Cinema studies and philosophy are two fields that naturally overlap in discussion, but rarely does scholarly work combine them with the explicit aim of giving equal weight to both. Damien Cox and Michael P. Levine’s new book do just this, with the effusiveness that comes from being passionate moviegoers, and the rigour provided by professionally-trained philosophers.

Divided into four parts, *Thinking Through Film* tackles several philosophical issues through the medium of film. It begins with an introductory section in Part One, and then moves swiftly through Epistemology and Metaphysics in Part Two, The Human Condition in Part Three, and Ethics and Values in Part Four. There are four chapters within each main part; each takes a film as a ‘case study’ of sorts, delving into the issue in question. The hard structure—one film and one topic per chapter—bounds the potentially enormous topics and focuses the chapters so the filmic text is the springboard for philosophical discussion.

Cox and Levine note in the Preface that the book is ‘about both philosophy of film and philosophy through film’ (viii). That the dynamism of movies naturally lends themselves to philosophical analysis is a point that is repeated. The fascination engendered by films, as well as their ‘popular, accessible, ubiquitous, and emotionally engaging’ nature (p.4), is strongly contrasted with ‘philosophical writing, which is often as dry as a desert’ (p.6). This generalisation (repeated throughout the book in subtle ways) unfortunately does no favours to philosophy, and one can be forgiven for thinking that Cox and Levine are apologizing for the boredom of philosophy, making a case, instead, to cerebral film buffs that philosophy really can be cool.

The authors do, however, bring to the light some often unspoken intellectual problems. For instance, they state that ‘underlying some conservative views on whether or not film can do philosophy lies a precious, overly-fastidious, and territorial notion of what philosophy is’ (p.11). Likewise, they write that ‘film can present a kind of nuance and perspective that is not often found in professional philosophy’ (p.11). Such statements, while risky to make, are perhaps also a breath of fresh air; kudos to Cox and Levine for revealing philosophy’s preciousness.

The monograph is enormously informative in ways that are intellectually overdue. Such a range of topics and movies is difficult to summarise in review, so I will present a few standout examples. Philosophically deconstructing ontology in The Matrix in chapter four, for instance, and personal identity in Memento in chapter eight, separates this scholarly work from other pseudo-intellectual works that scratch the surface of philosophical considerations but never quite reach the core. My favourite chapter (and film discussed) is chapter seven: ‘Fate and Choice: Minority Report’. Here, Cox and Levine are at their best, and they discuss the movie with considerable gusto, striking a balance between academic jargon and informal language. Further, they bring to the fore an idea I had not earlier considered during my own viewing of the film. After a discussion on seeing into the future, and loops created by ‘rewriting’ the future, they note that the ‘PreCogs ought to see—not a murder – but an arrest’ (p.119), because they...
‘do not see the future’, they ‘see a possible future’ (p.120). Indeed, if John Anderton stops crime in its tracks, crime does not occur – the arrests do. Cinematically this more accurate alternative would not be as gripping, however, this gem the authors offer – which may be obvious to some – impressed me with its lucidity.

However, there are times when Cox and Levine make bold statements that, in my opinion, cross the line into unnecessary judgment, and detract from a monograph that is otherwise encouraging of readers. For example, deciding that ‘philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Hume, Rawls, Dummett’ are not ‘real page-turners’ (p.11) takes authorial informality too far, and assumes that professional philosophers who enjoy these thinkers do not belong among the popular, mass readership of the book. It would have been in the authors’ interest, perhaps, to welcome professional philosophers into the fold in the introductory section by talking philosophy up, exposing its fascinating history, and then noting how cinematic technology now allows another medium to portray epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical ideas. The book is also dotted with condescending lines to the reader. For example, in chapter five, on the film AI and the philosophy of artificial intelligence, they write in brackets ‘(Actually, this last one’s a reply to a reply to a reply. Don’t panic. You won’t find it too hard to follow.)’ (p.86), and then again in chapter six, ‘Remember our topic is time travel (you might have forgotten)’ (p.101). This reader found such lines grating, bringing the level of thought down from the heights at which they achieved real insight into cinematic narratives.

Thinking Through Film both lightens the mood of philosophy and strengthens the resolve of film theory, finding a comfortable space within which to explore the mutual interests of both, for the benefits of both fields. It is by no means an easy task, but Cox and Levine have achieved the rare and commendable distinction of combining popularism with specialisation, discovering a common language through which both fields can speak to the intellectual moviegoer. Of interest to both film fans and philosophers, I highly recommend doing philosophy and watching movies with Cox and Levine.

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