



WANDA
TEAYS

SEEING THE LIGHT

EXPLORING ETHICS
THROUGH MOVIES

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

Seeing the Light

To Anthea

You spread happiness like rose petals tossed in the wind,
covering everything, touching everyone.

Seeing the Light

Exploring Ethics through Movies

Wanda Teays

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Preface

I will tell you something about stories, [he said] They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled ... You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.

—Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony

I will tell you something about movies. They aren't just entertainment; they are powerful ways to see into the workings of our minds and hearts. With movies, we can get a better sense of what we are doing here, why we are doing it, and what in the world we need to do to bring about the changes we seek.

If you love movies or like to come at philosophical concepts and ethics from the ground up, this book is for you. If you are fascinated by characters who are wrestling over decisions, trying to be true to their values, and reflecting on the choices they made, then you're in the right place. And if you like the interplay between ideas and theories and what we see on screen, welcome to *Seeing the Light*.

We don't have anything if we don't have the stories, as Leslie Marmon Silko says. Stories—the backbone of the movies we see—keep hope alive, give us a glimpse of what we are capable of, help us see more clearly, and reflect on the decisions we make. “Stories make you live right. Stories make you replace yourself,” Benton Lewis told anthropologist Keith Basso. How right he was! The power of movies goes far beyond one-liners etched inside our skulls. They set in motion thoughts and ideas that enable us to get a better moral grip. They inspire us to look beyond *this or that* movie to our own lives, to the lives of others, and to the society as a whole. We gain insight into moral reasoning in general and our own thought processes in particular.

As a philosophy professor who teaches ethics and problem solving (e.g., in critical thinking, logic, philosophy of law, bioethics, and contemporary moral problems), I wanted a book to reflect on ethics and explore the moral territory in a way that was neither dry nor abstract. Bring it to life! Aristotle was right to see the power of art and particularly drama (thus, movies) to help us develop moral character. Going into this territory and writing this book seemed right on target. Thus this project.

Goals of this Book

This is a book about movies giving us insight into ethics, and ethical theories helping us deepen our moral awareness through the stories unfolding on screen. We see characters navigating through murky ethical waters, struggling with adversity, being called to do the right thing, to act with integrity (which some do, some don't), facing moral dilemmas and making decisions (some wise, others less so), and dealing with the consequences that follow.

We stand to gain by understanding the ethical core of a movie, how we are *shown* what happens as a result of this or that decision. How often we identify with the characters or the dilemmas they face varies with the particulars of our own lives. But even if we never have to face flood or famine, viral outbreaks or invaders from other worlds, serial killers or murderous zombies, it is nevertheless true that we *will* know hardship and we *will* face choices between good and evil, justice and injustice.

Whether you are teacher or student, in a film club or just one of those people who enjoy contemplating the movies they see, there's a lot to learn from the interplay of ethics and film. This book offers you tools for understanding ethics, for examining the dimensions of moral reasoning, and for thinking about its role in our lives—all on a playing field of movies, movies, movies. The many films here pull us in and give us a front row seat on ethical decision-making.

Key Features of this Book

User-Friendly. This book presumes no background in ethical theory or philosophy. Nor does it assume you are versed in esoteric elements of film theory. It is written for people who want to journey into the realm of ethics and value theory and get a better sense of its impact on each of us—both individually and collectively.

Diverse Range of Movies. The movies range across a spectrum from classics to blockbusters and action films to independent and foreign films. They range from megahits like *The Dark Knight* and the *Bourne* trilogy to classics like *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Godfather*; from Indies and foreign films, like *Atanarjuat*, and *District 9* to documentaries, like *Food, Inc.* and *Taxi to the Dark Side*. So many interesting movies to think about!

Solid Introduction to Ethical Theories. The seven major ethical theories are covered in this book—from the Consequentialists (Ethical Egoists, Cultural Relativists, and Utilitarians) to the Duty-based Deontological Ethicists Immanuel Kant and John Rawls and on to Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and Feminist Ethicists. Each theory is brought to life with its application to a variety of contemporary movies.

Balanced Approach. We start with the existential level (Unit 1), move on to ethical frameworks and theories (Unit 2) and then reflect on ethical dilemmas and decision-making (Unit 3). For those wanting to emphasize ethical theory, you could start with Unit 2 or even Unit 3 and then go from there.

Good Quantity to Pick From. Each chapter touches on between six and nine movies, with two or three looked at in more depth. Together, they offer insight into moral reasoning and its significance in our lives.

Works Well With Different Approaches. Focus on either themes/issues or the movies themselves—or some of both! The first gives an ethical framework to take to the movies for example and explication; the second uses the movies as a vehicle for exploring ideas and understanding moral reasoning. Use short clips from the movies to show moral quandaries or let the discussions open the door for more careful study of the movies (and theories) themselves.

Flexible Structure. Units and chapters can be read in any order. The order of the three units reflects how our moral reasoning evolves. We start with the existential level of our individual lives and then turn to ethical theories and how best to incorporate those frameworks in our moral reasoning. We end the book on the ways we reflect on ethical dilemmas, the decisions made and actions taken—and adjust as we see fit. Shifting them around, however, allows different ways to approach the subject and suit the pedagogical objectives of the instructor or film group.

Wide Coverage. Movies are covered in depth (“Spotlight”), more narrowly (“Short Takes”), or flagged for future study (“Outtakes”). In this way, we can see how movies illustrate and explore ethical decision-making and other aspects of the moral dimension in imaginative and insightful ways.

Tools and Techniques. *Seeing the Light* gives us the tools for watching other movies and not just the ones included here. The techniques used in approaching films and the insights you've gained will be ready for deployment as you watch movies in theatres or in the comfort of your own home.

Useful References and Resources. Each chapter includes a list of ethics links, articles and books on the subject, as well as online references. At the end of *Seeing the Light* are general references to guide those who want to explore other resources or do more in-depth research in the field.

Handy Table of Official Websites. A table of Official Websites of the films we examine can be found in the book's appendix so you can have this information at your fingertips.

Discussion Questions. Each chapter ends with discussion questions. They help us highlight the issues, see the connections between the theories and the various films, and delve deeper into the topics. They are useful for faculty and students,

film groups, or anyone seeking to reflect on concerns and principles that are raised in the chapters.

Nifty Website. The worldwide web is a powerful tool and we benefit from that. At www.exploringethics.com you'll find a host of resources that keeps on growing. This includes interviews, film links, references on ethics, advice on using this book, resources for students and instructors, and tips for film groups. There'll also be more put under the spotlight, as thought-provoking movies come out in theatres or on DVD. Check out the website of *Seeing the Light* at www.exploringethics.com.

Organization of This Book

There are three units and 15 chapters. The units are: (1) the Human Condition, (2) Ethical Theories, and (3) Ethical Dilemmas. Unit 1 takes us into the realm of the human condition—authenticity, personal identity, autonomy and liberty, and courage—where we see ethics up close and personal. Here Existentialism's emphasis on individual existence is particularly useful to flesh out the issues and concerns.

Unit 2 goes into the realm of ethical theory, where we are introduced to the thinkers and their tools. We start with Ethical Egoism with its emphasis on self-interest, and end with Feminist Ethics, with its emphasis on care, relationships, and relative moral status. Each theory is then taken to a selection of movies, for us to get a clearer vision of the moral life.

Unit 3 presents ethical dilemmas, where we face moral hurdles and may have to make some very difficult decisions. This calls us to consider the obstacles in our path and how best to tackle them. Together the sections present an exploration through movies into the realm of ethics. Let's now turn to the layout of the chapters.

The Structural Nitty Gritty

UNIT 1: The Human Condition. Here we look at some key ethical concerns of our everyday lives. For this, Existential philosophy gives us effective tools to explore the moral terrain. The chapters here look at authenticity, personal identity, autonomy and liberty, and, courage and inner strength. Each chapter explores the issues and draws from a great collection of mostly contemporary movies to bring the ideas to life.

UNIT 2: Ethical Theories. Here we look at seven major ethical theories, one to a chapter to allow an in-depth discussion and to keep the aspects of the theories clear in our minds. We go from Teleological Ethics (focused on consequences)

to Deontological Ethics (focused on moral duty), to Aristotle (focused on moral character) and the Feminist Ethics (focused on relationships and dynamics of power). Each theory is used as an ethical framework for understanding movies and giving us a handle for setting out the ethical dilemmas the chapter moves set out. The unit starts with Consequentialism (three chapters—Ethical Egoism, Cultural Relativism, and Utilitarianism). These three theories favor moral reasoning that aims at maximizing favorable outcomes, while minimizing harms. They differ as to whose interests should prevail in the balance of weighing pros and cons.

In the next two chapters we examine the Deontological Ethics of Immanuel Kant (who wants to universalize moral decision-making) and John Rawls (who focuses on the quest for justice). These two theories emphasize moral duty, intentions, and obligations over potential consequences of ethical decision-making. Individual rights factor into this equation. We end Unit 2, the theory section, with a chapter on Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and one on Feminist Ethics. These two theories share a focus on moral character and leading a life of purpose, meaning. The first puts more emphasis on rationality and a purposeful life; the second looks more at relationships and addressing gender and other inequities.

UNIT 3: This last section of the book looks at ethical dilemmas and the importance of reflecting on moral decision-making. Its four chapters are: Confronting the Dilemma, Encountering Evil, Impact of Perspective, and (the last chapter of the book) Reflecting on Ethical Decisions.

Acknowledgments

ROY BATTY (replicant): I've seen things you people wouldn't believe.

—Blade Runner

Thanks to all the replicants, cyborgs, androids, and humans who populate the world of film and may or may not be persons! Maybe you have seen things I wouldn't believe. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to know what it is you are “thinking” about. Thanks, too, to all my students of Ethics and Film, who never once let me forget why I love to teach.

I am very grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of Wiley-Blackwell, whose astute comments and insights were so helpful to me. As for my editor Jeff Dean and my copy editor Alec McAulay—thank you, thank you so much. I am so indebted to you both.

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Then there's my family who cheered me on, thank you. I am so glad my husband Silvio Nardoni was my film buddy and so much more. My daughter Willow Bunu helped put together the resources and online references. I so appreciate her support and organizational skills. My appreciation also goes to Birgit Tregenza and Deniz Cizmeciyen for their enthusiasm and friendship. Thank you also Omar, Adam, Rahma, Ibrahim, Zachary, and Luke—you are agents of transformation. Hats off to you!

My father never lived to see the Paris of his dreams, but he made a world of difference in my life. In teaching me how to be alone *and* with others, to never give up, he infused my life with a sense of purpose. My path led me to Philosophy and to Ethics. I write, I teach, I reflect on the power of movies to transform our lives and infuse a sense of hope for the future. Fortunately, this is a view others share. And it's to *you* that I extend my last thank you: thank you for exploring ethics through movies with me. I am grateful that we're on this journey together.

Introduction to the Text

CHRISTOF: If his was more than just a vague ambition, if he was absolutely determined to discover the truth, there's no way we could prevent him.

—*The Truman Show*

Movies are a powerful medium, maybe *the* most powerful medium. They have an ability to draw us in, touch us to the core, hit us with new, sometimes disturbing images, make us care about worlds far removed from the ones we inhabit, and bring characters to life. No wonder we are pulled into this parallel universe that vividly presents ideas and issues and plops us right into the middle of ethical dilemmas crying out for resolution. It's virtually irresistible.

There's something about movies, that visual method of storytelling, that pulls us in. One aspect of its force is that it integrates so many aesthetic components (narrative/plot, cinematography, graphics, special effects, music, animation). The larger-than-life aspects of filmmaking allow us to study expressions, fixate on a sneer, a smile, or a wink, internalize a sob or wails of grief, and examine a host of human expressions while events unfold in front of our eyes.

By connecting with one of more characters, we *feel* what they feel, as they mull over the choices, weigh the risks and benefits, and try to avoid danger or harm. It's hard not to be drawn to the ethical dimension of movies, given their capacity to raise questions of morality and put us face to face with good or evil. This can catapult us to reflect on our lives, reassess our priorities, and rebuild the parts of our lives that have become worn down, or full of holes.

If we think of ethics more broadly as a way to examine questions of meaning, we find that movies offer us a means to explore this terrain. By presenting us with social and moral problems, and with characters acting or being acted upon, we can do some serious moral reasoning without the weight of "this is your life." We have enough distance to stand back, think about what's presented on screen and *then* apply it to our own lives.

2 *Seeing the Light*

We can learn lessons from what we see onscreen, knowing that we can walk out and step back into everyday reality. The ethical dimension of movies serves a valuable function. Even one scene can tap us into self-reflection, set ideas in motion, or inspire us to change our lives.

In a visual culture, movies are a compelling and effective vehicle for moral reflection. A good movie, a powerful story, a well-drawn character, or a striking image can stick in our minds long after we exit the theatre. Who can forget the alien bursting out of Kane's abdomen and scurrying across the floor? Who didn't have nightmares after seeing the Terminator's metal skeleton rise from the ashes and continue its pursuit of Sarah Connor? Who can erase the image of Trinity in midair dazzling the ill-prepared police, or that of the naked Atarnajuat running for his life over the Arctic snow? Surely there's a mental slot in our minds to store such images.

Think also how snappy dialogue sticks in our brains, recycled like lines from a song—such as, “I see dead people” and “I see you as a glass-half-empty kind of guy.” And who doesn't wonder if “I'll be back” will *ever* fall from the “Top 10” list?

Then there are the scenes that touch us, causing laughter or despair, joy or sorrow. *Admit it*: No one could have dry eyes when Paulie made it home to Marie, when Stitch was revived after nearly drowning, when Noah and Allie were *finally* reunited, or when Rose hung on tight while Jack sank into the icy waters. Such pivotal images, dialogue, and scenes are seared onto our skulls.

And don't forget the visceral effect of the audience reacting as one. Consider *127 Hours*, a retelling of hiker Aron Ralston's fateful fall into a crevasse. The only way out was to cut himself free of the arm trapped by boulders. “You could clearly see people in shock, struggling to stay in their seats, working to get past the intensity of what was going on in front of them,” film critic John Foote wrote, “So overwhelmed were these [audience] members by what was happening on screen ...they simply could not take it.” In fact, “I cannot remember a reaction to a film like this in a very long time,” says Foote, “perhaps not since *The Exorcist* sent audiences scurrying for the doors” (Kellett, 2010). Members of the audience were linked in a shared moment.

Movies have a way of leaving their mark beyond any connection to the “real” world. Look at Takako Konishi, who took to heart *Fargo*'s opening claim that it was based on a true story. It wasn't. But thinking a million dollars was hidden beside the road, Konishi flew from Tokyo to Minneapolis and grabbed a bus to North Dakota, hoping to find the loot. Bismarck Police Lieutenant Nick Severt said, “They tried to explain to her this was just a movie. It was fictional” (Gardner, 2001). Their advice floated right by her. A few days later, they found her body and concluded that she died of exposure.

It's hard not to commiserate, for the line between movies and everyday life, and between appearance and reality, is often blurry, dubious, arbitrary. As Konishi's actions demonstrate, movies have impact. It may be on the conscious plane, where we are called to look at our lives and reexamine what we are doing.

Alternatively, they could hit us on the unconscious plane, where we may be transformed without ever fully realizing it. As a medium, movies have the potential to pick us up and carry us along, changing us along the way.

Rare are those who haven't been touched by a movie they love or hate. Sometimes we are taken by surprise by our conceptions, or misconceptions as the case may be. When disagreeing with a friend's assessment of a movie, we realize that there's an element of subjectivity in rankings in the Top 10, Top 100, or Top 1000. Our differing perceptions and ways of seeing the world result in a range of interpretations about the movies we see—that's one reason watching and discussing films with others can be so enjoyable and thought-provoking.

As we'll see throughout this book, moral reasoning and food for ethical thought can be found in all sorts of movies—from yuck-yuck comedies to art house favorites and every genre in between. This ranges over films as similar and different as *District 9* (prawn-like aliens radically alter one man's life), *The Shawshank Redemption* (innocent man transforms prison inmates), *Groundhog Day* (cynical weatherman relives the same day), the *Bourne* trilogy (amnesiac is thorn in the side of the CIA), *Fanny and Alexander* (siblings suffer at hands of cruel stepfather), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (mind-control victim messes with the program).

Some of the movies examined here are megahits with big-name stars. Some are foreign films, noted for their insights into the meaning of life. Others are little-known documentaries. This collection of movies serves a valuable function beyond entertainment (which has its place!), and that is to help us develop our own moral character and live better lives.

Movies are alongside literature as carriers of contemporary mythology. We see it with such great directors as Guillermo del Toro, Peter Jackson, and Ridley Scott. In his commentary on *Pan's Labyrinth*, del Toro talks about the influence of fairy tales on his work. He sees movies as a way to link magic and reality, myth and history. This power is not to be underestimated. Jane Caputi (2004), scholar of popular culture, has studied the mythic dimension of film and observes:

A culture's myths, its symbolic and imaginative truths, are continually retold and reinterpreted in many ways—both sacred and secular, educational and entertaining. Indeed, popular culture's genres (romance, horror, detection, and so on) and conventional characters (femme fatales, princesses, sex goddesses, cowboys and serial killers) are based in the traditional narrative structural patterns of myth.

Film, it has often been noted, most originally by Parker Tyler (1947), is a prime arena for the mythic experience. Viewers sit in the dark in a space that is both collective and set apart from other activities. Dramas, fantasies and dream-like stories and images are enacted, often by charismatic, larger than life "stars," immortals, archetypal personas, existing in a realm of light, apart from ordinary reality.

Exploring the realm of ideas can open our minds to new ways of thinking. This shapes our experiences and how we perceive the world. Movies offer us

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a parallel universe that shows both the beautiful and the grotesque, and the exotic as well as the mundane. In this way we are exposed to alternative visions of reality and differing values and beliefs.

It is a rich and varied medium. It is a great platform for delving into ethical dilemmas, allowing us to grapple with concerns that lie along the moral spectrum. On the individual level these include loyalty, integrity, justice, courage on one hand, and betrayal, deceit, injustice, cowardice on the other. On the societal level these include liberty rights, euthanasia, the death penalty, genetic engineering, world hunger, organ sales, war, terrorism, and interpersonal violence. Watching how such issues can be life-changing is extremely useful for our moral development. What we see on the screen affirms the role of ethical concepts and theories in making sense of the natural and human-caused dilemmas we might encounter as we journey along.

We stand to gain by watching characters wade into the moral waters—some swim, some barely tread across to solid ground, while others sink. Look at Cypher in *The Matrix* (betrayal), Bryan in *Taken* (revenge), and Hank in *A Simple Plan* (greed). We also benefit by having societal issues placed in a context, as with Ramon in *The Sea Inside* (euthanasia), Thao and Sue in *Gran Torino* (gang violence), and Jeffrey in *The Insider* (corporate malfeasance). The issues are no longer abstract and distant, but are brought to life so the audience can experience yet can't intervene in what transpires. It is *not* just for entertainment, these moments. Not even close.

We will have many opportunities to examine ethical dilemmas and join in our collective moral discourse. Commenting on the power of art, Mary Anne Staniszewski states, "If we accept the fact that everything is shaped by culture, we then acknowledge that we create our reality. We therefore contribute to it and can change it. This is an empowering way of living and of seeing ourselves and the world" (1995, 298).

Such empowering ways of seeing teaches us about what it means to be human. We learn ways to work for a more meaningful life. For example, *Sleep Dealer* and both *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* show us a possible, uncertain future. In *T2* John Connor explains to his cyborg protector that the future is not set, that there is "no fate but what we make." Our lives are not preordained, with the endpoint carved in stone.

Free will is a necessary condition for living ethically. If we were not autonomous moral agents, how could we be responsible for what we do? How can we be held accountable, if we lacked the ability to choose freely (e.g., we were brain-washed by double agents or abused by a vicious nanny)? This philosophical issue doesn't escape filmmakers. We see this in the movie trailer for *The Adjustment Bureau*. It has a message reminiscent of Nietzsche: *If you believe in free will. If you believe in chance. If you believe in choice. Fight for it.*

Moral knowledge is necessary for an ethical life. Without a grasp of good and evil and the way to be a virtuous person, how can we be blamed or praised

for our decisions and actions? We need the personal wherewithal to choose well and live a meaningful life.

Both qualities of moral agency—free will and rationality—should be present for actions to be subjected to moral judgment. Otherwise we cannot grasp the concepts of good and evil or assess moral deeds. We must know people were free to choose and were competent to do so. Our inquiry rests on this foundation.

Where We Go From Here

The movies we examine in this book provide an ethical microcosm, offering us insights into moral reasoning. With the tools to confront ethical dilemmas, we can arrive at defensible decisions. Ideally, our actions should be well thought out, consistent with our values, and able to withstand the scrutiny of others. To accomplish that goal, it helps to see how the human condition provides a springboard for ethical reflection. This we do in Unit 1.

Another goal is to show how ethical theory provides a framework for analyzing and learning moral lessons from movies. Seven of the most significant ethical theories (none aligned with a particular religion) give us the framework. These are set out in Unit 2. Each ethical theory is applied to a collection of movies so we see their value in shaping our moral development.

My third major goal, pursued in Unit 3, is to show how movies help us reflect on our decision-making. We can run, but can't hide from moral problems. They may not even be *our* problems and, yet, we may be called to weigh-in. What sets the gears into motion? Wherein lie the pitfalls, the things that trip us up and blow our assumptions to smithereens? And what about the major leagues of ethics—such as how to persevere in the face of evil? *You know*. We're in the cellar, the light bulb blows, and our most dreaded nightmare leaps out at us. And there we are barefoot, with no weapon beyond the mop next to the washing machine, and our screams go unheeded. That scenario gets played and replayed—because it always sucks us in and keeps us glued to the screen, fearing the worst, but hoping for the best.

What inner strengths can we count on? Can we avoid tunnel vision when resolving moral problems? How do we keep track of different perspectives? Here's where the stories on screen guide the way out of the darkness. Think of Dorothy, alone in the Witch's castle, Clarice, alone in the dark against Buffalo Bill, and Neo alone against agents multiplying like rabbits. They were on their own.

These three units—"The Human Condition" (Unit 1), "Ethical Theory" (Unit 2), and "Ethical Dilemmas" (Unit 3) offer channels for exploring the philosophical ideas and moral reasoning that forms the groundwork of this text.

Thanks to the movies we discuss here, we can reflect on what it means to be a good person, one with the personal wherewithal and moral character to help others and make some difference in the world. This allows us to explore the

territory and decide what we ought to do, what we owe others and what, if anything, we should expect from those around us.

Secondly, we will discover how movies can teach us about ethical theories in a way that's neither dry nor tedious. They are a marvelous vehicle for gaining insight into moral concepts and ways to frame ethical decision-making. Doing this also provides the tools and skills we can take with us.

Structure of the Text

This book has three units. The first, "The Human Condition," has four chapters: 1.1 Authenticity, 1.2 Personal Identity, 1.3 Autonomy and Liberty, and 1.4 Courage and Inner Strength.

The second unit, "Ethical Theory," has seven chapters. The first three focus on Teleological Ethics (emphasizing end goals): 2.1 Ethical Egoism, 2.2 Cultural Relativism, and 2.3 Utilitarianism. The next two center on Deontological Ethics (emphasizing moral obligations): 2.4 Kantian Ethics and 2.5 Rawls' Justice Theory. The last two (emphasizing moral character and relationships) are 2.6 Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and 2.7 Feminist Ethics. These are the foremost ethical theories; each provides a powerful framework for understanding the ethical dimension of movies and how our own lives can become more purposeful and meaningful.

The last (third) unit is "Ethical Dilemmas," with chapters: 3.1 Confronting the Dilemma, 3.2 Encountering Evil, 3.3. Impact of Perspective, and 3.4 Reflecting on Ethical Decisions.

Each chapter looks at between six and nine movies, so we have variety and flexibility for thinking about movies and reflecting on issues that shape our world. There are three levels. First, we "Spotlight" two or three movies to allow for a more detailed discussion. The next is "Short Takes," where the discussion is brief or more narrowly focused. The third level, "Outtakes," introduces movies that merit further study.

The chapters

The end-result is fifteen chapters geared to helping us look at the ethical aspects of our lives, develop our moral reasoning, and examine our moral character. The spectrum includes drama, comedy, action films, sci-fi, and documentaries. It ranges from Hollywood blockbusters to foreign films, from mega-hits to small independent films that barely got funding, from classics to rarely seen gems. So many movies to expand our moral awareness. So many paths to build our ethical consciousness. Together they strengthen our ability to think and reflect about what we watch on screen. And together they help shine a light on the lives we lead, how we function in community, and what we need to do to live right.

Resources

There are six types of resources at your fingertips: (1) Tools for analysis (in the unit introductions); (2) Text references, video/audio and other online resources (at the end of each chapter); (3) Discussion questions (at the end of each chapter); (4) General references (4.1 at the end of the book), (5) Apps to Contemporary Moral Problems (4.2 at the end of the book), and (6) Official Websites and other resources (on the *Seeing the Light* website—www.exploringethics.com). For those who want to go further into the territory of ethics using movies as the springboard, these resources should be quite handy.

Thanks to movies, we can explore ideas and reflect on ethical issues and decisions that have personal as well as global impact. Hopefully this book will be useful for navigating that terrain.

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Online Resources

Philosophy Talk

- "Philosophy and Film." December 17, 2007: Ken Taylor, John Perry, and David Thomson discuss the philosophy of and within film. <http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/Film.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).
- "Philosophy and Pop Culture." August 3, 2008: Ken Taylor, John Perry, and Richard Hanley discuss big questions in popular culture. <http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/PopCulture.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).
- "Movie Show 2010," February 28, 2010: Ken Taylor and John Perry present their Dionysus Awards for the most philosophically-rich films of 2010. <http://www.philosophytalk.org/pastShows/MovieShow2010.html> (accessed August 5, 2011).

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PhilPapers: a comprehensive directory of online philosophy articles and books by academic philosophers with subject-based organization to help locate articles or books of interest. <http://philpapers.org/> (accessed August 5, 2011).

BMC Medical Ethics, BioMed Central, an open-access journal on the ethical aspects of biomedical research and clinical practice. <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6939/> (accessed August 5, 2011).

Unit 1

The Human Condition

Introduction to Unit 1

GAFF: It's too bad she won't live!
But then again, who does?

—*Blade Runner*

Watching movies adds another dimension to our lives by bringing us back to ourselves, to our lives, and to our connection with others. As much as eyes are windows to our soul, movies are windows to our society, our values. Marshall McLuhan declared in the 1960s that the media was the message. This was a view that resonated with others and foreshadowed later developments.

Two decades after McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard (1990) declared the media incapable of remaining silent, that we are being gorged with information, with meaning. For him, “there is no alternative but to fill the screen; otherwise there would be an irremediable void.” We *do* turn to the media for information, for interpretation, for reflection and direction, Baudrillard is right about that. This speaks to a yearning for meaning and for some sort of grasp on what we’re doing to fill our personal voids.

Baudrillard would appreciate *The Truman Show* for showing us what happens when too much is invested in sustaining a pretense. The superficial, the charade, is effectively the only reality that Truman Burbank has known. However, it could be shattered in an instant. A light falling onto the set or “out of the sky” as Truman was led to believe revealed the utter emptiness of the world he inhabited. Eventually he rejected the life engineered by Christof and populated by actors whose “feelings” for him were manufactured. He preferred stepping out into uncharted territory and its turbulence to a good life defined by others.

Out of the stories we watch on screen we can reflect on the issues, turn over ethical dilemmas in our minds, and gain insight into how to live our lives as we deal with the forces around us. Movies can be powerful vehicles for delving into the existential depths. Some do so with humor—as with *All of Me*, *What About*

Bob?, and *My Cousin Vinny*. Some do so in dramatic, even tragic ways—as with *Million Dollar Baby*, *House of Sand and Fog*, and *21 Grams*. Others do so with action or special effects—as with *The Dark Knight*, *Alien*, and *Avatar*.

We never seem to tire of contemplating what it means to be human. Think of all the movies that tackle this question and wrestle it to the ground. From aliens that inhabit other galaxies to the clones, robots, and humanoids serving our needs, film history is populated with beings whose moral status is up for grabs.

Look at the dilemma facing bounty hunter Rick Deckard of *Blade Runner*. He agrees to take out four “replicants.” These are “people” engineered with implanted memories to work in off-world colonies in tasks no human would willingly perform. That said, their four-year lifespan rubs them the wrong way. Part of the film’s fascination is that replicants don’t seem that different from humans, other than their greater strength and agility, and their truncated lifespans. They have no scruples about using any violence necessary in order to survive.

Deckard finds it disconcerting to find that emotions are not restricted to humans. As sentient beings, replicants experience the emotional gamut. Replicant leader Roy Batty shows this when he says to Deckard, “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.” The replicants, regardless of their implanted memories and superhuman physical skills, show a quite-human quest for self-identity. They struggle with such boundary conditions as despair, dread, alienation, and death that throw them back on what they are.

This brings up a fundamental question: Is there a set of characteristics that define us as human? As *Blade Runner* shows, arriving at an answer is not an easy task. Philosophers throughout history agree that the line between human and nonhuman is not as clean as we might think. For this reason, movies tackle the issue with gusto.

By the time we get to the nonhumans in 2009’s *Avatar*, we find peace-loving “people” who show no desire to be other than humanoids (Na’vi). But, like the replicants, the Na’vi resent humans seeking to exploit their skills. They would fight to the death to avoid falling under the control of the humans who put *their* needs above all else. *Blade Runner* and *Avatar* are just two movies that take up the challenge as to what makes us human and what aspects of the human condition merit our attention.

When reflecting on our lives, we see the role of both choice and chance. On one hand, our decisions and actions are pivotal in what we make of our lives and the meaning we create. With our choices we set things in motion and the wheels start to turn, or stop turning, as the case may be. To varying degrees, our decisions, even minor ones, play a part in who we are and what we become.

We may choose one thing and end up with another, or with nothing. We may head off in one direction and find the road switches back, diverges, forks off,