

## BOOK REVIEW

**Kimberly A. Blessing and Paul J. Tudico, eds., *Movies and the Meaning of Life: Philosophers Take on Hollywood*.** Chicago: Open Court Press, vii-302 (indexed). ISBN 0-8126-9575-5; US \$17.95; (Pb.), 2005.

The nineteen essays in *Movies and the Meaning of Life* are dedicated to various issues relating to the question of the meaning of life, each of which is addressed through an analysis of a popular movie. Although, as Kimberly Blessing and Paul Tudico suggest, readers might want to read the chapters in a different order, they are usefully organized into five sections, which are dedicated to: the search for truth and the search for meaning, issues of personal identity, the role of God in a person's life, the place of specific values in a meaningful life, and lastly, the contribution of morality to meaningfulness.

The many contributors to *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, twenty-one in total, offer a broad range of philosophical voices and succeed in exemplifying various types of philosophy. A noteworthy aspect of *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, and one that somewhat distinguishes it from other recent volumes dedicated to presenting philosophical themes through film, is that the contributors carefully approach the movies they discuss and make an effort correctly and richly to interpret them. In several instances, for example, in the chapters on *Contact*, *Fight Club*, *Memento*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, and *Minority Report*, the authors refer to both the movie and the preexisting novel of which the movie is an adaptation. In the essays that concern *Boys Don't Cry* and *Shadowlands* the contributors compare movies to documents concerning the real-life counterparts to the movie's characters. Some contributors refer to interviews with filmmakers, as in the chapters concerning *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, and *Kill Bill, Volumes 1 and 2*. In general, the authors pay great attention to giving references to the directors' filmographies.

When looking at philosophy in a film, or through a film, we can look at the film in a number of different ways. *Movies and the Meaning of Life* includes three such ways, with some variations. We may look at a movie as presenting a scenario that is considered to be especially apt to philosophical reflection, analogously to our use of thought experiments in

philosophy. The chapter on *The Truman Show*, used as an exemplification of Descartes's malignant demon hypothesis, and the chapters on *Being John Malkovich* and *Memento*, dedicated to questions of personal identity, are paradigmatic of such an approach. Any time a movie is used this way, the question naturally arises as to whether the movie offers us a superior, clearer and more fertile case study than the thought experiment most often employed in philosophical investigation. In this respect, the essays on *Being John Malkovich* and *Memento* are more successful than the essay on *The Truman Show*. Michael Baur, the author of the essay on *Memento*, persuasively shows the movie's protagonist to be in a situation that, however different in degree from our own, is not so different in kind. That our memories are as much a necessary as an unreliable source of personal identity is what makes *Memento* deeply troubling and hence capable of probing our intuitions in a novel way. Likewise, *Being John Malkovich* offers Walter Ott an opportunity to investigate the implications of the Cartesian view of selves in a way that would have otherwise required a long series of philosophical thought experiments. Consequently, the discussion of the incoherencies suggested by the movie, for instance, Malkovich going through the portal to his own identity, allows the reader to see them as representations, in *Being John Malkovich*, of the difficulties arising from the Cartesian view. In contrast, *The Truman Show*, discussed by Kimberly Blessing, is not as successful at probing our intuitions as the hypothesis of the *Meditations*. Descartes's malignant demon is just more powerful and hence more interesting than Christof, the creator of the television show in *The Truman Show*. Hence for instance, when Truman, the main character in *The Truman Show*, points out that its producers were never able to put their cameras into his head, which is a point Blessing recalls, he is not making a claim analogous to that made in Descartes's *cogito* argument, for Descartes had allowed the possibility that a malignant demon might be playing with his thoughts, even those that seem to be as clear and distinct as the truths of mathematics. Blessing enriches her discussion by broadening the scope to other philosophical questions, such as the value of real versus simulated experience such as is outlined in Robert Nozick's experience machine thought experiment. Yet, Blessing also points out the differences between the film and the experience machine thought experiment, and Nozick's thought experiment emerges as more powerfully probing our intuitions. The analogies that Blessing draws between *The Truman Show* and the philosophical hypotheses, Descartes's and Nozick's, turn out to be stretched. Perhaps, *The Truman Show* could have proved more suitable to address questions of the meaning of a life lived under the continuous supervision of an entity in many ways similar to a divine providence.

Would our lives be diminished if they were to be continuously framed so as to fit a pre-established plan?

Another use of film for philosophical reflection is that of looking at movies whose directors appear to have some philosophical theses to present, perhaps even to defend. Paradigmatically, such theses are expressed by the characters, but a movie can, as a whole, embody a philosophical view and be taken as offering such a view to our consideration. Several of the essays in *Movies and the Meaning of Life* look at film in this manner, and the list of the movies they analyze is long: *Waking Life*, *Fight Club*, *Boys Don't Cry*, *Shadowlands*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Kill Bill, Volumes 1 and 2*, *Pleasantville*, *Spiderman 1 and 2*, *Minority Report*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Groundhog Day*. Indeed, while often movies are looked at as raising interesting philosophical questions, the contributors to *Movies and the Meaning of Life* devote considerable energy to interpreting the movies they analyze, so as to also discuss the answers they offer.

The success of a movie that embodies an identifiable philosophical perspective significantly depends on how worthy of our consideration the philosophical perspective that is presented is. At the same time, the overall success of the movie also depends on how well such a philosophical perspective is integrated with the other filmic elements: its narrative, its characters, and its cinematic qualities. Moreover, any time we consider a movie for the philosophical perspective it embodies, we must wonder whether the film medium is the appropriate medium to convey a philosophical thesis, rather than a philosophy text, or a literary text. We should ask whether in the specific instance under consideration there is anything specific that the film medium contributes to the philosophical view and that other media could not contribute. The movies discussed in *Movies and the Meaning of Life* enjoy different success on these terms. Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is thoroughly interpreted by Mark Conrad, who draws attention to the movie's main metaphor, that of sight as understanding, and identifies the perspective of its filmmaker with that of its character Judah, a successful ophthalmologist who has his former mistress murdered. The thesis of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is identified as pessimistic: "we live in a godless universe which is devoid of meaning and value; and ... the best that we can hope for is to blind ourselves to, or deceive ourselves about, this ugly truth" (p. 123). Conrad's case for his interpretation of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is convincing, especially in its framing as ironic the apparently optimistic, if tragic, ending Allen also offers us.

Less successful is Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*, discussed by Kevin Stoher. The philosophical message of *Waking Life* is so evident that the

attention of the viewer focuses almost entirely on its quality and on how it is conveyed. Stoehr recounts the movie step by step and succeeds in constructing a coherent and unified account of *Waking Life* that has the merit of showing how explicitly the movie presents its philosophical theses. Yet, contrary to the intentions of Stoehr, who mostly approves of *Waking Life*, such an approach has the result of highlighting the pedantic and overly intellectual nature of *Waking Life*. *Waking Life* does not seem to add anything to the theses it draws from philosophy. Indeed, the theories inspiring the work, which range from existentialism to Hinduism to Jungian psychoanalysis, can be captivating, when gathered from their original sources. Such theories, however, sound too much like amateur philosophical thoughts once they take the vague and watered-down form by which they are presented in *Waking Life*. For instance, Stoher summarizes some of what he calls the “key lessons” of *Waking Life* as follows: we must take a “path of immersion” rather than “detachment,” we “must engage actively in life, with full enthusiasm and participation” (p. 33); we must live life “as a creative activity” of our own “self” and “world” (p. 37). The problem is that, once stated so vaguely, hardly anyone would disagree with such theses. By contrast, if such claims were to be made more specific than they are in *Waking Life*, they would then become much less plausible. In fact, when the claims are made more explicit by Stoehr, we might easily disagree with them. For instance, some of *Waking Life*’s passing characters, one of them lights himself on fire as a form of protest and another screams for having been put in jail, are explained thus: “we overcome negative attitudes such as resentment, indignation, and general life-denial,” which those characters exhibit (p. 36). In fact, it might be difficult to say anything about these two characters, since we lack sufficient contextual clues. Yet, in general, such attitudes as resentment and indignation may be considered negative in two different senses, and hardly as attitudes that should be suppressed at all times. While they are negative in the sense of being unpleasant to have, and of targeting something that is the object of negative evaluation, such attitudes might often not be negative to have. Justified resentment, at least for some time, toward a wrongdoing we suffered, or indignation toward such practices as torture or the death penalty, are the appropriate attitudes to have, and may even be dutiful on our part. Indeed, such attitudes, had at the right time and towards the right objects, contribute to make a basis on which we should assess the value of our own lives. Likewise, when, in Stoehr’s essay, in the midst of agreeable, or at least widely agreed-upon, values, such as freedom, individual choice, and self-creation, we encounter “the importance of the present moment, which involves a kind of cosmic consciousness or holistic awareness of the

interconnectedness and unity of all existence,” we wonder if the author is not just involuntarily proving that *Waking Life* is guilty of venturing into overly ambitious claims that it cannot substantiate (p. 41).

Another essay in *Movies and the Meaning of Life* that exemplifies the paradigm of looking at a movie for its philosophical theses is that in which Rebecca Hanrahan analyzes *Boys Don't Cry*, and which is dedicated to issues of personal identity, specifically, the question of “the source of our gender identity” (p. 78). A realist, a subjectivist, and a constructivist answer are briefly presented, and the answer that is presented in *Boys Don't Cry* interpreted as leaning toward the subjectivist and the constructivist answers, with Hanrahan defending a version of gender constructivism. Such a topic is interesting, and the chapter contributes to enriching *Movies and the Meaning of Life*. Yet, we might be puzzled by some of Hanrahan's arguments. For instance, she interprets *Boys Don't Cry* as suggesting, without endorsing, a version of gender constructivism that considers it “central to determining a person's gender” “that person's position with respect to the act of penetration” (p. 85). Yet as Hanrahan continues, we realize that the theory in gender *Boys Don't Cry* allegedly prompts discussion about is hardly worth considering. The proponents of such a view allegedly would claim that a single act of penetration, such as that experienced by the character Brandon when raped by the characters John and Tom, is sufficient in normal circumstances to determine a person's gender. In fact, Hanrahan's refutation of such a view turns out being far too simple: “Given John and Tom's position within this society and given the constructivist perspective at play here, through the rape they should have been able to reconstruct Brandon as a woman. But they don't. So, something must be wrong with the constructivist perspective” (p. 89). The proponents of any theory will have to accept that it takes more than an act of rape to change a person's gender. Even more puzzling is Hanrahan's conflation of the ontological question of gender identity with the ethical question of what we owe others. The above passage from Hanrahan is followed by her statement: “One thing morally wrong is that this particular brand of gender constructivism licenses rape” (p. 89). Up to this point, we might have legitimately thought that the various theories of gender under examination had to do with an ontological question. Yet, while a theory of ontology may certainly be ethically relevant, it does not as such license, or not license, human actions as morally permissible.

A further way in which a movie can be used for philosophical enlightenment is as a representation of positive or negative character traits. Several of the movies considered would qualify as instances of this sort, for the prominent role that characterization plays in them; *Crimes*

and *Misdemeanors* and *Shadowlands*, for example. However, the authors of the five essays of *Movies and the Meaning of Life* are especially interested in what, through movies, we can be told about ways of approaching life; they are dedicated to *Contact*, *Chasing Amy*, *American Beauty*, *Life is Beautiful*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Heather Keith and Steven Fesmire look at *Contact* as presenting through the film's protagonist a paradigmatic example of a scientifically minded person, who will seek answers concerning our place in the universe only by what she can empirically prove and rationally defend. Her attitude is contrasted with that of people who ground their beliefs in faith. At the same time, a scientific mind is shown to rely, in a sense, on faith as well, faith in experience, if tempered and supervised by a healthy skepticism.

The essays on *American Beauty* and on *Life is Beautiful* develop the theme of gratitude for life and life experiences as it emerges from the two movies. Anthony Sciglitano carefully analyzes *Life is Beautiful*, directing our attention to details that are relevant both cinematically and philosophically. Sciglitano contrasts the view of the protagonist, which is characterized by gratitude, generosity, vitality, and creativity, to the Nazi's view of life. He successfully shows how the Nazi view may, dangerously, become attractive. Yet he also succeeds in making a case for the protagonist's view of life as being the superior and preferable one, among other things because it is more "realistic" (p. 178). The protagonist's approach to life faithfully represents our finitude and our real potentials, while the Nazis' does not. Accordingly, the story can become relevant to our own lives, if sometimes in unexpected ways.

Jerry Walls is also careful to make sure that our reflections prompted by *Chasing Amy* are relevant to our own lives. He takes *Chasing Amy* to show difficulties that are suffered by different sorts of characters in our "post-modern, post-Christian" world, where morality is no longer grounded in God, and yet where remnants of Christian morality, especially sexual morality, survive (p. 149). Walls claims that morality and the meaning of life are best grounded in a belief in God's existence. It is unfortunate that not much is provided in the form of an argument for his claim. Indeed Walls's reasoning may even be question-begging, in that he assumes that the view that God exists is the only way to provide a foundation for morality: "If there is no God to whom we are accountable, morality certainly does not have the same sort of authority over us as it would with his existence" (p. 149). Walls's point is supposed to be made stronger by the description of the psychological problems experienced by some of the characters in the movie, who, though not religious, appear to feel the pressure of traditional Christian sexual morality. Yet, Walls's

reasoning is self-defeating, since we could easily argue that his analysis of *Chasing Amy* suggests that there might be something rather unhealthy, psychologically, in holding on to a morality, specifically sexual morality, that is grounded in religion.

We might ask why we should bother with the often unrealistic stories that movies are about, beyond the entertainment they offer us. One of the contributors to *Movies and the Meaning of Life*, Sciglitano, answers this question well: “One of the great capacities of cinema is its ability to show us the drama that underlies our apparently prosaic lives” (p. 181). Kimberly Blessing and Paul Tudico have assembled a set of essays that, covering a broad range of issues, will be helpful to whoever desires to approach philosophical questions through the fascinating world of film.

Alessandro Giovannelli  
Department of Philosophy  
Lafayette College  
Easton, PA, 18042  
USA