

FAITH, FILM AND PHILOSOPHY: BIG IDEAS ON THE BIG SCREEN

REVIEW ESSAY

This book is edited by Douglas Geivett and James Spiegel. Geivett is a professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California, and Spiegel is a professor of philosophy and religion at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana. The book consists of fourteen chapters, each written by a different author. Spiegel, who contributed one of the chapters, also wrote the book's Introduction. In addition to the chapter divisions, the book is divided into four main parts, each covering a particular area of philosophical interest. Part one deals with the human condition, part two with discussions of the mind and knowledge, part three with various ethical issues, and part four with faith and religion.

Introduction

Spiegel begins with a quotation from Plato: "Those who tell the stories rule society." Since the most influential storytellers in our society are probably filmmakers (9), it's important for Christian scholars and ministers to be aware of the kinds of stories being told, and the various worldviews which these stories promote. As Spiegel reminds us, "Every film offers a worldview, a set of beliefs and values for understanding how the world is and how it should be" (9). Since the disciplines of philosophy and theology are interested in "worldview development" and analysis, they offer us many tools, concepts and categories for uncovering and critiquing the "set of beliefs and values" which a particular film might offer (11). What's more, since important ideas in philosophy and theology are often explored in film, the insights gleaned from one of these disciplines can inform and benefit the others. In fact, says Spiegel, "the principal and overarching aim of this book is to demonstrate" this very point (17).

Part One: The Human Condition

Chapter One: The Citizen Kane Mutiny

James Sennett argues that “*Citizen Kane* presents a biblical and realistic picture of human nature—one that is denied and denigrated by the Hollywood mainstream” (22). This state of affairs is what he terms the “*Citizen Kane* mutiny.”

Sennett holds that a biblical view of human nature will preserve “the tension between our status as divine image bearers and our status as fallen rebels” (32). He sees evidence for the former in Kane’s “insatiable” need for love (24-27), and evidence for the latter in his inability to “make himself vulnerable and available to those whose love he desires” (28). This, Kane’s tragic defect, is what “defines and destroys” him (25). And this, according to Sennett, is often what Hollywood promotes and celebrates in “popular heroes” like James Bond and Batman (32-34). As he sees it, “the typical Hollywood message of heroism and success is in direct contradiction to that of *Citizen Kane* (35).

Chapter Two: Story-Shaped Lives in Big Fish

Kelly James Clark describes *Big Fish* as “a magical tale that demonstrates the transforming power of stories” (37). Edward, a fantastic storyteller who has long thought of himself as a “big fish,” is dying. Unfortunately, “his insistent self-aggrandizement and his absence from home” have distanced him from his son, Will (45). Edward desperately wants (and needs) his son’s love and forgiveness. He asks his son “to tell the story of how he dies” (48). Although initially reluctant, Will eventually comes around and tells his father’s story. Father and son are reconciled when “Will sees the pattern of his father’s life and accepts him unconditionally” (48). Reflecting on the meaning of this film for Christians, Clark reminds us that history is *His* story. History is meaningful—and so are our lives. Although we can’t always discern the pattern or purpose of our lives, we can nonetheless hope and trust that there is one (50-51).

Chapter Three: Defining Love Through the Eye of the Lens

In this chapter Greg Jesson “explores and analyzes” the “contemporary concept of love and romantic experience in the films *Pretty Woman*, *Legends of the Fall* and *The Bridges of Madison County*” (53). He identifies the contemporary concept of love with a view called *romantic determinism*. This view holds that love “is an overpowering attraction that has been programmed into the individual by heredity and environment” (61). In this sense, we really have no control over who we fall in (or out of) love with (54). Our will and reason are overcome by irresistible feelings and we are little more than puppets, whom *Eros* directs wherever he wishes.

In response, Jesson argues that “the most challenging, and the most fulfilling, part of romance is learning how to love another selflessly over the long haul. While such attraction is initially blissful and effervescent, it is like the tide, always ebbing and flowing, tempered by our histories, choices and frailties” (63). This raises, once again, the issue of the will. Jesus primarily identified love with actions, rather than feelings (58). And since our actions are strongly influenced by our character, the issue of personal integrity cannot be ignored (61-62). Unfortunately, we all struggle with “pride and selfishness” (68). If, therefore, we are to truly, consistently, and selflessly love another, we must humbly receive the enabling grace of God (68).

Part Two: Mind and Knowledge

Chapter Four: Escaping into Reality

Douglas Geivett discusses *The Truman Show*, a film which “traces one ordinary man’s opportunity to discover the truth and embrace reality” (72). Truman Burbank is deceived. The town in which he lives is, unbeknownst to him, actually a giant television studio. To make matters worse, his wife, mother, and all his friends are merely actors. In fact, although he doesn’t know it, he is the *star* of the longest running show in television history! But while Truman could leave at any time, he is “imprisoned within . . . beliefs that seem perfectly justified but happen to

be utterly false” (73). In order to achieve authentic existence, therefore (and a life in the *real* world), “Truman must come to a *knowledge of the truth*” (74).

What can this film teach us about “the human cognitive condition”? And what insight might this offer for the religious person’s quest “to know the truth about ultimate reality” (81)? Geivett draws a number of interesting correlations between Truman’s quest to discover the truth about himself and his world and the believer’s quest to do the same. For example, he points to the importance of *intellectual virtues* like curiosity, reasonableness, trust in reliable authorities, attention to detail, persistence, and a passion for the truth (83-84). These are the virtues which eventually enabled Truman to know the truth—and the truth set him free (88; John 8:32).

Chapter Five: The Sleeper Awakes

David Hunt argues that the worldview of *The Matrix* shares many parallels with the worldview of ancient Gnosticism. Gnosticism “regarded *knowledge* as the way to salvation” (90). But this knowledge could “only come from outside the system.” Hence, the Gnostics taught that “a divine emissary,” an “Alien Man,” had to come and “correct the misinformation that is promulgated and reinforced by the world-system” (91). Similarly, notes Hunt, the Matrix is portrayed as “a global illusion” in which the vast majority of human beings are trapped (92). Liberation can only be achieved through knowledge which comes from outside the system. In the *Matrix* trilogy, Neo is “the Alien Man or Gnostic Messiah” who comes to free humanity from the illusion in which they are trapped (93). By exploring what the films have to say about the three “major areas of philosophy: epistemology, metaphysics and ethics,” Hunt demonstrates that the films raise a number of significant and thought-provoking questions, even if they don’t provide equally significant answers (95-105).

Chapter Six: Consciousness, Memory and Identity

In this chapter Gregory Ganssle explores “the nature of persons in three films by Charlie Kaufman”: *Being John Malkovich*, *Adaptation*, and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (106). Ganssle argues that each of these films portray human persons as having a particular nature and individual identity that is relatively stable through time (119). But this sort of stability

cries out for a metaphysical explanation—and Ganssle believes Christian theism offers the best explanation available (119).

Christian theism teaches that human beings have been made in the image of God. This implies that we have a particular nature or essence. According to Ganssle, “This nature provides both the limits of adaptation and the grounding for persistence through time” (120). Further, if God created human beings with a particular nature, then this implies that human flourishing will be intimately related to living in accordance with God’s design. As Ganssle observes, “Objective moral values that transcend human beings and that contribute to our good are perfectly at home in a theistic world” (120). Finally, Christian theism teaches that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. This implies that “all that is human has meaning” (120). To sum up, Kaufman’s films present us with a view of human nature and personal identity that are relatively stable through time. And this, claims Ganssle, confirms the view of persons “found in traditional theistic metaphysics” (121).

Chapter Seven: What Would Have Been and What Could Be

“It’d been better if I’d never been born at all,” George says to Clarence, his guardian angel. “Undeterred, Clarence proceeds to show George just what things *would have been like* had he never been born” (123). In this chapter, James Spiegel considers the notion of counterfactuals in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Run Lola Run*. Counterfactual conditionals “refer to what *would be* the case given certain nonactual conditions, as opposed to what in fact *is* the case” (126). But since these statements are contrary to fact, in what sense can they be true (126)? Spiegel thinks this raises real problems if “we think of truth in terms of correspondence to reality” (126).

But there’s another issue that needs to be raised. Why should we think “that changing some single choice or event must alter the course of history” (129)? Because, says Spiegel, we assume the *law of causality*, the idea “that events must have causes” (129). But does this law apply to human choices as well? Spiegel thinks it does. After considering, and rejecting, two varieties of libertarianism, namely, Molinism and free-will theism, he opts instead for a compatibilist view of human freedom (130-36). So what does he make of the counterfactuals of

freedom presented in these two films? While he thinks that they are philosophically interesting, as a compatibilist he holds that there is really only one scenario which God has decreed—and this will infallibly come to pass (136-38).

Part Three: The Moral Life

Chapter 8: Liberation Through Sensuality

Dallas Willard takes a look at three films in this chapter: *Pleasantville*, *American Beauty*, and *The Cider House Rules*. Although the films are different in many respects, they all have a common theme that Willard is concerned to expose; namely, “that *sensuality or feeling is foundational to goodness* in life” (152). The typical foil for this view is the rigid, angry, uptight, moralistic, uncompassionate, sexually-repressed individual who can’t relate to real human feelings, needs, or problems. And who wants to be like that? If these are the only two choices we’re offered, it’s hardly surprising that most viewers would opt for door number one—a life of unrestrained sensuality and feeling.

But are these our only two choices? Willard doesn’t think so. Besides moralistic rigidity and unrestrained sensuality is the person who can “act with genuine love, as a matter of the will and of character and not just of feeling.” “This,” he says, “is what it means to be *responsible*” (155). But since it requires “a conception of what is *good* for people, as distinct from what is desired or felt,” it is unlikely to be recognized in our “sensual culture” apart from a major paradigm-shift which, in all likelihood, would itself be a result of conversion (155).

Chapter 9: From a Society of Fear to a Community of Trust

In this chapter, Sara Shady explores Michael Moore’s Oscar-winning documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*. Made in the wake of the Columbine High School shootings, Moore’s documentary explores the reasons for violence in American society. After analyzing and rejecting a variety of simplistic theories, Moore provocatively concludes that “fear is at the root of American violence” (157). Shady concurs with Moore’s diagnosis. Relying on the work of Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891-1976), she attempts to demonstrate that fear is

indeed “linked to problems of social injustice and the breakdown of community in American society” (157). “Finally, reflecting on the religious themes in the work of both Moore and Macmurray,” she concludes her essay by arguing that “to move beyond our culture of fear we must put faith into action” (158).

Chapter 10: Vengeance, Forgiveness and Redemption in Mystic River

As the title indicates, Caroline Simon’s essay explores issues of vengeance, forgiveness and redemption in Clint Eastwood’s powerful and thought-provoking film, *Mystic River*. For example, can vengeance be virtuous, as philosopher Peter French suggests (176)? Or should it always be rejected, as Solomon Schimmel believes (176)? Does Jimmy act virtuously in killing Dave, the person he thinks is responsible for his daughter’s tragic death? Or has he overstepped appropriate moral boundaries by taking matters into his own hands? Although “Jimmy meets the requirements that French sets out for the virtuous enactment of vengeance,” we later learn that he acted on inaccurate information and killed the wrong person (178). The film raises equally interesting questions about forgiveness and redemption. When is forgiveness appropriate? And is redemption merely a vain hope or is it firmly grounded in reality (181)? Simon argues that the film’s “studied ambiguity concerning religion” forces us to ask what kind of world we inhabit (185). How we answer this question, she suggests, will not only influence our view of the characters in the story, it will also influence “where we place our trust and hope”—and even how we live our lives (185-86).

Chapter Eleven: Moral Monsters

What makes a horror film good? Since such films are supposed to frighten us, we might put this question another way: what makes a horror film frightening? According to Ronald Tacelli, the answer is relatively simple: “Horror requires the notion of a moral good that is able to be violated, overcome and destroyed as well as the notion of an evil that aims to destroy it” (192). If this is correct, then what sort of “horror” movie would we have if *all* the characters were evil? In Tacelli’s view, we would have a rather nauseating movie. And “nausea, while it may be horrible, is not horror (205). To prove his point, Tacelli reviews three “bad” horror

movies: *Lemora: A Child's Tale of the Supernatural*, *Hannibal*, and *King of the Ants*. Although I've not seen any of these movies, if Tacelli's descriptions are accurate, I think he might be onto something. While the movies he describes sound perverse, gruesome, and disgusting, they certainly don't sound frightening. I was honestly grateful for the spoilers!

Part Four: Faith and Religion

Chapter Twelve: Religion and Science in Contact and 2001: A Space Odyssey

Brendan Sweetman begins his essay by drawing our attention to the rich philosophical content of these films. Although he focuses his discussion on *Contact*, he notes that both films deal with “what philosophers call *ultimate* questions” (209). These include questions about the origin of the universe, “the rationality of religious belief . . . the nature of consciousness and free will . . . and . . . whether there might be intelligent life on other planets” (209). The movie *Contact* does a particularly good job of comparing and contrasting a naturalistic worldview (represented by the atheistic scientist Ellie Arroway) with a theistic worldview (represented by scholar and author Palmer Joss). Although the movie was based on a novel written by the late naturalist Carl Sagan, Ellie's views “are challenged at several points” (215). Sweetman even claims that both films “easily support” the idea “that theism is more rational than naturalism” (215)! While this may be a bit of an overstatement, he's certainly correct in noting that both films “are well worth our time and reflection” (224).

Chapter Thirteen: Bottled Water from the Fragrant Harbor

In this chapter Winfried Corduan takes a look at some of the spiritual elements in Hong Kong films. He begins by observing that “there is a ritualistic quality about Chinese theater, which is expected by the Chinese audience within any medium, whether it be stage or film” (226-27). He notes that this rather formulaic quality of Hong Kong films is rooted in Chinese religious and cultural art forms such as the Taoist funeral drama, Chinese theater, and Peking Opera (227). After carefully emphasizing that the sacred/secular distinction is inapplicable to Chinese thought, he proceeds to discuss five specific examples of cultural and

spiritual elements which are often present in Hong Kong films. These are: “filial piety, social groups as inextricably religious and political, martial arts as integrated into spiritual orders, balance as the highest ideal, and portrayal of Western values as incompatible with Chinese ideals” (229).

Chapter Fourteen: Rattle and Film

In this essay Doug Blount compares and contrasts the responses of U2 and Friedrich Nietzsche to “the blues of the human condition” (241). On the one hand, he notes, both believe “that life *is* worth living” (241). But they reach this conclusion for very different reasons. In Nietzsche’s view, life is worth living *because* God is dead (243). We are no longer accountable to anyone but ourselves; “we are free to be our own masters” (254). By contrast, U2 thinks that life is worth living *because* God lives! “On U2’s view, the wretchedness of this life must be seen against the backdrop of God’s grace and the hope of new life, which that grace provides. In response to the blues, then, U2 offers gospel” (241). In support of this thesis, Blount does a careful analysis of the Christian themes in U2’s film, *Rattle and Hum*. “Most prominent among these,” he writes, “are the twin themes of despair and hope—what one might call the blues of human wretchedness on the one hand and the gospel of promised redemption in Christ Jesus and his kingdom on the other” (242). The contrast with Nietzsche is striking. While Nietzsche joyfully proclaims the “good news” of God’s death, U2 joyfully proclaims the good news of God’s salvation and coming kingdom.