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What Film Is Good For: On the Value of Spectatorship, edited by Julian Hanich and Martin P. Rossouw. University of California Press, 2023, 413 pp.

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Roger Ebert famously referred to movies as "machines that generate empathy", arguing that cinema had the power to transport viewers into the lived realities and emotional experiences of people all across the world who are "sharing this journey with us". This is not an uncommon way of tackling the question of what film is good for. Yes, it offers up popcorn-chomping entertainment, high-octane action, heart-rending romance, and spine-tingling fear, but seeing movies as conduits for empathy implies something deeper than mere entertainment—in theory at least.

Julian Hanich and Martin P. Rossouw's collection, *What Film is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship* aims to complicate and add nuance to that story. In a series of contributions from a diverse range of scholars, *What Film is Good For* wades deep into the moral morass surrounding the culture-shaping art form of cinema. The essays in this volume interrogate the ethical and moral worth of film, a medium often relegated to mere entertainment. The collection engages with the multifaceted nature of film's value, steering clear of reductionist perspectives and monolithic answers, presenting instead a plurality of perspectives that illuminate the relationship between film and its spectators. Readers are presented with a wide-ranging investigation that asserts that the value of film is not singular but is as varied and complex as the medium itself. I won't hold off on expressing my appreciation for this work: if you are a lover of film, then this is an invaluable collection. And I mean this expansively, in the same spirit that Rossouw and Hanich approach ethics. The guiding ethos of the volume is that anyone who is engaging with cinema is necessarily engaging with ethics: Whether "the everyday filmgoer, the fan, the filmmaker, the critic", we are all entangled in film ethics at some level (2). Hanich and Rossouw have done an excellent job selecting works that expose and untangle many of the complexities that accompany this sort of inescapability of film ethics.

Rossouw and Hanich divided the book into sections that, while thematically distinct, resonate with the general claim: film is not just a mirror to our moral selves but also a moulder of our ethical worldviews. These seven semi-distinct sections offer a "prism-like" exploration of the pluralistic value of film through thirty-two chapters (8). The essays come from a diverse group of academics, critics, and filmmakers, each providing a unique perspective on the significance of film spectatorship. As the introduction makes clear, the anthology consciously avoids a monolithic theoretical approach to film ethics, favouring instead a "methodologically agnostic" and personal

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tone across its chapters, which vary in focus from mainstream cinema to experimental films and include formats like short films, streaming services, and television series (7). The volume's conceptualisation of film ethics is founded upon a broad interpretation of "the good", a term that is deceptively simple yet intrinsically bound to myriad values that extend beyond mere moralism. The introduction's discourse—grounded in the thoughts of theorists like Aristotle, Siegfried Kracauer, Stanley Cavell, and Thomas Elsaesser—illustrates the indelible link between the ontology of film and its ethical dimensions.

The first section, "Adaptive Goods", examines how film can articulate and facilitate our adaptation to global changes and crises, such as ecological disasters, migration, and the Covid-19 pandemic. This section highlights film's potential to be an invaluable resource in times of upheaval, advocating for the importance of accessible cinematic experiences. Jennifer Fay's chapter ". . . A Portal to Another World: On Cinema, Climate Change and A Good Apocalypse" [*sic*] is a powerful opening chapter for both this section and the book as a whole. Fay's argument situates film as a medium through which viewers can engage with and reflect upon their relationship with the environment, thereby establishing a foundational perspective that underscores the anthology's exploration of cinema's transformative potential. Fay suggests that apocalyptic narratives are not merely alarmist entertainment but critical thought experiments that prepare us for real-world crises. "How can [cinema] help us to see the current climate catastrophe", asks Fay, "without also catalysing pre-traumatic stress that prepares us for a certain future without the will to change it?" (19). Part of her answer comes through the cinema of Tsai Ming-Liang, a "master auteur for the Anthropocene" who uses the grammar of slow cinema to show a meditative depiction of "the postapocalyptic world of the present" (19–20). In films such as *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), Tsai's world can be crumbling and bleak, but it's a far cry from the nihilistic visions of the future found in standard postapocalyptic fair. Instead, Tsai encourages viewers to slow down and reflect on both what the world is and what the world can be, bidding us "to sleep, to pause, and to consider leaving behind all that was already unwelcoming" (22). Fay's chapter sets the stage for the rest of the book and opens a section that impresses upon the reader the capacity of film to shape our adaptability to global issues, a perspective that is both sobering and empowering.

"Empathic Goods", the second section, delves into cinema's ability to foster empathy, connection, and dialogue, while also considering the limitations and potential pitfalls of its empathetic reach—pushing against Ebert's film-as-empathy-machine argument. A standout in this section is Litheko Modisane's chapter ". . . Public Engagement, On Postcolonial African Cinema's Critical Value", which makes a compelling case that film harbours the potential to "catalyze public critical engagements" and "challenge dominant values through mobilization" (69). Modisane's chapter is infused with an activist strain that is profoundly stirring in an age so desperate for political change.

"Empathic Goods" is as challenging as it is empowering, however, especially when considering Malcolm Turvey's chapter on the limitations and liabilities of empathy. Turvey's chapter, perhaps more than any other in the collection, complicates the idea that cinema's empathic powers are, in fact, a good thing. Turvey makes the case that theorists presume without qualification the positive and desirable capacity for film to expand empathy. Pulling from psychologists like Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz, Turvey calls into question this "optimistic view" by arguing that empathy is often harmful and, ultimately, a poor foundation for ethical behaviours

(91). Empathy, defined here as observing someone's affective state and then feeling similarly to what they're feeling, has the potential to lead to egoistic decisions, distress, burnout, avoidance, moral licensing, irrational preferences, and/or motivation to help people for immoral reasons (93–98). Of course, Turvey doesn't just shoot down film's power for empathy without recourse; this volume is far too hopeful for that. Turvey argues that film can be a poignant vehicle for "considered empathy," where viewers "weigh whether we *should* empathize with [characters] given factors such as the effects of their actions on others, how morally justified these might be, and the context in which they occur" (99). Turvey's nuanced critique serves as a vital counterpoint to a dominant narrative on the value of film, illustrating the anthology's commitment to a balanced and comprehensive examination of film's impact. Through Turvey's analysis, the anthology fosters a dialogue that bridges emotional engagement with critical reflection, enhancing the reader's understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in cinematic empathy.

The third section, "Sensitive Goods", centres on how films can enhance and cultivate various forms of sensitivity, whether aesthetic, moral, or related to the discomfort provoked by certain cinematic experiences, showcasing film's power to both enlighten and disturb. This section has an excellent contribution from editor Julian Hanich in ". . . Striking Beauty: On Recuperating the Beautiful in Cinema". Hanich reminds us of the deeply aesthetic dimension of the film-going experience, opening with an observation that "while clearly a form of entertainment, a dream factory, a tool for moral or political interventions, the cinema also enables experiences of striking beauty" (162). This was a welcome reminder at this point in the anthology, and one that brought to mind the cult-favourite AMC ad where Nicole Kidman waxes poetic about how we are "reborn" in movie theatres, uttering the famous line, "somehow, heartbreak feels good in a place like this" (which I find both kitschy and unironically comforting). By invoking, among others, the rapturous cinematography in the films of Malick or Campion, the stunning animation of Miyazaki, the physical beauty of movie stars, as well as telling of an encounter with Kiarostami's *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003) that left him "speechless with its visual and acoustic splendor", Hanich effectively transports the reader into that aesthetic dimension of cinema that made so many of us fall in love with film in the first place. But the story isn't all just straightforward aesthetic richness, as Hanich is sure to point out. For instance, he brings out competing, pluralistic definitions of beauty and offers insights into a modern move away from—almost an academic embarrassment with—discussing the beauty of cinema. Ultimately, Hanich argues that the aesthetic power of film allows for "pleasurable *contemplation*" and an "existential *invitation* to inhabit its beautiful world", an invitation that, to be fully realised, must be both admitted to and practiced (164, 171).

Part Four, "Reviving Goods", reflects on film's edifying and transformative effects. This section includes Catherine Wheatley's moving musings on cinema's ability to renew our vision of the everyday world. It is a powerful assertion that cinema can make the familiar appear strange and new, prompting a revaluation of our surroundings and, by extension, our lives. "Reviving Goods" also includes a notable chapter from the collection's other editor, Martin P. Rossouw, as well as cross-chapter engagement from Robert Sinnerbrink's essay, which engages directly with Rossouw's metatheoretical critique of film-philosophy.

The section on "Communal Goods" argues for film's role in building and reinforcing communities, addressing how cinema can unite people around broad social causes or specific shared interests, from widespread activism to niche fan communities. Dudley Andrew's ". . . Love

of Community and Reality: On André Bazin and the Good of Cinema" expands the conversation to include film's communal and cultural dimensions. Andrew's reflections on André Bazin's philosophy extend the dialogue beyond the individual, situating cinema within broader social and cultural contexts. This chapter builds upon earlier discussions in the book by illustrating how film not only shapes individual perspectives but also fosters a collective sense of identity and reality.

The final section, "Unsettled Goods", confronts the more ambiguous or challenging aspects of film's value, questioning and probing into how film may disturb, unsettle, or even appear valueless. In the final chapter, filmmaker Mark Cousins takes us on an autoethnographic journey fifteen years in the making as he confronts the question of whether cinema has made any difference in the world. This works well to end the collection because it acts as a synecdoche for the book as a whole: it is a wandering, pondering, exploration from an erudite filmmaker that draws from film history, philosophy, literature, memoir, and more. Cousins caps the book off by reflecting on cinema's complicated relationship to personal and national identity, race, masculinity, sex, war, and loneliness. This multifaceted portrayal of humanity is representative of the anthology's breadth. Yet, with a total of thirty-two chapters, a stirring introduction by the editors, and a reflective afterword by Radu Jude, a single review cannot do this collection justice. Although I have highlighted some notable chapters, it's important to acknowledge that many others within this anthology also merit attention and discussion.

The anthology's embrace of diversity is not just thematic but also methodological, featuring essays that range in tone from the academically rigorous to the personally reflective, thus fostering a dialogue that extends beyond the borders of conventional film theory or film-philosophy. The anthology not only responds to but also anticipates shifts in the cinematic landscape and its reception, proposing forward-looking insights into the evolving relationships between film, viewers, and society—all while being remarkably readable. One of the most commendable aspects of *What Film is Good For* is its accessibility. While grounded in scholarly inquiry, the anthology remains engaging and approachable for general readers, academics, and cinephiles alike. It invites readers to reflect on their own filmic experiences and the latent ethical dimensions therein. This is not a book that dictates; it dialogues with its audience, encouraging introspection and debate. Moreover, the anthology's global perspective—from discussions of the Iranian New Wave to Japanese activist films and the digital streaming economy—ensures that its analysis of "goods" is not limited to Western cinematic traditions. This inclusivity enriches the conversation, highlighting the universal relevance of film ethics while acknowledging cultural specificities. In addressing the sheer plenitude of goods that film can represent, the anthology encapsulates Aristotle's vision of ethical abundance in the world—a world where good is not static but ever-emerging and evolving. It envisions a cinematic landscape where new values are constantly being discovered and defined, shaped by changing contexts and unforeseen situations. The anthology thus situates itself as a living document that captures the dynamic interplay between film and value, offering an expansive take on what it means to engage with film ethics today.

Part of the appeal of *What Film is Good For: On the Values of Spectatorship* comes from a sense of hope threaded throughout the book. It is written by and for people who take cinema seriously, and it is rousing to read such varied and thought-provoking chapters on the value of film, all of which ultimately affirm the meaningfulness of this beloved medium. Rossouw and Hanich emphasise this in the closing paragraph of their introduction, writing, "[i]n a time of global

crisis, strife, and suspicion, this collection of essays aims to sound a more upbeat tone: that watching movies can be profoundly valuable in a rich variety of ways" (9). Insofar as this was their aim, Rossouw, Hanich, and their contributors have hit a direct bullseye, their collection a testament to the power of film to inspire, challenge, and transform. This work has left me with a renewed appreciation for the films that have touched my life and a keen anticipation for those yet to come—a true treasure for an academic anthology to prove so stirring.

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