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# Martin Roussouw, "Transformational Ethics of Film: Thinking the Cinemakeover in the Film-Philosophy Debate"

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**Martin Roussouw.** *Transformational Ethics of Film: Thinking the Cinemakeover in the Film-Philosophy Debate.* Brill 2021. 315 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9789004459953).

This book provides a contribution to the decades-long dialogue in the philosophy of film regarding whether and how films can foster philosophical thought. Among the various issues embedded in this dialogue, one concerns the extent to which films can make genuine contributions to philosophical knowledge, over and above illustrating or repeating ideas contained in the books of philosophers. Another issue concerns whether purported instances of film-as-philosophy have this effect through a film's agency, as opposed to the viewer doing the heavy philosophical lifting. In the latter instance, a question arises as to whether just any viewer of the film will undergo a philosophical exercise, or whether only those of a pre-existing philosophical persuasion will 'get' the message. Recasting much of the existing debate, Martin Roussouw's study emphasizes film's capacity for what he calls 'transformational ethics.' By this term, Roussouw means the capacity of films to challenge a viewer's thinking, and more than this, the viewer's way of being. He holds that some films have the power to elicit behavioral or ethical change in the viewer, such that the viewer's life-practices can be altered. This position takes its cue from the classical Hellenic and Roman ideals wherein philosophy is inseparable from ethics (7), and indeed, Roussouw frequently cites Pierre Hadot, a proponent of philosophy as a way of life. On the whole, I find the author's approach quite fresh. In particular, his emphasis on film's power for enacting ethical transformation, rather than theoretical insight or discovery, gives a much-needed shot in the arm to a topic whose development has stalled in recent years.

Roussouw takes his framework for transformational ethics from the writings of South African philosopher Johann Visagie. As Roussouw describes, Visagie's theory 'seeks to explain transformational ethics by describing the essential options and parameters that inform particular practices of personal transformation' (62). It is a descriptive approach focusing on the deep structures that underlie ethical, transformational discourse. An influence here is Michel Foucault, as Visagie terms his framework 'discourse archaeology.' As Roussouw summarizes, among the dimensions of this approach, transformational ethics can be divided into a threefold separation of motive, ethic, and practice. 'Motive' refers to the person's 'aspiration to change the self to some desired state' (64), emphasizing that at the root of ethical transformation is a wish to improve one's situation. 'Ethic' refers to 'an articulable conception of why and how self-change is to be achieved' (66). In this light, transformational ethics typically involves sets of rules, guidelines, or credos that specify the conditions of transformational change. Finally, 'practice' refers to the activities that provide the means for enacting transformation. Insofar as transformational ethics likewise involves a self working on itself, there are also identifiable directions or 'options' for pursuing this work. The first two, 'mode' and 'technique,' address the 'how' of self-transformation. 'Value' specifies the specific purpose to be achieved in the self-change. 'Domain' spells out the locus within one's self that is to be operated on. Finally, 'paradigm' identifies 'the "why?" behind it all,' the larger motivating context leading one to seek personal self-change (68-69). Following this taxonomy, Roussouw illustrates the framework's application in the David Fincher film *Fight Club* (1999). This film's emphasis on



fighting as a means of self-transformation is predicated on a ‘technology of the self.’ The deliberate pursuits of pain, self-harm, and pleasure reveal, alternately, ascetic and hedonistic ‘modes’ through which the film’s characters discover routes of personal transformation and growth. Yet, the film also juxtaposes fighting with other well-known traditional and contemporary ‘techniques’ for self-change, like meditation and support groups (70-71).

At this point, one might still wonder about the specific power of films to enact transformation of the self. *Fight Club* merely portrays other human beings going through transformation, but holding that films have transformative power for their viewers is another claim altogether. In the remainder of Chapter Two, Roussouw pivots and gives some attention to this question. He begins to develop his own voice on the topic by giving a ‘meta-theoretical’ analysis spun off from Visagie’s more practical account (88). He suggests redirecting Visagie’s framework for the purpose of uncovering how films can do transformative work on the self. This approach re-appropriates the task embedded in the broader notion of film-as-philosophy as one of unraveling how a film can be an impetus for self-transformation. As Roussouw observes on this note, it is difficult to distinguish what a film depicts from the work it does on the viewer (89). To unpack the question, Roussouw discusses in depth how films can realize the taxonomy of ‘technique,’ ‘mode,’ ‘value,’ ‘domain,’ and ‘paradigm,’ specifically in the manner of doing transformational work on the viewer. For instance, one transformational value (read as goal or purpose) latent in film-viewing is greater awareness, say, of oneself or specific arenas of life. As Roussouw describes, ‘the value [of awareness] typically takes the form of an increased awareness of one’s beliefs and assumptions, one’s thinking and experience, one’s embodiment, and even an awareness of what is unknowable and transcendent’ (94). Similarly, an ostensibly transformational domain of film is perception. Films can alter the ways we see, or even what we see (94-95). Likewise, films can occasion transformational ‘modes’ of reflection, contemplation, frustration, and other altered states in the viewer (91). Roussouw rounds out the chapter with multiple tables diagramming the operational mechanisms of what films accomplish in this sphere and the transformational effects that subsequently map onto the viewer. Although the material here is in one regard highly technical and rooted in rigorous categorization, Roussouw concludes the chapter with a helpful rejoinder that the taxonomy in question simply spells out the mechanism underlying the various dimensions philosophers often highlight in instances of film-as-philosophy (100). The task at hand is simply cataloging the various phenomena philosophers identify in film viewership but do not always analyze critically.

Chapter three combines the findings of Chapters One and Two for the purpose of illustrating how traditional and contemporary views of film-as-philosophy fit within the categories of transformational ethics. Roussouw groups his analyses under ‘bumper-sticker’-type slogans such as ‘Sense Your Senses,’ ‘Know Yourself,’ ‘Blow Your Mind,’ and the like, in order to generalize the ways in which film’s philosophical capacities are more deeply indicative of transformational-ethical effects often realized in film viewership. This move echoes the book’s key premise that philosophy and ethics are intertwined. Roussouw exhaustively catalogs (across nearly 100 pages) the leading positions in the film-as-philosophy debate in order to address how his framework offers alternatives to the main-line views, and in some cases, stands to recast them altogether. Philosophers whose work

Roussouw surveys here include Robert Sinnerbrink, Vivian Sobchack, Stephen Mulhall, and Daniel Frampton. Films of interest Roussouw reads alongside the literature include *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), *Happy-Go-Lucky* (Mike Leigh, 2008), *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), and *Blue* (Derek Jarman, 1993). A theme of emphasis as the chapter finishes is the character of films to make an ‘ascetic’ demand on the viewer (191-96), a dimension of withholding knowledge or refusing a certain reaction, which in turn poses a challenge to thought. I find this position, as Roussouw articulates it from the literature, to be generally persuasive as well as an important contribution to the broader dialogue.

The final main chapter focuses on the work of a single filmmaker, Terrence Malick, and one Malick film, *The Thin Red Line* (1999), dissecting the actual philosophical exercises a single film performs. As Roussouw notes at the chapter’s start, Malick has been of perennial interest to philosophers of film due both to the latter’s philosophical education and the contemplative character of his films. In the course of surveying the voluminous philosophical literature on Malick’s film, Roussouw highlights the aspects of transformational ethics that can be read in *The Thin Red Line* while also deconstructing several other readings of this film. The latter serves to provide a ‘meta-hermeneutical’ critique (242) of the often un-critical lenses with which philosophers read philosophy into this or that film.

This highly original book offers a unique and provocative contribution to the scholarship. Roussouw is a persistent questioner, often demonstrating sharp philosophical instincts. I will conclude with two critical remarks. One criticism regards the book’s very heavy focus on existing literature, to the detriment of more argumentation from the author’s own voice. The thorough engagement with the literature has the unfortunate effect of making the main chapters quite long, and beyond this, challenging for keeping the study’s principal thesis in view. On a more philosophical level, I believe the book could benefit from a broader account of the longitudinal possibilities of transformational ethics, vis-a-vis film operating as the medium for this transformation to occur. Roussouw’s account engages the phenomenon of transformation in a somewhat snapshot-like fashion. Whereas an autobiographical or other type of personal history (in the fashion of someone like Stanley Cavell) detailing the kind of long-term personal transformation Roussouw envisions could fill in the picture considerably.

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