Film and Morality
For Roz, as ever
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The aims of this book are to examine how film-makers treat morality and how this might contribute to our moral education. Rather than seeking a prescription for being moral, my objectives are threefold. The first is to encourage readers to view a film as a sequence of moral dilemmas which characters and audiences are invited to resolve. Interest often lies in the clash of perspectives. The second objective is to examine how we are led towards a predetermined moral position, whether the film be standard Hollywood fare or from a moralist such as Rohmer. Thirdly, I suggest that exploring morality provides a way of maintaining an interdisciplinary perspective on film studies.

The organisation of this book deserves comment. To structure it around genres seems restrictive. As Michael Dempsey puts it, “‘Genre’, like ‘stock company’, can be another cell in the same prison.” ¹ The introduction considers the place of morality in the arts. The first chapter examines the relationship between film and morality with particular reference to censorship. People experience moral conflicts within social contexts, so ensuing chapters focus on five such settings: the family, war, crime, law and work. Inevitably there are overlaps, with films about the family touching on work, while committing a crime is one way to make contact with the law. The arbitrary distinction I have used is to accept a film’s primary emphasis, so that if the greater part is devoted to a murder, it is treated as a crime film, even if the murder is provoked by marital jealousy. Films may venture into imaginary worlds which offer a singular perspective on moral issues. Here the term genre is hard to avoid when moral concerns are clothed within the trappings of a musical or a horror film. The western is included as a representative genre and one of the most popular in the history of the cinema, despite having lost ground of late. Wider issues of freedom and political action do not fit easily into any genre or social setting and are accorded a separate chapter. The concluding chapter touches on the continuing moral outrage prompted by films and examines the relationship of free will and morality through the insights which neurobiology provides.
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INTRODUCTION

How to be Moral

How to lead a moral life has tantalised humanity since the days of the ancient Greeks. That we are still asking the question attests to its intransigence. One age-old solution is to seek an answer in religion. However reluctantly, atheists are likely to look in the same direction for want of alternative sources of moral authority, attesting to the pervasiveness of the Abrahamic tradition over more than two millennia. Go no further into the Bible than Genesis and the story of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac raises tricky moral issues. Can a seemingly immoral act be justified if it is God’s command and can it be questioned on moral grounds? The writers of Genesis resolved Abraham’s dilemma with what might be the first use of that well-worn literary device the last-minute intervention. It is axiomatic that religion provides moral guidance, but what of those who cannot live up to its precepts? And if different religious traditions offer competing visions of morality on such issues as homosexuality and polygamy, how should they be judged when all cite God as their authority? These issues can seem abstruse, but they gain urgency when religions come into conflict.

In philosophical terms, a religious code offers an example of deontology, laying down rules to which believers are expected to adhere. When the rules were called into question by Reformation figures such as Martin Luther and Galileo, the consequence was confrontation or compromise, though religions have a habit of adapting in order to retain their relevance for adherents as society changes.

An alternative philosophical approach to a rule-based system is consequentialism in which a moral action is judged by its consequences. In its modern form this emerged from the Enlightenment, the most well-known manifestation being Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism with its guiding principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. Such an approach appeals to successful politicians, for whom the ballot box validates their ability to gauge public opinion, and to businessmen who can cite healthy profits as evidence that they are giving consumers what they want. Utilitarianism is not without its dangers. Satisfying the greatest number may dwindle into pandering to the masses and giving short shrift
to the losers, while illegal or unethical activities might be condoned in the quest for the greater good as Watergate illustrates. Personal morality can get squeezed out, the irony being that non-conformists such as Bentham were prominent social reformers. Bentham was instrumental in founding University College London, where non-conformist students could study at a time when Oxford and Cambridge were barred to them.

With its focus on the virtuous character, virtue ethics has found favour with philosophers as an alternative to deontology and consequentialism. Though this is often seen as a recent development, it can be argued that figures such as Homer and the Mahabharata serve as role models for the virtuous life, marking a shift from the rule-based systems exemplified by the Old Testament. Richard Holloway is a former Bishop of Edinburgh who advocates a virtue based approach as a way of escaping from institutional religion: “The main characteristic of our new, lightweight moral tradition will be the principle of consent. Just as obedience to the commands of authority, whether God, state, or any other centre of power, was the dominant characteristic of ancient traditions, so, today, is the consent of our reason and emotion.” Holloway sees society as moving from a morality based on rules to one based on values, though the issues he examines such as abortion and the use of drugs are cases where rules are already under pressure. Turn to robbery or murder and there is likely to be agreement among philosophers of all hues that such acts are unacceptable, though there is scope for disagreement over the treatment of the offender. The French ban on the face veil for Muslim women presents a conundrum for virtue ethicists. Does it represent freedom or oppression, and does such a ban mark a resort to a rule-based system under the utilitarian guise of being what voters want? Another reservation is that Holloway’s ideas have limited applicability beyond the confines of westernised societies. Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph distinguish between western relationships based on contract and traditional cultures where the social order is also a sacred order. These contrasting paradigms lead to notions of morality which are hard to reconcile, though they are not necessarily applicable across all spheres, the casual affair being the antithesis of a contractual relationship, yet being more acceptable in the West.

Virtue ethics has rehabilitated the term ethics, which is considered as having a wider application than morality. This can create confusion given that the term is also applied to codified professional standards. It will be used throughout this work in the latter, more restricted sense. Morality and professional ethics may conflict, an obvious example being the barrister who defends someone whom he suspects of being guilty. Ethically he is
bound to do his best for his client, even though morally he may prefer not
to take on the case. Conflicts between morality and ethics provide fertile
dramatic ground as exemplified by *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, US,
1993).

Philosophy concerns itself with how morality is defined rather than its
substance. A. J. Ayer is firm on this point:

> The propositions which describe the phenomena of moral experience, and
> their causes, must be assigned to the science of psychology or sociology.
> The exhortations to moral virtue are not propositions at all, but ejaculations
> or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to action of a
certain sort. Accordingly, they do not belong to any branch of philosophy
> or science.6

Anyone seeking to live a moral life will derive scant help from philosophy
as Ayer defines it, which remains theoretical and resolutely neutral. Nor
can philosophy show how moral values are derived or how they operate,
these issues coming within the purview of other disciplines. Morality
guides our response to other people, or as Haidt and Joseph put it,
“Morality is about helping and hurting people.”7 This emphasises the
importance of the social context, for morals mean little to somebody living
alone on a desert island. Susan Wolf introduces a social dimension in her
paper “Morality and the View from Here”, but she shies from the
implication that morality cannot be treated as an abstraction in the way
that philosophers are wont to do.8 James Wilson adopts an anthropological
perspective, seeing moral limits as a way of maintaining the community.
Young people test the limits of acceptability and function as a
destabilising force.9 This implies a constant state of tension between
tradition and each succeeding generation, which is a process rather than a
problem. Wilson neglects to mention that artists can assume a destabilising
role, as the careers of Picasso, Stravinsky and Salman Rushdie
demonstrate. In traditional communities, family and tribal pressures
provide a check on behaviour, as do such authority figures as priests and
elders. In the urbanised West, where the extended family structure is often
fragmented and authority figures may be absent, social controls are
weaker. This means a greater reliance on legal sanctions to control
behaviour and a correspondingly greater role for the legal professions.

**Art and Morality**

What does art do for us? One answer is that it can serve as an exemplar of
how we should live. Visitors to a church in pre-Reformation days could
not fail to miss the graphic depictions of what awaited them in the next life if they did not mend their ways. In Agatha Christie’s books, the villain gets found out, demonstrating that we cannot evade justice. This is art with a moral purpose. In today’s world that purpose is less clear, particularly when values are compartmentalised, so that the fervent anti-abortion campaigner need have no strong views about animal rights or global warming. Moral codes are linked to competing religious, political, ecological and economic beliefs which are proclaimed with increasing stridency. This can present difficulties for those working in the arts and media, who welcome publicity and seek to be innovative, but wish to avoid causing offence to potential customers and have to be mindful of laws designed to protect the rights of minorities. These problems are exemplified by the case of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s play Behzti (Dishonour), which was cancelled by Birmingham Playhouse in 2004 after protests from the Sikh community and death threats against the author.10

One business strategy is to target a particular audience. There is little crossover between readers of tabloid and serious newspapers, so that the two publications can promote distinct and potentially contradictory agendas even though the same media organisation publishes both titles. This provides an example of even-handedness or opportunism rather than a consistent moral approach. Such practices have become common in the age of the conglomerate, when a convenience food manufacturer can market health foods with no ethical qualms. It is a far cry from the days when the Methodist lay preacher J. Arthur Rank exercised benign moral leadership over his cinematic empire.

Film and television have usurped many of the functions of religious art for secular Western societies, offering audiences stories which raise moral issues. This is something which film-makers play down given that audiences go to the cinema primarily to be entertained, while the term morality has religious connotations which can prove problematic at the box office. Overtly religious subjects are avoided, an exception being Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ (US, 2004), which garnered mixed reviews.

Plato grappled with the purpose of art in society, concluding in The Republic that once people’s material needs were satisfied, the presence of artists showed that society was in a healthy state. Using this as a starting point, Tom Sorrell discerns the Platonic ideal in eighteenth-century paintings which implanted the notion of the public good, even if this was an exclusive and privileged public. He sees art as enabling us to enlarge the circle of people with whom we empathise and the range of situations into which we project ourselves. This helps us to live with national trauma
such as McCarthyism and social change, including the acquisitiveness of the 1990s. Sorrell also perceives potential dangers, for art can make us feel cynical about good and less disturbed about evil if we succumb to the charm of the criminal.\footnote{11} This can be seen in the appeal of fictional characters such as George MacDonald Fraser’s Flashman and Patricia Highsmith’s Tom Ripley. It is also apparent in the mythologising of criminals from Robin Hood to Al Capone, a process in which the cinema connives. 

Clive Cazeaux looks to Nietzsche, who rejected the deontological notion of morality as a choice of absolutes, including religious imperatives, preferring to see it as a fluid process of moving between two poles characterised by Apollo (structured) and Dionysus (passionate and celebratory). The measured Apollonian approach strives for moral objectivism, while Dionysus lives for the moment. Cazeaux suggests that in a world without absolutes we strive for order and as Nietzsche sees no objective order in reality, art becomes a means of achieving order out of chaos\footnote{12} One reservation is that Nietzsche’s ideas grew out of German romanticism, which must have seemed like chaos to those schooled in the classical ideals of the eighteenth century. Schumann explored a similar polarity to Nietzsche, using the characters of Florestan (the man of action) and Eusebius (the dreamer) in his music.

Art and morality have long been intertwined, but need all art have a moral dimension? For Iris Murdoch, art for art’s sake is intolerable: “These arts, especially literature and painting, show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition.”\footnote{13} In this she echoes F. R. Leavis, whose views on literature held sway in Britain during the 1960s. Leavis categorised authors by their moral worth with D. H. Lawrence among the worthies, while Dickens and Joyce were castigated for their lack of moral seriousness.\footnote{14} The Leavisite view has lost ground in a postmodern age. Move away from narrative or representational art and discerning a moral becomes increasingly difficult, which may be one reason why atonal music and non-representational paintings have sometimes struggled to find a public. Age is a determinant, with younger age groups being more accepting of abstraction. It could be argued that the young are more open to simplicity and change; an alternative interpretation is that they are less attuned to the subtleties within traditional forms.

Matthew Kieran comes from a later generation of philosophers than Murdoch and takes a more relaxed view:

Everybody, naturally, is well motivated to think that art refines and civilizes. With respect to art works, exposure to a particular work in and of itself won’t degrade. Though we might be worried about it because it does
Kieran puts the onus on the consumer of art to make moral decisions rather than its creator, who presumably has the freedom to transgress moral norms. By this model, art can disturb, but we as the audience choose whether to seek similar experiences elsewhere. This is not a new approach. A declaration from a youthful G. H. Mead a century earlier makes a similar point, though Mead goes further in seeing the work as morally neutral, with morality or immorality being in the eye of the beholder: “Moreover, we always find that art is never a positive force, but receives its light and character from the one who studies it. The same poem pleases, with its imagery, the pure and the impure. The same model thrills the moral and the corrupt, and receives any distinctive hue or a distinguishing mark from the observer.” Nietzsche and Mead were forerunners of relativism, which displaced the Leavisite tradition by the 1980s.

At first sight, George Orwell seems to take a similar position to Murdoch in his response to Salvador Dali’s autobiography. He shows no liking for the work: “If it were possible for a book to give a physical stink off its pages, this one would.” Where he differs from Murdoch is in separating the moral from the aesthetic in the cause of artistic integrity. In the process, Times leader writers who denigrated the book are given short shrift: “Such people are not only unable to admit that what is morally degraded can be aesthetically right, but their real demand of every artist is that he shall pat them on the back and tell them that thought is unnecessary.” Orwell also recognises the danger of not knowing how to respond: “People are too frightened either of seeming to be shocked or of seeming not to be shocked, to be able to define the relationship between art and morals.” This hints at the social pressures involved in artistic taste, which may skew responses to art. It takes courage to take a stand against a fashionable and profitable artistic movement such as the Young British Artists of the 1990s, even if that position is vindicated by time.

How should the morality or immorality of art be judged? James Harold offers five criteria:

(i) The art may come into existence through immoral processes such as painting goldfish, thereby killing them.
(ii) It may be produced out of spite and with the desire to harm or humiliate. Harold cites William Styron’s 1967 short story “The Confessions of Nat Turner”, which is intent on portraying Negroes as weak and mentally unstable.
(iii) The moral character of the author.
(iv) The effect on the audience. Harold notes Martha Nussbaum’s praise for the moral purpose of Charles Dickens and James Joyce.
(v) The moral response the work prescribes or presupposes on the part of the audience. This may differ from (iv) because the work is flawed, or it has attracted the wrong audience.20

Several criticisms are possible:

(i) Harold adopts a scattergun approach, not quite settling on the creator or the recipient of art as the validator of morality. Mike Harris Stone is more analytical, seeking morality in four areas: the making of the work, the art itself, the performance (in the case of music and drama) and its reception.21
(ii) The criteria may conflict. The reason for killing goldfish may be to demonstrate the decadence of the acquisitive society, so that an immoral act in Harold’s terms has a moral purpose. Another example is the furore which erupted when Edward Bond’s play Saved premiered at the London’s Royal Court Theatre in 1965. Should simulating the stoning a baby be condemned as morally reprehensible even if the play offers an insight into the motives of the youths wielding the stones?22
(iii) The personal morality of artists including Bernini, Gesualdo, Eric Gill and Wagner is open to criticism, even if their work elicits a moral response, but is the private life relevant, particularly when the artist is long dead?
(iv) Identifying the moral effect of art can be difficult. The work of Philip Roth, Francis Bacon and Pedro Almodóvar is too close for objectivity. Judging the effect may be easier with a work from the past or from another culture, though this presents other problems which are touched on below.
(v) The effect on audiences should be independent of the artist’s moral purpose to avoid the danger of dwindling into tautology.
(vi) Different factions may take opposing views on a work. One example has already become apparent: while Leavis decried the work of Dickens and Joyce, Nussbaum praises them.

Harold is not dogmatic: he appreciates the moral ambiguity of Nabokov’s Lolita which offers a sympathetic portrait of a paedophile. Nor should qualms about Harold’s analysis invalidate his conclusion: “Artworks have the power to encourage us to think about morality in terms that are not black and white, and works that do this deserve the greatest moral praise.”23

Though distance can lend objectivity, a stumbling block in appreciating moral messages in art is that they can be culturally specific. Redemption means little in a secular society, which affects our perception of religious art. We can appreciate the works of Bach or Bernini, but it means something different to us than it did to their contemporaries. Cultural
specifi city also means that the literary merit of some best-selling authors is not sufficient to keep them in the public eye. One reason why Marie Corelli, Warwick Deeping, Joan Butler and John Creasey have declined in popularity is that they espoused values which have proved ephemeral. Similarly, those mainstays of Victorian narrative painting, the pauper and the fallen woman, have lost their impact, meaning that the work of artists such as Luke Fildes, Frank Holl and Augustus Egg can appear sentimental. The same might be said of John Baxter’s social comment films Dosshouse (GB, 1933) and The Common Touch (GB, 1941) now that dosshouses have been transformed into hotels. A generation after Baxter, the imperative that a couple should marry when the girl becomes pregnant was central to A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger, GB, 1962) in a way which is less credible half a century later. Whatever the aesthetic or historical value of these works, as moral fables they are outmoded.

Whether or not art can change society, societal change is revealed in art. Those graphic portrayals of hell in religious art were displaced by a shift to portraiture later in the Renaissance. Such cultural change can be difficult to date with any precision, meaning that a marker of change is needed. Landmark legal cases may not sway public opinion, but they can signal a defeat for established values, while expanding the boundaries of what is permissible, giving publicity to the new and allowing fresh ideas to take hold. In 1960, Penguin Books were charged under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act for distributing D. H. Lawrence’s novel Lady Chatterley’s Lover. Penguin were the victors, opening the floodgates to the books and films which characterised the permissive attitudes of the 1960s and put deontological values under strain. The 1878 libel case of Whistler v. Ruskin did not have such obvious consequences, but it illuminates how attitudes to art and morality were changing. What mattered to aesthetes such as Whistler and Oscar Wilde was beauty above all. Art had no moral agenda and the morality of the artist was irrelevant. The corollary was that the artist worked in a rarefied sphere, detached from society. This put the elitist Whistler in opposition to John Ruskin, who promoted the view that art should further the good of society and who claimed that Whistler’s Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket was “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face”. Whistler sued Ruskin and won a Pyrrhic victory with damages of a farthing, but not being awarded costs led to his bankruptcy. Culturally, the old guard represented by Ruskin lost its dominant position, while the Victorian notion of art as an instrument of moral advancement was thrown into doubt. Art nouveau and the impressionists were to displace this notion further, though Wilde’s fate showed the limits of aestheticism. An artist can only go so far in
transgressing moral norms before society calls a halt.

Cross-cultural comparisons may lack the defining moment which a trial provides, but they are equally revealing about disparities of viewpoint. Human remains and artefacts collected in colonial days are being returned as indigenous races find a political voice and sensitivity to their traditions increases among the former colonisers. Irene Winter cites a more subtle example of cultural difference: “Where Indian aesthetic theory departs significantly from Western theory is in the insistence that judgment and openness to experience is itself based upon prior experience and learned discernment, hence that one cannot hope for a raw sensory response unmediated by preparation and a priori concepts.”26 This would seem to rule out spontaneity, that touchstone for much art appreciation in the West. Artefacts coming from another culture may leave us baffled or alienated. As outsiders we misread their cultural and moral significance. Parochialism is easy; an empathic understanding requires more effort, but has more to yield.

A particular form of cultural specificity occurs when insiders interpret a moral message differently from other people. Jerrold Levinson cites rap as a form which has a special meaning for insiders.27 It is possible to appreciate his point while wanting to take it further. We are all insiders in some situations and outsiders in others, whether we be fans of a football club, members of a church or speakers of a language. Moral messages are always open to misinterpretation. Insiders may distort the message or turn it into dogma in their zeal, while outsiders may fail to comprehend its significance. Despite this proviso, Levinson’s conclusion remains valid: “The artist apparently oblivious to likely misreading is just a bad, or sloppy, artist.”28

Distinguished work may avoid an obvious moral, but this does not preclude moral content. Peter Lamarque argues that it is possible to engage imaginatively with human concerns without offering solutions. His example, drawn from Wilson Knight’s analysis of Shakespeare, is King Lear.29 The same might be said of Hamlet or the heroines of Henry James. Issues such as the inevitability of ceding power to the next generation and putting dynastic power above personal wishes are difficult to articulate, which is a reason for exploring them in art. The artist needs the skill to communicate a vision which speaks to large numbers of people.

The moral value of art can be denigrated because the message is simplistic. Typical of this is Jerome Stolnitz’s conclusion: “Artistic truths are preponentantly distinctly banal. Compared to science, above all, but also to history, religion and garden-variety knowing, artistic truth is a sport, stunted, hardly to be compared.”30 This ignores the distinction
between the artwork and its reception. As Noël Carroll puts it, *Crime and Punishment* does not teach morality, but relies on morally educated readers.31 By this view, Dostoevsky’s novel confirms and deepens the reader’s sense of morality, though an alternative interpretation is that it preaches to the converted, thereby sustaining elitism. What the morally uneducated reader might gain from a reading is something which Carroll does not pursue, though such a person would be less inclined to pick up the book in the first place. Another response to Stolnitz is that moral messages which stay in the mind do have apparent simplicity, the Ten Commandments being the supreme example. This has not prevented them from providing the basis for moral and legal codes over the centuries, but a simple moral precept is of limited value if we hypothesise more complex situations. If Peter steals from Paul, does that give Paul the right to break into Peter’s house to take his own goods back? If Peter stole to pay for a life-saving operation for his injured son, does that mitigate his action? And what if Paul’s drunken driving caused the injury? These dilemmas can be rehearsed in art. As James Young concludes, science is suited to law-like regularities, but art enhances our ability to make judgements where general laws are nonexistent or elusive such as decisions involving relationships and emotions, where we rely on inference.32 Different art forms have varying strengths in this respect. Dramas enacted on stage or elaborated in print have the space for morally complex characters to be developed, while narrative painting, tinted silent films and classical ballet rely on signifiers which viewers are expected to recognise, e.g. the nobleman who holds a bow and arrow in his portrait to demonstrate power, or the red tint of the film signifying that the heroine is in danger from fire. Recalling Carroll’s morally educated readers, the message is there, but an audience has to be attuned to the nuances of meaning to make sense of it. The same principle applies to classical music, which is notable for its abstraction unless it is associated with words (opera and lieder) or visual cues (ballet and film). The tone poems of Sibelius or Richard Strauss are programmatic, but when Tchaikovsky could add a programme to a symphony after its completion to increase public acceptability, the value of a programme becomes questionable. Berys Gaut argues that even a non-programmatic piece such as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony can convey something, albeit nonspecific: “It may be an attitude towards life in general, the rather indeterminate object being supplied by the viewer or listener’s imagination under the work’s guidance.”33 These qualities have been exploited in film, notable examples being Prokofiev’s score for *Alexander Nevsky* (Sergei Eisenstein, USSR, 1938) and Bernard Hermann’s contribution to *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, US, 1958). What music
conveys in these cases is a mood or emotion which colours how the viewer interprets events on screen. Substitute something jaunty and a more cynical view might be taken of the proceedings. This is a case of what Lamarque terms engaging imaginatively with a work which does not offer solutions. Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (US, 1940) is that rarity, a film in which the visual images are intended to enhance appreciation of the music.

Archetypes derive from Greek drama and represent an ideal type of behaviour which need not involve a moral dimension, the archetypal businessman being judged by his success in producing a profit and the soldier by his performance on the battlefield. By contrast, the archetypal heroines of Puccini, Ibsen and Strindberg cannot be defined by their work and are more likely to be judged from a moral standpoint. Archetypes provide a means of bringing social roles and attitudes to life, but risk dwindling into stereotypes. Distinguishing the two can be difficult, but the stereotype could be said to fall back on the generic without allowing for individuality or change. Boris Johnson has characterised it as the consequence of a lack of curiosity about people. Harold cites the example of E. M. Forster, who admitted to writing flat incidental characters who do not change and can be summed up in a single sentence. They are distinct from the central characters, who display complex inner lives and have the power to surprise the reader. If characters cannot learn and evolve intellectually, emotionally or morally, then the audience can gain nothing from them.

David Frampton writes about film, but his comments about the nature of the message and its reception have general applicability. He offers three theories of reception, though throughout this book, I shall employ the neutral term *model* for ideas which are judged by their usefulness rather than their validity.

(i) The pretend model relies on the work generating make-believe emotions in the audience such as fear on seeing a horror film. The make-believe quality of art is why Plato denigrated it.

(ii) The counterpoint model of emotional response relies on the fact that we have prior knowledge of the emotions or situations represented. This allows us to empathise: a case of emotion recollected in tranquillity. The prerequisite is Carroll’s morally educated audience.

(iii) The thought model advocated by Murray Smith and Noel Carroll proposes that an audience can be moved without accepting the literal truth of what is being presented: a case of the willing suspension of belief. This implies an intellectual sleight of hand in accepting the absence of reality in an artwork, while appreciating its moral significance or aesthetic qualities. Richard Holloway approaches the Bible in this spirit.
The pretend model puts the work on a par with the fable or fairy tale, which implies imaginative effort and connivance on the part of the audience. The moral can linger in the folk memory as in the case of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories of the ugly duckling and the emperor’s new clothes. Because children appreciate the moral, this does not necessarily make it simplistic: adults and children may draw different parallels or employ different models in interpreting it. If the emotions or situations in the counterpoint model have already been experienced, then the learning should already have been done. What is gained from reliving them may be catharsis—a letting go of an unpleasant memory—a deepened understanding or a new perspective. This raises the question of what happens if the artist’s interpretation seems wrong or unconvincing, as when a character’s sudden change of heart is attributed to witchcraft. This could cause emotional dissonance for the audience rather than catharsis, while the value of revisiting old memories is negated if they serve to reinforce existing fears or prejudices rather than prompting a re-evaluation. The thought model is more sophisticated in accepting the artificiality of art while acknowledging the insights which can be gained from it. The quality of the art object is not reliant on how well it simulates reality. A corollary is that the willing suspension of belief or disbelief can apply to the producers of art: agnostics including Brahms, Janáček and Vaughan Williams produced distinguished religious music and distinguished agnostics have performed it.

Artist and audience may never meet, yet they are linked by the artwork in a strange, symbiotic relationship. Fault lines can open between representational and non-representational art, with the latter receiving less attention in terms of its moral message. The creator may not offer a moral, but this does not stop audiences from imposing one, with Tchaikovsky’s premature death leading to his final symphony being considered as autobiographical. Alternatively, members of an audience may apply the counterpoint model by reaching back into their own histories and the circumstances in which a work was previously encountered, e.g. the film seen on a first date, or the concert attended on 9/11. This implies that each person will have a unique response to art. What can get in the way is approaching it from the straitjacket of theory, which prescribes a particular approach.

Morality and Aesthetics

A question already touched on in relation to Ruskin and Orwell is whether morality can be disentangled from artistic quality. At one end of the
spectrum is *autonomism*, with art being seen as having an autonomous existence and intrinsic value. In its purest form, autonomism is apparent in the aesthetic movement’s concern for beauty above all. At the other extreme is *moralism*, which takes the premise that art can be evaluated morally. This was the position of the Pre-Raphaelites, whose credo harked back to an age of religious painting when the moral message was paramount. Most philosophers inhabit the middle ground, though their emphases differ. Colin McGinn moves away from a simple dichotomy of moralism and autonomism to develop a moral theory of beauty. An object is beautiful if it offers aesthetic bliss and this state of mind is associated with other qualities found in art such as tenderness and curiosity. McGinn distinguishes between inner and outer beauty, a point he illustrates by comparing Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* with Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This leads him to assert the superiority of moral aestheticism over the immoral variety of *Dorian Gray*: “The true aesthete must be a moralist, because he cares about the beauty of his soul.” Such a position requires stretching the definition of aestheticism to the point where it loses its meaning. It also requires accepting that aesthetic bliss is associated with beauty and that this provides the gateway to moral qualities. Picasso, Edgard Varèse and Tennessee Williams provide examples of art which is not necessarily beautiful, but can be called moral. Aesthetic bliss may be a sufficient, but not a necessary quality for moral qualities to emerge.

For Berys Gaut, “Ethicism is the thesis that the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of aesthetic evaluation of these works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.” In Gaut’s terms, morally commendable attitudes offer neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for a work to be aesthetically good, while the range of aesthetic qualities available means that what he terms an all-things-considered judgement has to be made.

Noël Carroll has written prolifically on the philosophy of the arts. He dismisses as sentimental the Utopian notion that all art has some redeeming feature which can be evaluated morally, while he sees the autonomous position of art having intrinsic value as too sweeping, one example being its failure to take account of the particular conditions applying to religious art. Carroll favours a moderate moralism lying between autonomism and moralism: “I submit that artworks that are narratives of human affairs are generally the kind of things it makes sense both to talk about in ethical terms and to assess morally.” This allows for the possibility that art can exist without a moral dimension, implying that
it need only be judged aesthetically. Taking a more relaxed position than Gaut, Carroll considers that moral defects need not constitute aesthetic flaws, which allows the two spheres to coexist more or less independently. Christopher Hamilton concurs: “It remains unclear whether the imaginative insight which art affords into others’ subjectivity really is conducive to moral probity.”43 Rather than citing the obvious example of Nazi concentration camp commanders relaxing to Mozart, he points out that absorption in art can be at the expense of engaging with real life. Stephen Davies goes further, seeing a positive moral stance as constituting a defect if disproportionate moral outrage reveals a lack of toleration, compassion, or insight.44 An example is anti-vivisectionists who feel justified in attacking scientists. Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs might provoke outrage among spectators, but this need not detract from their aesthetic qualities or from Mapplethorpe’s moral insights. By contrast, Tolstoy is illustrative of Iris Murdoch’s moralist stance towards the creation of art. Davies summarises Tolstoy’s position: “Good art must promote the equality and friendship of all people in a universally accessible way, and he condemned Shakespeare’s works, as well as many of his own, for failing to do this.”45 Tolstoy allows for the possibility of art without moral content, but by definition it is bad art. Yet who would be willing to reject the works of Shakespeare or Tolstoy in the interests of classification?
CHAPTER ONE

MAKING FILM MORAL

Voyeurs in the Dark

When the cinematograph came to Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, many people first encountered it as a fairground attraction sharing the bill with vaudeville acts. The booth was decorated to resemble a theatre or variety hall to the extent of upholstered seats being provided. A two-tier pricing system allowed proprietors to boast that they catered for all classes, in one case claiming that Queen Victoria patronised the show. Alongside fairground screenings, travelling showmen toured public halls, presenting films which often had a more educational bias.¹ The fledgling cinema industry in France and America developed as a novelty in similar fashion.² With the Boer War, British film-makers took the opportunity to respond to patriotic fervour by showing the fighting on screen, even if the skirmishes were sometimes re-enacted on the moors outside Blackburn.³ Already the seeds of later tensions were apparent. What did reality mean on the screen? Was the cinema an entertainment medium, a means of education, or should it aspire to be an art form? Should it cater for mass audiences who were predominantly working class, or seek a wider audience base? Those in power had an additional concern: did this novel form of entertainment need to be controlled given that it had the potential for disseminating inappropriate ideas to the masses?

Intellectuals made up another group who viewed the cinema with suspicion, wary of its newness and popularity. In 1935, Oliver de Selincourt decried the pernicious moral effects of the cinema, jazz bands and cheap novels.⁴ De Selincourt came from the elitist camp, though whether he was heaping opprobrium on the activities or the people who enjoyed them is not clear. This can be a problem in approaching the Frankfurt school, whose writings about “the masses” sometimes seem dismissive if they are not seen in a Marxist context. Adorno displayed an awareness of the danger, even if he did not entirely escape from it: “The blending of aesthetics with its residual communicative aspects leads art, as a social phenomenon, not to its rightful position in opposition to alleged
artistic snobbism, but rather in a variety of ways to the defense of its baneful social consequences." Walter Benjamin went further in revealing his human side, showing a sense of wonder in a review of Chaplin’s The Circus from 1928/9, while a year later he was writing sympathetically about Mickey Mouse. Despite these glimpses of humanity, the intellectualism of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School can seem chilling. Being for the people in a Marxist sense does not necessarily mean being of the people.

To pose a simple dichotomy of elitist and populist viewpoints is to oversimplify. The difference can be a matter of how ideas are expressed, with most commentators adopting nuanced positions between the extremes. Christopher Sharrett attacks the morality of the cinema, implicitly Hollywood cinema, in a 1993 article. He begins by criticising the critics: “The conservative criticism of cinema is and always has been involved in the pursuit of scapegoats. This criticism is little interested in systemic issues that very well may be involved in both the dominant ideology and moral code, as well as their built-in self-destruction.” Sharrett cites the example of John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan and was obsessed with Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver (US, 1976). Concern about how the film influenced Hinckley deflects attention from Reagan’s political ideology and its relationship to capitalism. Sharrett does not labour the irony, for what is Hollywood film-making if not an example of unfettered capitalism and what was Reagan if not a product of Hollywood? As Sharrett notes, “These critiques also look back to a halcyon, innocent age, a common inclination these days given the amount of nostalgia for the 1950s that saturates cultural production.” Nostalgia has not gone away since 1993, so Sharrett’s point still deserves to be taken seriously. So far, Adorno would not dissent from his analysis, but Sharrett’s next comment marks a change of direction: “If the cinema is to be accused of anything, it is anesthetizing us, but here again, the blame lies squarely and solely with the consumer. It is not in the interest of the commercial media to do anything but move product in the quickest and most efficient way possible.” By shifting the blame to audiences, Sharrett adopts an elitist position, implying that markets are morally neutral, while the uncultivated tastes of consumers encourage the industry to produce low quality product. This is to play down the role of film in shaping and articulating public taste and opinion rather than merely responding to it. Journey’s End (James Whale, GB/US, 1930) and All Quiet on the Western Front (Lewis Milestone, US, 1930) carried antiwar messages to larger audiences than in the works’ original forms as a play and a book respectively, while the documentaries of Michael Moore have
raised public awareness of issues from gun control to global warming, whatever reservations might be made about Moore’s editorial style. An implication of Sharrett’s position is that he might be happier if cinema were kept as a postmodern diversion for an educated elite rather than a sop to the masses.

Distinguishing between elitist and populist approaches to cinema is conceptually distinct from considering whether film constitutes an art form or a means of mass communication, but in practice the two issues can become conflated as the comments of Sharrett and Adorno reveal. Noël Carroll sidesteps this difficulty by introducing the concept of mass art, which differs from popular art in its reproducibility, with vaudeville being classed as popular art while cinema is mass art. ¹¹ Technology in a form such as television, the cinema projector or the Internet is required to achieve the reproducibility of mass art. Because avant-garde art is meant to be challenging or transgressive, by definition it cannot be mass art, which errs towards homogeneity. ¹² Carroll is tentative about how this relates to quality, though he offers pointers. The sociability of mass art provides a common source of discussion and criticism as well as a reservoir of common cultural symbols. ¹³ This is exemplified by Titanic (James Cameron, US, 1997): “Such works must be able to exploit some structures, such as editing structures and forms of narrative exposition, that strike a common chord in large numbers of diverse people with little or no formal background training in how to decipher or decode the structures of the work.”¹⁴ For Carroll, mass art offers a pool of shared values which may reinforce accepted morality, but what of a film set in a different culture geographically or historically, or originating in another country? What do today’s audiences make of the moral codes shown by passengers on the Titanic towards duty, respect for women and romance across the classes? Did The Birth of a Nation (D. W. Griffith, US, 1915) boost membership of the Ku Klux Klan or prompt a later revulsion against it? How far do American films inculcate American values into other cultures and what are the consequences of this hybridisation? It is difficult to measure of how film changes morality at the societal or individual level. Pace Sharrett, any tendency to uniformity in mass art resulting from the demand-led nature of its production will serve to maintain the status quo, or more simply, offering people what they are comfortable with will not change opinions. This does not preclude people in other societies from considering the same values radical. Nor can the homogenisation of mass art ever be total given niche audiences and the maverick nature of some film-makers. Films serve diverse social functions and their makers may smuggle dissident messages into their work under the noses of censors and
Any discussion of film per se has to be treated with caution. A work by Bergman or Tarkovsky is going to have a minority appeal corresponding to Carroll’s notion of avant-garde art, but this calls into question neat distinctions based on real art’s assumed uniqueness and lack of reproducibility given that the technology is the same for Tarkovsky and Spielberg. David Thomson does nothing to clarify the situation when he compares the ending of Tarkovsky’s *Andrei Roubliev* (USSR, 1966) with that of Vincente Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* (US, 1956) to the advantage of the latter. Lust for Life is in the Hollywood tradition of biopics, which means that it should be classified as mass art and aesthetically inferior. And what of Ang Lee’s films, many of which cannot be categorised as either standard Hollywood product or art-house fare? Classification can be an addictive pursuit, but each work deserves to be considered on its merits.

As Benjamin noted in his 1936 paper, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, a similar debate was played out between painting and photography in the nineteenth century. Benjamin echoed William Morris’s misgivings about modern culture and like Morris he was better at posing questions than finding answers. Morris trod an uneasy path between his socialist ideals and expensive art for art’s sake, which is where uniqueness leads. Benjamin arrived at a different conclusion which might have satisfied the young Eisenstein: “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.” This hints at film as communication and potentially as Marx’s opiate for the masses, but not all political filmmaking need come from the bourgeoisie: the Co-operative movement with its impeccable proletarian credentials was a prolific source of documentary films in Britain during the interwar years.

In *Filmosophy*, David Frampton adopts the default liberal position of accepting film as art. This allows him to consider film as the starting point for a paradigm shift among audiences: “What is significant about film is that it shows us a new reality, and that engenders new thinking, new experiences, new emotions.” Frampton has a case for claiming that watching film is qualitatively different from other artistic experiences. If theatre audiences are voyeurs, cinema audiences are voyeurs in a double sense. Not only are they experiencing a make-believe drama enacted for their benefit, but they are watching through the spy hole of the camera lens, which only allows them to see what the film-makers choose. This is manipulation, but it is willing manipulation. Selection is integral to