

## Book Review\*

### *Bioethics at the Movies*

Edited by Sandra Shapshay

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. 380 pages. Paperback. ISBN 978-0801890789. RRP: £29.

*Reviewed by Trevor Stammers*

Programme Director for Bioethics and Medical Law, Centre for Bioethics and Emerging Technologies, St. Mary's University College, Twickenham. [trevor.stammers@smuc.ac.uk](mailto:trevor.stammers@smuc.ac.uk)

The cinema is a forge of contemporary morality, a crucible of ethical worldviews and a powerful lens through which to contemplate spiritual dimensions perhaps not surprisingly since it is the most popular entertainment (aside from TV which is always recycling movies or offshoots of the movie industry) in which an all powerful creator animates her or his creations. Little wonder that in a recent survey more than 20 % of Americans turn to the visual arts as their primary means of both spiritual experience and expression.

This book then is both timely and a first as far as I know. It comprises of an anthology commissioned from over twenty bioethicists – mostly with PhDs, on themes drawn from films featuring bioethical dilemmas.

The book is poorly presented – especially at the relatively high price. The essays are arranged in five sections, not all of which have an obvious connection within the grouping. Abortion, robotics and animal experimentation are lumped together in Part One with no obvious thread linking them at all. Parts Two and Four are reasonably coherent on the new genetics and issues of ageing and death respectively, but the other two sections are a hotchpotch batch of essays on the good life and the role of theory and culture. The book is “illustrated” with four black and white photos which add nothing to the text and are again seemingly chosen at random. They are also of very poor quality and the book would be much better off without them at all.

However, the main disappointment is the actual quality of the essays. The level of discussion in places is so basic as to be banal. For example, the third essay on *I, Robot* and *Bicentennial Man* opens with, “Bioethics is the study of ethics issues in the biological sciences, and it receives most public discussion in relation to issues in medicine and medical research.” This will not exactly be gripping news to most potential readers of a specialist volume like this.

---

\* This review is an expansion of a review first published in the *Catholic Medical Quarterly* Winter 2009.

Secondly, most of the authors merely use the film as a pretext for riding their hobbyhorses roughshod over the screenplay. The most vivid example of this is Matthew Burstein's essay on Richard Fleischer's 1971 sci-fi film *Soylent Green* set in a dystopian world where food shortages and overpopulation make death in the state thanatorium a noble end – except for the twist that the resulting corpses therein are secretly recycled to feed the living. The film clearly warns of the dangers of state-approved and assisted death but this does not stop Burstein using his commentary to proclaim the virtues of assisted dying. He is at least aware of the liberties he takes, even heading one section “*Are we talking about the same film?*” but such insight proves no obstacle to his unsubstantiated assertion that “Much as the thanatorium functions as the ultimate symbol of misery in *Soylent Green*, it could serve as the ultimate symbol of mastery in a properly ordered world” (p. 288).

My third criticism is that nearly all the hobbyhorses gallop one way since there is a virtually universal libertarian approach throughout. Robert Arp in the opening essay on *The Cider House Rules*, though he pays lip service to a few anti-abortion arguments, at least makes it quite explicit that he is more “sympathetic to the liberal pro-choice position” (p. 18). However, nearly all the subsequent essays on controversial topics take a broadly liberal position and a finer balance in the choice of authors would have made a far richer text. Only two films – *Million Dollar Baby* and *Gattaca* get a contrasting pair of essays and give a glimpse of how much better the book would have been following this format for all the films discussed.

Religion, though still having a large worldwide influence on bioethics and with religious themes often being present in the movies discussed (such as *Sea Inside*, *Gattaca* and *Million Dollar Baby* to mention just a few) is regrettably ignored for the most part. Where religion is referred to, it is either ridiculed as in the assertion (p. 234) that “the biblical text is replete with references to impairment as the consequences of wrongdoing” (neatly ignoring Jesus' clear teaching to the contrary in John 9:3) or else it is totally unreferenced to a primary source, for example, the attribution to Augustine of the teaching that disability is a direct punishment for the fall of Adam (p. 234) (a claim indeed widely asserted on the internet but with not one of the claims being referenced to Augustine's actual writings!).

In spite of these serious flaws, the book is worth a look, however, as it will promote awareness of previously undiscovered relevant films, even for those with a longstanding interest in bioethics in cinema – around a dozen of the films discussed were new to me. A minority of the essays are well written, cogently argued or simply very emotionally moving. The discussion of the film *Dad* contains some interesting discussion of what we mean by compassionate care and authentic living and it certainly touched even this cynical critic's heart.

There is also a wealth of references at the end of each essay to other films as well as to relevant classic and contemporary papers. Every chapter also concludes with topics for group discussion and there will certainly be much to discuss, perhaps especially for those not as enamoured with the autonomy-dominated perspective as most of the contributors to this volume.