Introduction

Film Ethics as Delivering the Goods

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INTO THE GOODS

It seemed a simple enough idea. We wanted to do a volume on film ethics. So we decided to invite an array of film scholars to respond to what we took to be a decisive yet easy-to-answer question: “What is film viewing good for?” By which we meant: “What values may we attach to our experiences of the moving image?” Now it just so happens that the issue of “the goods” is also a beloved trope of crime and gangster movies, finding expression in stock antihero statements like “Where’re the goods?” or “No—first you show us the goods, then you get the money!” And, being the film lovers that we are, it’s a trope that to our minds nicely covers what this book is about: in gangster parlance, you could say that we asked this group of film studies kingpins to deliver the goods—to just give us an indication of some goods, any goods whatsoever—that film, in their experience, could possibly live up to.

But, as good ideas often go, we weren’t quite prepared for some of the reactions our idea of film ethics went on to elicit. (Botched drop-offs of “the goods” is, of course, also a gangster trope.) More than a few respected peers turned out to be rather wary of delivering judgments on what film is “good for”: I don’t do ethics... I never moralize... Surely this smacks of instrumentalist thinking...? Why reduce film to the good and the bad...? And, not to forget: The “bad” things about movies make for the best part! Yet little did they know, and did we know at
the time, that these are precisely the sort of conventional responses that our now-completed compilation of essays wants to put into question.

With this volume, we invite those skeptics who might say “I don’t do film ethics” to give it a second thought. This requires a basic shift in our approach to the very idea: that doing “film ethics” first and foremost is a matter of addressing the value of film as such, and in this case with specific reference to the value-able experiences of spectators. Therefore, rather than circumscribing paradigmatic “ethical contents” in film experiences (e.g., moral identification or the fostering of empathy), we want to underline that any spectatorial experience may have an ethical dimension inasmuch as cinematic experiences are inevitably valued, or at least have the capacity to be valued, for a multitude of reasons. While we’re not unaware of the dangers of endlessly inflating the notion of film ethics, we do find ourselves intrigued by some implications of this shift: namely, that by way of tacit valuations, anyone—the everyday filmgoer, the fan, the filmmaker, the critic—can be thought of as engaging in film ethics at some level, even if only as an unarticulated “lived ethics.” But, at the very least, this shift in focus toward value should make it evident that film ethics is far more prevalent in, and fundamental to, film scholarship than people might think initially. Doing film ethics, we propose, is, in a sense, inevitable. And considering how often it occurs in the background, our aim here is to make it the main attraction.

IN GOOD COMPANY

To be sure, this volume is about much more than simply wanting to win over those who are agnostic about “what film is good for.” With regard to film ethics as a now-burgeoning field, its ambition is to bring to the fore the good of film as the arch question of film ethics. In this sense, we admit that our volume is really staging a retrieval and recovery. For it’s a question that has undoubtedly been asked before—even if not as often or as outright as you’d think.

One place where it has recently come up is in the later work of Thomas Elsaesser. In his Film History as Media Archaeology (2016), Elsaesser consolidates his career-long interest in the position of cinema within the cultural-technological cycles and formations that have characterized modernity. Yet, in the introductory passages, he is quick to concede that beneath the core questions of his archaeological approach—“Where is cinema?” and “When is cinema?”—expanding upon the classical film-theoretical question of “What is/was cinema”—the question
of “Why is cinema?” or “What is/was cinema good for?” also lingers.¹ That is to say, “What role has cinema played—and is still playing—in the larger development of [h]uman kind, or more specifically, in our Western modernity and postmodernity?”² In fact, the same question lurks also in more specific quarters of Elsaesser’s work. One finds it, for instance, in his influential statement on complex cinema, “The Mind-Game Film” (2009), where he takes stock of the conditions behind the twists, delusions, and confusions that defined turn-of-the-millennium movies such as *Lost Highway* (1997, dir. David Lynch), *Fight Club* (1999, dir. David Fincher), and *Donnie Darko* (2001, dir. Richard Kelly).³ Here, too, Elsaesser wastes no time in bringing up the question, now only of a particular species of cinematic storytelling: what are mind-game films (perceived to be) good for?⁴ Consequently, he considers how mind-game films allow viewers to train their skills of interpretation and interactive engagement as part of the more general affective labor that the modern “control society” demands of us.⁵ That’s a compromised good for sure—but a good nevertheless.

Then there is Stanley Cavell, who directly broached the question with the title of his published lecture, “The Good of Film” (2000).⁶ Whereas Elsaesser brings up the good of film in connection with shifting historical forces and fortunes, Cavell raises the question as an extension of one of his most abiding interests: “Emersonian” perfectionism, after Ralph Waldo Emerson—a perfectionism set not on some metaphysical ideal of perfection but on an open-ended process of becoming who you are. As it turns out, Cavell’s lecture is mostly about what he understands by a “good film.”⁷ But, in the end, Cavell still comes good on the promise of the title: yes, it is an affinity for such perfectionism that makes the likes of Hollywood remarriage comedies good films, but it is to work out our perfectionist ideas and ideals that these good films are ultimately good for.

A number of decades before Elsaesser and Cavell, however, it was Siegfried Kracauer who, in the concluding chapter of his *Theory of Film* (1960), first posed the question in its most famously outright, and dramatic, form.⁸ And it is from this formulation that we take our main cue: “Only now that the inner workings of film have been dealt with is it possible and indeed necessary to come to grips with this issue, which is most central of all: what is the good of film experience?”⁹ Kracauer didn’t pose the question for mere rhetorical effect. His own answer is, in fact, broadcast by the very subtitle of his book: the redemption of physical reality. As Kracauer goes on to explain later in his conclusion, “We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual
nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera.”¹⁰ Physical reality has become elusive, sedimented under the abstractive reasoning that drives modernity.¹¹ But in cinema we have a medium that essentially “incorporates aspects of physical reality with a view to making us experience them,” thus mobilizing and turning the unmoored, abstracted fragments of our modern condition against itself.¹² And it is in this restaging of reality that Kracauer locates the good that film experience is for: the potential to retrieve the textures of life from beneath the abstractions of modern science; and the promise to radically reconstitute the modern subject’s lifeworld as a reconnection to the world.

Yet, it is not so much the answer that Kracauer had for his question that is the primary concern of this volume. Our concern, rather, is with the conceptual space presupposed and opened up by the question itself, and how it can provide a basis for doing film ethics. What we want to propose is that as soon as you consider the value or the good of film, you put yourself on a turf that is unmistakably ethical.¹³ And this seems true to us regardless of what your answer to the question is, and regardless of the kind or nature of “film” you’re talking about, as the mixed bag of Kracauer, Cavell, and Elsaesser above makes clear. For what is ethics if it is not to, in one way or another, busy yourself with that illimitable primitive concept of “the good”? Yet, furthermore, we want to drive home that this is an ethical space that cannot be circumvented. The keen sensitivity we see in Kracauer for how the ontological “what” question of film is imbricated with its ethical “good” question is a model that to some degree holds for all thinking about film. The question of the good of film is indeed “most central of all,” as Kracauer puts it, because it inevitably borders on, subtends, and often so much as motivates all the other theoretical questions worth asking. Valuation, even if only by implication, is unavoidable. Therefore, conceptions of what film is good for, even if only nascent or implied, will factor into any film theory worthy of the name.

Of course, our insistence upon this inevitable ethical dimension in reflecting on film is not to ignore the existing and rapidly growing body of work currently done under the banner of “film ethics,” especially within contemporary film-philosophy. Next to the work of some of the authors in our volume—such as Michele Aaron, Sarah Cooper, Seunghoon Jeong, Carl Plantinga, Robert Sinnerbrink, Thomas Wartenberg, and Catherine Wheatley—we are thinking, for instance, of Brian Bergen-Aurand, Nadine Boljkovac, Noël Carroll, Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, Amy Coplan, Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, Ward Jones and
Samantha Vice, Joseph Kupfer, Lúcia Nagib, Orna Raviv, D.N. Rodowick, Dan Shaw, Murray Smith, Jane Stadler, and Lisa Trahair. But what bearing does our retrieval of the arch-ethical question of “the good of film” have on film ethics as it is currently pursued by these and many other names? What exactly is this volume’s contribution to the existing field? We like to think of our intervention in terms of a double movement: to urge a particular concentration within film ethics that goes hand in hand with a simultaneous expansion thereof.

On the one hand, our definition of film ethics as addressing questions of value brings to the surface a basic stratum upon which diverse approaches to film ethics converge. For example, as different as phenomenological (e.g., Stadler, Sinnerbrink), new materialist and realist (e.g., Boljkovac, Nagib), or analytical-cognitivist (e.g., Plantinga, Carroll) approaches to film ethics may be, they are all premised on particular orders of values and valuation. Undoubtedly, their estimations of the good of film vary as drastically as the difference between the values of intense emotional experience, affirming the transcendence of nature, or the refinement of cognitive insight. But the fact of value-attributions at work in these and other approaches still remains—and it allows film ethics as a whole to be more concentrated around a basic point of departure, the question of the good of film, which its diversity of approaches all share.

On the other hand, this concentration that we encourage within film ethics simultaneously also yields, not without a hint of irony, a far more open and ecumenical understanding of what may be admitted under the banner of “film ethics.” Our point here is simply this: if we understand film ethics to be primarily about addressing value, and if it can be reasonably posed that assumptions about value and the good of film also thrive in other (seemingly unrelated) fields of film—think of genre theory, historical inquiries, or reception studies—then film-ethical insights can rightly be expected to show up in places far beyond the boundaries of the institutionalized subdiscipline called “film ethics.” Hence our claim that film ethics is far better considered as a basic aspect of film studies than a mere subfield within it. As we hope our collection of essays from various fields shows, questions about the value of film—and thus film ethics—are within the purview of almost any film scholar.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE PLENTY

We can imagine that a stickler for definitions reading this might have some pretty hefty philosophical questions brewing by now. What is
“good,” even? How do you define “good” versus “bad”? Could someone value film for something “bad”? Who ultimately decides what is “good”? Given the work that’s gone into moral philosophy worldwide over thousands of years, we won’t pretend that we can solve these issues in the space of a couple of paragraphs. But how about we at least go back to a few lines from an early landmark, just to get some bigger potential misunderstandings out of the way:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are activities, others are products apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many.14

In invoking the opening passage of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the centrality that it accords to “the good,” there are, of course, a number of things we’re not endorsing here. We’re obviously not trying to sell the idea of a neatly hierarchical, teleologically governed universe, with a single “highest good” at the peak of the pyramid. Or the idea that all things (be it a person, a pot, or a Tyler Perry movie) have an immanent form dictating their good. And certainly not the idea that the good of something is universal and unchanging. Today, we know that context is king; there’s no denying that values do shape-shift and differ, often drastically, across historical and cultural borders.15

Nevertheless, there are things we readily do associate with. First is the patent ubiquity, the pervasiveness, that Aristotle ascribes to the good. We suggest that a similar ubiquity holds also for the more specific sense of the term we’re interested in: “the good” and “goods” as not just any old goal or end, but understood in terms of values.16 Surely no artifact (think: film) or activity (think: spectatorship and scholarship!) can function apart from spheres of value; they are unavoidably entangled in webs of human interests, and in this sense they all do “aim,” although likely not at “the good,” certainly at some good.

Another aspect we associate with in the passage is Aristotle’s intuition for varieties of the good: that the good comes in distinct kinds and scales. But, again, we approach this at the level of value, kinds of value. This volume thus explores a great diversity of potential values of film: personal, social, educational, political, and—yes—moral-ethical. Some might consider it a tautology to prescribe a moral or ethical value to the good of film. From our standpoint, however, the question of the good of
film proceeds from a more fundamental space where the ethical as such is about the discovery, clarification, and prioritizing of values. This entails that explicitly “moral” or “ethical” values—the likes of moral understanding, empathy, or transformative experience—at the outset do not per se deserve more attention than other kinds of value that may likewise be enlisted to characterize the good of film. Indeed, several of the essays that follow show how supposedly “nonethical” kinds of value—cognitive values such as education, or aesthetic values such as beauty or wonder—may just as much be part of the wider axiological ethics where we negotiate “the good” of cinema spectatorship.

Then there is an especially salient bit of inspiration that we take from Aristotle: reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* today, we can’t help being struck by, on top of the ubiquity and variety, the sheer plenitude of goods that he sees in the world—irrespective of whether you buy into the ancient philosopher’s metaphysical baggage. In fact, we derive this sense of plenitude precisely from the contextuality of the good. Now, obviously, the largely conditional and particular nature of the good has its downsides, and we don’t deny that a switch of context can make many a supposed good turn decidedly bad. (No doubt: the road to hell is often paved with “good” valuations.) But let us not forget that this selfsame contextuality can also birth new out-of-the-blue specimens of the good. It’s a compelling thought: that the things we may regard as good are forever in a process of disclosure and multiplication. New, unforeseen goods of film may and will be spawned by new and unforeseen situations: some as big as a technological boom or a planetary crisis, others as small as a secret idiosyncrasy at home. For Aristotle, this might have been too good to be true. Although there is already such an abundance of possible goods in the world, there are plenty more still to come.

**Unwrapping the Goods**

In the spirit of such plentiful potentials, but also potential pitfalls, we present with this volume no less than thirty-four essays—not only from scholars, but also filmmakers and critics—as a wholeheartedly pluralized perspective on the good of film spectatorship. The best way to come to grips with this abundance of values, we found, is a volume that remains methodologically agnostic and features a number of shorter essays, often voiced in a very personal tone, that approach the good of film from various directions, distances, and determinations. Intended to be thought-provoking, these invited short-form essays put assumptions
about the nexus of valuation, the good, and ethics to the test. Also, rather than boxing the essays into a reasonably conventional series of categories, we have opted for seven sections in which hidden affinities can be found and uncovered. We thus aimed for a conversation, even a dialogue, between essays that might encourage readers to draw further connections and conclusions of their own. Taken together, our seven sections, prism-like, refract the light shed on the good of film and thereby break up the assumption that we are presenting a grand theory of film ethics. And who knows: the methodological openness and frequent sense of personal voice that attends each section may even offer new perspectives and ways of doing for more conventional debates in film-philosophy. Following this “ethics” of openness and plenitude we also embrace a fairly flexible understanding of the term “film”: even though a fair number of essays focuses on fictional feature films (and some even take the cinema as their natural habitat), others don’t hesitate to deal with short films, small-file movies, documentaries, or television series. Examples range from experimental slow cinema to mainstream blockbusters, from Netflix to *Nomadland* (2020, dir. Chloé Zhao), from African cinema to the afterlives of films.

The volume’s opening conversation on *Adaptive Goods* revolves around ways that film registers and supports dramatic shifts we are undergoing, and need to undergo, in times of global upheaval—whether relating to ecological disaster, migration, or Covid-19. One essay even advocates for an environment with free access to a good that may well prove invaluable: watching films. The essays gathered in the section *Empathic Goods* focus on film as an agent of empathy, connection, and dialogue, yet ultimately also the limits and possible dangers of its empathetic potential. *Sensitive Goods*, in turn, deals with film’s cultivation of values that converge around overlapping meanings of “sensitivity”—be it sensitivity related to deep or beautiful sensory experiences, moral sensitivity towards others, or a sensitivity to discomforting cinematic experiences. In a phrase, films can be both eye-opening and eye-popping. But films can also harbor edifying, renewing, and transformational capacities, extending from experiences of wonder, through moral improvement, to undergoing profound transformation. That’s what our contributors to *Reviving Goods* put on the table.

By all means, films also have the power to convene and consolidate communities of all kinds, as the authors in the *Communal Goods* section argue. Such communities may concern widespread social causes and societal positions, or very specific instances of fanhood and cinephilia.
The essays on *Medial Goods*, by contrast, zero in on values of film that thrive on and emphasize particularities of the medium and the viewing situations in which we encounter films. Here we may think of the cinema as a space of larger-than-life experiences and protection against the vagaries of everyday life, but we can also picture the couch-potato situation of someone who by streaming on Netflix & Co. is deprived of the values nested in an entirely mundane activity: to watch without any rush the credit sequence of a film. But what if the value is not that straightforward? What if there is even pleasure to be gleaned from the unpleasant? Ask the authors who feature in our final section on *Unsettled Goods*—“unsettled” both in the sense of values that seem unstable and disquieting and the sense of values that are not yet entirely settled. Is film maybe good for nothing, as one contributor wonders? Not so fast! Even our most doubtful authors are ultimately convinced that film is good for something.

In a time of global crisis, strife, and suspicion, this collection of essays aims to sound a more upbeat tone: that watching movies can be profoundly valuable in a rich variety of ways. Of course, this does not deny the simple fact that films are also the product of market forces, often ideologically compromised, and so forth. At the end of the day, and in the greater economic scheme of things, films are still “goods.” What the following pages set out to do, though, is to deliver these goods from the still widespread prejudice that money-making entertainment is the only thing they’re good for.

**Notes**

1. Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 21 (emphasis ours). Our thanks to Seung-hoon Jeong for drawing our attention to this particular passage.
2. Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*, 21.
5. Elsaesser, “Mind-Game Film,” 34.

10. Kracauer, Theory of Film, 300.
13. For this and related lines of reasoning here we are indebted to our friend and colleague Liesbeth Korthals Altes.
15. Not that we’d go so far as to reduce all values and valuation to a relativistic free-for-all, though. While values obviously change from one local context to another, there are more fundamentally shared human contexts—“inescapable horizons,” to borrow Charles Taylor’s coinage, like nature, society, power, and subjective experience, each shining through in this volume—that still provide some stability as backgrounds of intelligibility and significance to the values that we forge. See Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 31–41.
16. In Aristotle’s terms, values represent said higher order, intrinsic ends “apart from the actions” pursued for their own sake, constituting the axiological sphere that determines our notions of what’s desirable, ideal, important, and worth striving for.
17. It’s for this reason that a figure like Jürgen Habermas—who relies upon a rigorous distinction between ethics (concerned with relative and particular goods “for me” or “for us”) versus morality (concerned with universalizable norms that must unconditionally ensure “the right” for all)—is so skeptical about whether any generalizable claims regarding the good can be made. And it’s a position that we have sympathy with. See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, Justification and Application, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 1–18.