of the camera, a 'way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed upon it'. Yet there is no pure experience, and what unfolds involves, here as in *Blow-Up* and *Palermo Shooting*, is an oscillation or interplay between the photograph, the visual record, and the threads of description and narrative. The films achieve a realisation of this visual experience. In the play of memory, haunting images recur, however compromised or complicated by the lines of the story. In fact, the inheritance in these various works goes back one stage further. Cortázar's story was indeed inspired by a photograph, by none other than Sergio Larraín. Some time in the 1950s Larraín was taking photographs in the streets around Notre Dame in Paris, and he captured scenes between a couple that he noticed only when he developed the film.

If these points are brought closer to questions of the curriculum, we should be struck by the dependence of academic subjects—the humanities especially—on the archive. When Matthew Arnold wrote of the importance of an education in 'the best that has been thought and said', this referred to the best of our cultural inheritance, but it also may seem to some to have legitimated an unthinking traditionalism: this would be to take the products of the past—whether literary works, historical accounts, cultural artefacts, scientific discoveries, or technical inventions—as fixed in their significance. But those who subscribe to that view would be like Cortázar's photographer if he were never able to leave his camera at home. What is missing is the interplay of reception and interpretation, the occasion of response and the exercise of criticism and judgement that, in the end, sustains the significance of these works in their opening to the future.

Towards the end of the book, before the coda, Arcilla does make curricular suggestions that are in part compatible with what I am arguing

for here. The 'education story form', exemplified in Wenders' films, can be promoted if a 'corpus of exemplary works of education' can be identified and celebrated publicly:

we should seek to draw serious attention to works in the various arts, such as novels, songs, paintings, and dances, which flesh out recognizable details of a person's education. Our aim should be to place a growing list of such works in conversation with each other and with the conventions that they share and play off. This entails elaborating comparative judgments about them that will hopefully stimulate insightful argument and discussion among an audience that extends beyond their authors. (p.146)

It may be that—Arcilla quotes Rilke—'you must change your life' (p. 147). But there is an introspective orientation to this that is at odds with what I have suggested. I have pointed rather towards a curriculum that, in its emphasis on attention and reception, gains distance on existentialist *angst*, and leads *beyond the self*.

Without doubt, however, Arcilla's book has helped me to reconsider Wenders' work and to think through these questions again.

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<sup>1</sup> The etymologising has been criticised, but there is in contemporary research, it seems, a prevailing view that confirms the derivation of ἦρως (hero) either from ἐρως (love) or from εἶπειν (say, speak). I am grateful to Marianna Papastephanou for advice about this. For a related discussion, see my 'Impudent Practices' (2014).

<sup>2</sup> The encounter with Death in *Palermo Shooting* echoes Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

<sup>3</sup> The original title of the story is 'Las Babas del Diablo', which has been translated as 'The Devil's Drool', but the Spanish expression is more allusive than this translation suggests. As Genaro J. Pérez writes, the expression 'refers to the early morning fog that resembles gossamer filaments and that also is called "threads of the virgin"' (Pérez, 2019),

<sup>4</sup> Of course this will vary with different traditions and genres of painting.

<sup>5</sup> Magnum Photos. Online at:

<https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/sergio-larrain/>. Accessed: 31 July 2021. Sergio Larraín Echeñique (1931-2012) was a Chilean photographer, who is famous especially for his photographs of street children.

<sup>6</sup> 'Who is being led out; what characterizes his or her life as a whole? From where is he or she being led? To where is he or she being led? And lastly, who or what is leading the person out?' (Arcilla, 2020, p. 15)

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of different economies of thought, see my 'Towards and Economy of Higher Education' (Standish, 2005).