

Editor's Introduction

Volume 16, the second special edition of *Film and Philosophy* dedicated to Ethical and Existential themes in the philosophy of film, has been a challenge to compile. The number and quality of the submissions for this cycle made the decisions about which articles to include painfully difficult. One accepted article has to be carried over to Volume 17 as a result. I want to thank my co-editors and other anonymous referees for their thoughtful reviews, and all the authors who submitted their work to our scrutiny, for making this edition truly special.

Dr. Robert Kearns (played by Greg Kinnear in *Flash of Genius*) invented the intermittent wiper blade, and had his work pilfered by no less an industrial giant than General Motors. His story is the subject of our first essay, by Gwendolyn Dolske, who mobilizes the major concepts in the existentialist ethics of Simone de Beauvoir to celebrate Kearns' heroic defense of his intellectual property. For Kearns, winning recognition for his accomplishment, and for the "flash of genius" of his unique vision, was of primary importance, and he turned down several significant settlement offers that did not include admissions of guilt on the part of GM executives. His obsessive fight cost him dearly, but his struggle is valorized in this overlooked gem of a movie.

Frequent contributor Aaron Smuts is up next, with an interpretation of perennial holiday classic *It's a Wonderful Life* that highlights its philosophical content. Smuts contends that the film presents a compelling theory of the meaning of life as being determined by the objective good that one causes. George Bailey (James Stewart) is redeemed from despair by recognizing the difference he had made in the lives of his family, friends and fellow citizens in Bedford Falls. But Smuts rejects what he calls the Pottersville Test of meaning as unreliable, for it suggests that the good one does only includes the difference in value between the actual world and the possible world in which one does not exist.

Erin Kealey then proposes a Heideggerean reading of the Zombie apocalypse subgenre of horror films that illuminates both Heidegger's philosophy and the films she discusses. She offers a detailed interpretation of *Shaun of the Dead*, and briefer comments on *Night of the Living Dead* and *28 Days Later*, in order to propose the intriguing thesis that inauthenticity hinders our ability to understand the situations in which we find ourselves and effectively plan for the future. She draws attention to how inauthentic plans frequently lead to the demise of characters

in zombie films, while authenticity is often crucial to their survival.

Federico Fellini explored existential themes in several of his films (most notably in *La Dolce Vita* and *8 1/2*), and Iddo Landau offers us a reading of Fellini's classic *Nights of Cabiria* from the perspective of the absurdism of Albert Camus. For Landau, Cabiria (played by Fellini's wife, Giulietta Masina) embodies a kind of absurd heroism, as she continues to search for love despite its unattainability. Her persistence in the face of a Sisyphean series of romantic misadventures is depicted in a subtly evolving fashion, as Fellini modulates the tone of the film by presenting Cabiria as more ridiculous in the beginning and more noble (even tragic) towards the end.

Co-authors William Devlin and Shai Biderman help us segue from existential to more clearly ethical themes with an article that incorporates both. They offer an analysis of the compelling detective story *Gone Baby Gone* that sees it as a perfect example of Jean Paul Sartre's contention that appeals to abstract moral standards are useless in resolving profound moral dilemmas. Their account of how private eye Patrick Kenzie (played by Casey Affleck, brother of writer-director Ben) grapples with his decision argues for the superiority of feature films to the brief thought experiments typically proposed in philosophy books and essays. In their view, this is because films situate abstract moral dilemmas in concrete and detailed situations where we care about the characters involved and feel for their respective plights.

Blade Runner has long been one of my favorite films, and many authors (including Stephen Mulhall in the premiere issue of this journal) have mined it for philosophical insights. Mario Sluga begins his analysis of skepticism in the film by referring to a passage in Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* that asks whether a third person should intervene if one were present as the creator of an automaton proceeded to "kill" his creation. This is strikingly similar to the question of whether Deckard (Harrison Ford) should be stopped as he "retires" the replicants in the film, a question he increasingly asks himself as the narrative unfolds. Ridley Scott is also engaged in the exploration of a philosophical theme that Sluga calls "epistemology as ethics".

John Marmysz proposes an ideological analysis of *Avatar*, where he argues that the culture of the Na'vi is depicted as strikingly fascist. Citing nine principles of fascism proposed in a book by Jay Gonen on *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*, Marmysz draws convincing parallels to the depiction of the Na'vi people in

Cameron's box office bonanza. If, like me, you always felt a little queasy about the film, this article helps explain why.

Volume 16 concludes by reproducing an American Society for Aesthetics "Author Meets Critics" panel session on Dan Flory's book on the philosophy of race, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*. A distinguished panel of commentators that includes Charles Mills, Tommy Lott, and Murray Smith offers their reflections on Flory's general thesis that *film noirs* made by black directors are singularly appropriate vehicles for critical insights into race relations in America, as well as Flory's more controversial claim that Danny Aiello's depiction of Sal (the owner of the pizzeria in *Do the Right Thing*) as a sympathetic racist was an effective condemnation of the widespread virulence of racism in America. Flory's response to their observations is the last essay in the volume.

I want to thank our diverse set of contributors for their thoughtful essays and express my hope that subsequent cycles of submissions remain as rich and difficult to choose between as this one proved to be.