Ward E. **Jones** and **Samantha Vice**, eds.
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To explain the popularity of film in our culture, we cannot simply attribute it to our passion for, or interest in, the medium. We do not just *care* about movies. We also *react* to them. We talk about them. We are grateful for them. We are disgusted by some and inspired by others. In an attempt to make sense of our political, social, and moral climate we engage these stories. Or better put, these stories engage us. We do not involve ourselves in the movies as much as we involve the movies in ourselves. So what explains our transformative attachment to film? By placing the spectator in a position where she can relate to and learn from the story, film reveals its mysterious ability to transform a mere viewer into something more. If the best movies are the ones that forever meditate on the perplexity and beauty of the human condition, then these stories invite us—not just as spectators, but also as characters—to participate in this sacred meditation.

In this superb anthology, *Ethics at the Cinema*, editors Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice examine the moral dimensions and interactions between film and its spectator. This insightful, compelling, and highly readable compilation of essays is divided into two parts. Part 1 ('Critique, Character, and the Power of Film') addresses issues arising from the attitudes that films and other narratives encourage us to adopt. The essays included in this section deal predominately with the nature of film. Put simply, they examine what film as a narrative medium does *to* the spectator. Part 2 ('Philosophical Readings') focuses primarily on the ethical dilemmas and philosophical issues raised within particular films. Yet as the contributors remind us, something much more is gained from discussing these narratives than a mere lesson applicable to some real-life situation. 'On the contrary', Jones writes, 'their discussions tell us about our complex and ethically significant encounters *with these films*, and how it is that aspects of our characters (are) enlivened or ignored, accommodated or challenged in those encounters' (15).

Part 1 examines the meta-issues surrounding film technique, narrative, and viewer engagement. The reader will immediately notice the provocative essay titles. (It is worth mentioning that Andrew Gleeson's analysis in 'The Secrets and Lies of Film' is surprisingly even more provocative than the title suggests). The reader will also notice how each contributor operates under a very important assumption: not all films engage with morality in the same way. Murray Smith, for example, convincingly explains how the spectator encounters not one but *many* different degrees of 'moral concentration and moral seriousness' as she moves from one work of fiction to another (70). Smith's case study is *The Sopranos*, and the essay's title captures the question many of us have wondered: 'Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?' Smith's answer, at least in part, is this: Tony Soprano represents the best and

worst of us. We are not completely good; nor are we completely bad. And television shows like *The Sopranos*, *Dexter*, and *Breaking Bad* confront us with this very reality. The truth is that we are all too familiar with our complexities, impulses, and contradictions to rashly condemn or ignore the Tony Sopranos on screen. So while we may not always love our antiheros, we know them a bit too well to hate them entirely.

Part 2 includes philosophical readings of specific films that tackle, among other themes, issues of moral ideals, racism, romance, friendship, and conflicts of loyalty. These readings do not, however, consist of authors using film as mere springboards for philosophical reflection (although there is arguably a time and place for this sort of treatment). Rather, these philosophical readings occur when a philosopher brings the world of a film to, as Stanley Cavell puts it, 'consciousness of itself'. That is, they describe, examine, and often evaluate the sort of moral interactions and experiences that spectators can have with a particular film. Aside from the three essays devoted to *The Third Man*, perhaps the most noteworthy philosophical reading in this collection is Torbjörn Tännsjö's treatment of *Sophie's Choice*. One of Tännsjö's primary aims is to take what we think of as a 'moral dilemma' and offer a distinction between a 'tragic moral choice' on the one hand and a 'moral conflict' on the other. He does this not to draw some real-life moral lesson from Sophie's predicament, but to help us make sense of her choice. At the end of his analysis Tännsjö describes (and defends) Sophie's choice as an example of 'blameful right-doing'. And while his mastery of moral philosophy is no doubt evident, it would have been almost impossible to make his case without an equally remarkable grasp of narrative theory and technique.

Luckily for the reader, Tännsjö is one of many contributors to this volume who brings to the table more than a first-rate knowledge of Aristotle and Nietzsche. They know film, too, which makes the intellectual breadth and depth of each contributor the book's most impressive feature. Much of the credit goes to the editors, having selected philosophers who are just as capable of analyzing films as they are philosophical treatises. Other academic works devoted to philosophy and film, in their sincere but incomplete attempts to treat seriously both their own field *and* the film, often leave the reader unsatisfied, mostly because the philosophers underestimate or overlook the complex ways by which films create meaning. These efforts betray such a rudimentary grasp of film theory and criticism as to make narratives seem like a matter of jest. In *Ethics at the Cinema*, however, this is not the case. Throughout the essays we read how knowledge of everything from lighting, music, camera angles, and even the final credits helps construct their philosophical reading. Moreover, the contributors demonstrate a keen awareness of the many ironies and contradictions present in film narrative and its protagonists. It becomes immediately evident to the reader that the philosophers here do not just use film to make sense of philosophy; they use philosophy to make sense of film.

This is not to say that that the reader will agree with all the essays, or that some contributors do not interpret films better than others. In his reading of *Crash*, for example, Lawrence Blum criticizes the film for oversimplifying the process of racial reconciliation. Arguing that the memorable car rescue scene was meant to redeem a previous injustice between a racist cop (the rescuer) and the woman he earlier harassed

(the rescued), he states: 'The black woman's gratitude at her white savior has dwarfed both the damage to her and the white man's remorse at having victimized her' (109). How does Blum arrive at this conclusion? His reasons are dubious at best, as he relies mostly on the woman's ambiguous look made seconds after the rescue. Blum thinks this look has 'gratitude' and 'wonderment' written all over it. As a result, he hastily accuses the film of trying to tie up and trivialize an otherwise complex racial conflict. This reading may turn off most readers who interpret the scene—rightly, in my view—as *complicating* the storyline, not resolving it.

Of course, such disagreements are inevitable, as are a writer's attempt to make a philosophical point by neglecting or mistreating a film's broader narrative goals. But perhaps these realities add to, rather than subtract from, the value of *Ethics at the Cinema*. A. O. Scott of the New York Times once summed up the film critic's manifesto as follows: 'Any movie worth seeing is worth arguing about, and any movie worth arguing about is worth seeing.' If he is right, then every film analyzed in this book is not only worth seeing—yes, even *Fools Rush In*—but worth arguing about as well. That the reader is invited to argue with these contributors, and with the films themselves, should inspire any serious filmgoer to purchase *Ethics at the Cinema*. It is hard to imagine a better way to get the discussion started.

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