

Robert Sinnerbrink. *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film.* Routledge 2016. 216 pp. \$145.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781138826151); \$49.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781138826168).

This book by Australian philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink is his latest contribution to the philosophy of film. Something of a sequel to his 2011 monograph *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images*, which analyzed the cinematic image as a vehicle for philosophical thinking, this new title focuses on film's capacity to function as an aesthetic medium for ethical reasoning. *Cinematic Ethics* aims to bridge two distinct research areas that have been growing in the philosophy of film during the last couple of decades: on one hand, work by Anglo-American philosophers such as Amy Coplan and Jesse Prinz regarding the irrational, emotive sources of moral judgment, and on the other hand, attempts by philosophers of a more continental persuasion to describe the conditions under which films can enact philosophical thinking in their own right. The latter camp is a school of philosophical film interpretation most indebted to Stanley Cavell, with whom Sinnerbrink engages extensively in this work. Sinnerbrink also engages extensively with ethical and political questions that emerge from the cinematic philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, whose writing on film continues to generate a very lively literature in the present, especially in Europe. Both Cavell and Deleuze have been influential in suggesting that the film medium exhibits a unique capacity to generate new concepts and new modes of thought in a fashion that transcends ordinary philosophical discourse. They both have also attempted to describe film's capacity for overcoming skepticism and nihilism, suggesting that film is a medium with the power to reinvigorate human belief in the world. Sinnerbrink's book aims to continue this dialogue, but specifically by focusing on film's potential to stimulate ethical thought by way of engaging the viewer's emotional capacities.

Cinematic Ethics is divided into two parts. The first part consists of four chapters devoted to the more theoretical aspects of the subject, with significant focus on the work of Cavell, Deleuze, and contemporary thought in cognitive theories of emotion as they apply to film viewership. Sinnerbrink criticizes both Cavell and Deleuze on the grounds that each fails to develop comprehensive ethical-political frameworks sufficient to the globalism of the 21st century. This criticism frames Sinnerbrink's approach in the second part. In this second part, Sinnerbrink develops more robust viewpoints in his own voice by taking up several films that offer unique food for ethical thought. In general, Sinnerbrink's choice of films exhibits cases in which the medium's potential for stimulating ethical thought exceeds the power of traditional philosophical discourse. Of emphasis is the cinematic image's aesthetic power to reveal moral 'otherness' and ambiguity. Sinnerbrink also highlights the emotive power films have in their ability to foster an interplay of sympathy and empathy in the viewer, what Sinnerbrink terms 'cinempathy.' Sinnerbrink draws on contemporary scholarship on emotion in film viewership in order to leverage the working assumption that the film viewer often reacts to situations depicted on screen in a fashion parallel to emotional reaction in real life. Detailed examples in Sinnerbrink's reading of the selected films emphasize that viewer emotion is predicated on stylistic traits in films such as the close-up, deep focus, point-of-view shots, and shot-reverse-shot composition.

Although many others in the philosophy of film have written extensively about the subject of film and emotions, Sinnerbrink's work is innovative insofar as it gives a thoughtful account of how specific films can occasion a kind of ethical thinking, by revealing in a cinematic way the complexities of ethical dilemmas and the ambiguities of responsibility, choice, and praise and blame. As the book proceeds, it does remain open to question as to how much theoretical or conceptual knowledge such films (or any films for that matter) can genuinely offer through purely

cinematic means. Do ethically-faceted films produce new ethical knowledge for their viewers, or do they merely occasion reflection? Sinnerbrink seems less interested in taking up this issue. The more persuasive, implicit view at work seems to be that instances of cinematic ethics, while limited to specific, singular cases, can clue one into broader themes that stand to inform one's ethical sensibility. It might be better to describe Sinnerbrink's thesis using some of his words in the fourth chapter, that film contains the potential to enhance 'moral perception' and exercise the viewer's 'ethical imagination' (102). In this light, Sinnerbrink follows in the steps of fellow Cavellian Stephen Mulhall, taking careful film readings to function as their own philosophical justification. This approach is apt because it is predicated on the notion that the only way to defend what films accomplish in terms of philosophical thought is to describe the experience of viewing them. Nonetheless, the tension here is one embedded in the subject more broadly, regarding precisely what sort of knowledge films can and do engender when functioning in the guise of philosophy.

This book is a rich piece of scholarship showing an impressive amount of research. Two especially strong features stand out. First, the early chapters contain very accessible and informative summaries of the work of Cavell and Deleuze on film, some of the best available in English. This book would be worth picking up just for these excellent chapters. Secondly, *Cinematic Ethics*' use of thorough, often provocative readings of a diverse selection of films from both classic Hollywood as well as the current auteur scene succeeds very well at illustrating the application and limitation of the early chapters' theoretical import. One of the principal films discussed is *Stella Dallas*, the 1937 movie directed by King Vidor, and which also features into Cavell's book *Contesting Tears*. While Sinnerbrink agrees with Cavell on many points regarding the dialectical thought process occasioned by the coming-of-age, personal-discovery motif represented by this film, he also treats the Cavellian reading of this golden-age Hollywood narrative in a more contemporary light. Sinnerbrink's readings of two more recent films, Pedro Almodovar's *Talk to Her* and Alejandro Innaritu's *Biutiful*, engage the Cavellian model while also pressing it further. As is well known, Cavell's philosophy of the golden-age Hollywood film emphasizes the theme of Emersonian self-perfection, especially as it applies to leading female characters. The women in these roles often undergo a kind of testing or personal proof as they attempt to discover and reinvent their place in modern American society. Sinnerbrink criticizes Cavell's reading of *Stella Dallas* on the score that Cavell's emphasis on individualistic self-realization overlooks the 'more complex dialectic between individual and social-cultural world' (125). Sinnerbrink instead favors a model of film-*cum*-philosophical ethics that 'situates the exercise of individual autonomy within an intersubjective relational network of social-cultural norms, practices and institutions—one that articulates the contradictory demands or desires that are engendered by, yet remain unsituated within, our modern world' (*Ibid*). Indeed, Sinnerbrink reads the genre of moral melodrama (of which *Stella Dallas* is one example) to excel at highlighting ethically ambiguous situations whose outcomes do not permit easy or ultimate resolution; the pressures put upon the characters of the narrative are not only personal problems, but often also social and political. Sinnerbrink reads Almodovar's seminal film *Talk to Her* similarly, highlighting this film's ability to negotiate the moral ambiguities of the rape of a comatose patient juxtaposed with the goodness of the rapist. Among the film's accomplishments here is its presentation of the rapist, Benigno, in a sympathetic, life-affirming light, alongside his violation of the vocational trust given to him as a nurse to care for a helpless patient. Of note for Sinnerbrink is this film's ability to engender a positive moral outlook for the viewer, blunting the more predictable gut-reaction judgments one might otherwise lodge against Benigno. Sinnerbrink takes a similar approach in reading Innaritu's *Biutiful*, a contemporary melodrama set in Spain, in which a man dying from terminal cancer attempts to quietly atone for his role in a tragic accident that killed

many innocent migrants. The example of this film illuminates the complexity of a moral dilemma fraught with multiple levels of conflicting interpersonal, spiritual, social, and political demands. The other films Sinnerbrink dissects in this book include *A Separation* (Asghar Farhadi, 2011), *The Promise* (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 1996), and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer et al, 2012).

Overall, Sinnerbrink's very readable book is an outstanding contribution to the dialogue on film-as-philosophy. A question that remains pregnant in the more theoretical territory Sinnerbrink opens up concerns the causal mechanism with which films are able to command bona fide emotions in their viewers, such as sympathy and empathy. This causality seems to be taken largely as a given, whereas Sinnerbrink even acknowledges that first-person experience of film-viewing only explains part of the phenomenon in question. In reality viewer emotion is an issue that, as Sinnerbrink notes in the fourth chapter (83ff), is at once cognitive and phenomenological, and not easy to grapple with argumentatively. However, in my opinion this would be a topic for a whole separate book. I hope Sinnerbrink can continue this fine work.

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