

The Good Bones of Kupfer's Framework for Applying Morality to Television and Film

Introduction

Through his writing on the ability of the audience to derive successful criticisms and moral advice from film, Joseph Kupfer provides a logical framework for going from narrative facts to successful interpretations. His embrace of the inherent value of practicing virtue found in Aristotelian virtue ethics allows him to put forth fictitious film as narratives case studies in moral judgement that can supplement empirical evidence of the good. This paper will examine how his process of higher level interpretation successfully supports his application of moral judgment, while also challenging Kupfer's deviation from intent of the author towards public consensus for "successful" moral interpretations of film through extreme cases of both irreverent satire and sanctimonious film.

First Order Facts to Interpretations

Kupfer sets up distinctions among first order content, intermediate interpretations, and higher-order meaning statements which are communicated through narrative film. First order interpretations are "foundational descriptions of the story" (336), that constitute basic narrative facts about the content, and these "cannot be challenged as they are "necessary for readers or viewers to make sense of a story" (335). There exists an overwhelming sense of reliability of first order facts since Kupfer contends that viewers are usually able to operate with regular assumptions about spatial, temporal, and causal relationships that are modelled after their perception of the real world. Occasionally, a film will set up shakier first order content either through the use of an unreliable narrator (e.g. *Forrest Gump*) or through explicit suspension of spatio-temporal uniformity and/or the laws of physics (e.g. *Groundhog*

Day, Avengers Endgame), but even in these scenarios, viewers are able to adjust their assumptions and proceed without further disbelief in basic facts.

Developing intermediary observations requires the viewer to step back from the immediacy of first order happenings in order to examine the relationships/connections between basic narrative facts. Kupfer contends that intermediate inferences are usually not made atomically on individual first order events, but instead viewers “derive implications from clusters of scenes, collages of images, and counterpoints of dialogue” (336). Kupfer summarizes this view by stating the text of a script supports or justifies the interpretation, from intermediate inferences through subsequent building of meaning, to summary statements of the film’s overall themes and views” (339). However, his open nature of synthesizing intermediate interpretations allow “viewers of movie fictions [to] have a degree of freedom in interpreting them” (336), which has crucial upshots for his later arguments about forming moral takeaways from film.

Kupfer aims to empower the critic by arguing that interpretive freedom of higher level inferences requires some degree of responsibility, while also recognizing that there is no critic that can be considered truly impartial. Each critic and viewer brings his own set of experiences, perspectives, and beliefs with him to view a film, allowing for a variety of interpretations for the same mass-produced film. Since “critics reveal themselves in their criticisms” (337), there arises a plethora of possibilities for the application of fictitious films to commentary on society, politics, religion, etc. based on the critic’s values and personal experiences. Kupfer is particularly concerned with this upshot since inventive critics with an agenda can use “movie fiction as a springboard for their own flights of fancy instead of fitting their inventiveness more faithfully to the story” (338).

Successful Film Critiques

In a sea of potential inferences from a film, Kupfer argues that successful interpretations are those which most accurately reflect the purpose of the film. He clarifies that this purpose is not necessarily that of the filmmaker, since art is “a public object open to interpretation according to conventions of

intelligibility and the interpreter's creative response" (339), which allows him to avoid problems of artist intentionality in favor of a historical or societal consensus. For example, Kupfer believes that the public has reached a consensus on interpreting Hitchcock's *Vertigo* as within a more removed psychological and meta-narrative perspective. This does not mean that some religious interpretation of guilt and divine judgement in the mission tower scene of the movie is necessarily wrong, but Kupfer would argue that it is not nearly as successful as placing the entire movie within a psychological framework of analysis.

Yet even with public consensus, "no one interpretive approach can respond to the spectrum of questions or tangle of interests that movie-goers and critics may have" (339), since the varied experiences of viewers allow for an incredibly diverse array of interpretations, some of which might be complete outliers unencountered by an individual critic. Although the application of a variety of individual experiences leads to more diverse interpretations of an artistic work, Kupfer holds that the experience of viewers vindicates successful interpretations of the film. The more successful connections that viewers can make with the narrative events in a film can make the perspectives from the work more rewarding as they validate human experience and provide a solid foundation for discussing higher level interpretations with others.

Kupfer further clarifies this claim about the coexistence of film interpretations in both film fiction and the real world through his experience of moral claims made by film narratives. While accurate moral claims are able to enhance movie appreciation when present in a fictitious narrative, Kupfer believes that these "general claims are supposed to capture truths about human life" (340) when applied back to the real world. However, he does recognize that moral claims made in film need not be directly applicable to every viewer in order to add meaningful interpretation to a film. Although individualistic, this perspective has a promising upshot of encouraging each viewer to assess films for moral claims that they see reflected in their own lives in order to form societal consensus through a double reference of (1) what is good in fiction narratives and (2) what is consequently good in the real world.

Virtue Ethics

Kupfer is also a staunch virtue ethicist, who follows the Aristotelian idea that virtues are excellent qualities of human beings that are cultivated through either good or bad behavior. He further breaks down virtue into (1) executive virtues for self-mastery, which are those that are critical for practicing moral values (e.g. patience, courage, determination, etc.), and (2) substantive virtues that can motivate action towards these overarching executive virtues (e.g. compassion, loyalty, generosity, etc.). He contends that “executive virtues without the substantive are morally directionless; substantive virtues without the executive are without efficacy,” (342) since they mutually reinforce each other. To make a simple analogy, the executive virtues are like the car’s GPS display which charts a course for a road trip and the substantive are the gas that is burned to move the vehicle along the correct road.

Taking a Western concept of Aristotelian virtue, Kupfer contends that “virtues help constitute these valuable aspects of life” and defines a good life as acting in line with moral virtues. Virtues are inherently good (i.e. in and of themselves) “because the virtues are the forms by which people realize their human potential” (344). Although virtues are developed through practicing good activities, Kupfer disagrees with MacIntyre’s concept that virtues are merely vehicles through which humans can access the good things internal to life’s activities since this is too instrumental of a concept for a true Aristotelian. For example, studying hard for the MCAT is not virtuous since it gives one a chance to become an incredibly successful doctor, but her studying is inherently good regardless of whether or not she even takes the exam. Merely practicing the virtues of hard work, discipline, and knowledge are a celebration of what makes her truly human, and her success “flows naturally from putting the virtues into practice” (344). The upshot of this internal achievement found in practicing virtue can be found through its combination with human wisdom, which allows an individual to know which virtue to practice and to what extent in a given moral dilemma. Without a well-formed sense of judgement, one risks slipping into vice since “virtue lies in the mean between the extremes of more and less” (344). Kupfer highlights this formation of judgment as a large empirical aspect of living a good life since the only way to develop moral wisdom is through witnessing/practicing virtue in one’s own life and the lives of others.

Kupfer does agree with MacIntyre that “ascribing virtue and vice to individuals also presupposes constructing the appropriate stories for them” (345). This furthers his previous claims about both (1) the necessity of first order facts to give basis for higher level interpretations (i.e. one needs biographical events in order to practice virtue) and (2) the empirical nature of developing proper moral judgment from human experience. He compares fictitious film narratives to be “like case studies in law” ripe for philosophical analysis since they “naturally elicit attention to those loose ends of life so easily lost on the clean edges of academic theory” (345). Films provide new evidence and experiences to keen viewers that allow them to make comparisons to their handling of moral dilemmas in their own lives or to supplement their limited life experiences in certain areas to test their clear cut moral philosophies in a more practical, messier setting.

For example, the first two *Star Wars* trilogies set a standard for showing the descent of a savior character (i.e. Anakin Skywalker) as he answers continuous moral dilemmas with selfishness and anger until he devolves into one of the most recognizable, ruthless villains in cinematic history. Even though the narrative events of the film are presented in a different galaxy far, far away, the presentation of a likeable character with redeeming qualities places the viewer into Anakin’s headspace as he justifies a series of morally ambiguous decisions in the prequel trilogy, allowing the viewer to approve or disapprove of his development of vices until the consequences of his actions consume him. There is some degree of payoff when Anakin’s son is able to find the bring out the remaining virtues in his father through patience and forgiveness, providing the viewer with a nice happy ending and a moral lesson about seeing the good in others.

Much like the quality of subsequent *Star Wars* films, the world has changed, and more sophisticated audiences have fallen in love with relatable antiheroes including Jules Winnfield, Walter White, John Wick, etc. who are often left unredeemed. Not that the antihero hasn’t been a part of the 20th century (e.g. Charles Foster Kane, Michael Corleone), but examples of increasing intensity of satirical comedy and absurdism in the first two decades of the 21st century seem to stretch certain areas of Kupfer’s theory on moral education through film and television.

It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia

One of the most successful irreverent comedies of the 21st century is Rob McElhenney's *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, which was recently renewed for its record-breaking 15th season in 2020. The show revolves around five snide narcissists who run a local bar by night and engage in elaborate, self-promoting schemes during their off hours. Although the show starts off with a controversial first season in which "the gang" provides 14 year-old's with fake ID's and attempts to pick up women at abortion clinic protests, the character's somehow devolve even further into predatory manipulators who kidnap and physically and emotionally torture at least three different people. Despite how many times they poison bar patrons, lock their neighbors in a burning building, or extort their friends for donations to fake illnesses, each episode seems to reset the premise with very few continuities between episodes. Much like the characters in the show, the audience never really gets to witness the consequences of their actions since it's always on to the next scheme. Some solace can be found in the gang's unspoken loyalty to each other, shown through tribalistic scenes in which the gang collectively spits on patrons, sabotages a medical study, or assaults a waiter at a gourmet restaurant. But usually the audience finds that these allegiances only arise for sex, money, and influence over other members of the gang, and sincere actions are almost always mocked by the show.

Applying Kupfer's principles, general public opinion of the show has recognized its satirical nature and most people have interpreted it as such. Like many satires, *It's Always Sunny* exercises the audience's moral judgment through negative reinforcement of morally corrupt actions (i.e. it shows the audience how not to behave). Although it tends to gloss over the consequences and vices developed by its characters, a reasonable viewer can find entertainment in the ironic and offensive humor of the gang's behavior while understanding why it is morally reprehensible to replicate. It makes functional sense that *It's Always Sunny* rarely examines the conscience of its sociopathic and depraved characters since this in depth analysis of the certain emptiness felt by its characters would likely dampen the comedy of the content and deter viewers from watching it. Self-awareness, sincerity, and serious consequences are

completely off-brand for the show, so they are understandably avoided by the producers and must be imputed from a viewer's personal experience. Hence, even this negative concept of morality would still prove valuable under Kupfer's theory of applying virtue ethics to film, in the same way that it might be good for a finance student to read a case study on the moral pitfalls of the Lehman Brothers company. However, there might be an Aristotelian mean to be found here between fetishizing the the most disgusting evils of society and insulating the audience from grim immoralities of the real world.

Dhar Mann Videos

A helpful juxtaposition to the glorified irreverence of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* might be found in a YouTube video series produced by internet personality Dhar Mann. Creating content for his 3.32 million followers on YouTube, Mann describes himself as a "mission-driven entrepreneur and filmmaker focused on ideas that have a massive positive impact on the world" (YouTube). His videos often contain poorly scripted and obviously contrived scenarios in which characters "learn their lesson" through karmic consequences that arise from mistreating other people. Underneath the cringey dialogue and axiomatic portrayal of social wrongs, Mann delivers on promoting morally good actions and encouraging his viewers to like and share the positive message of these productions.

His winning optimism and pragmatic advice might make Mann a helpful moral guru, but his short films can be painfully uncomfortable for those outside of the #DharMannFam fanbase, often putting Mann himself at the butt of many jokes online. The forced acting and obvious message in videos such as "Customer Humiliates Burn Survivor; He Immediately Regrets His Decision" portrays an interaction between a cruel restaurant-goer and a scarred waiter that is so heavy-handed that even some propagandists might cringe. The contrived premise and uncomfortable dialogue results in a fantastical ending in which the customer's girlfriend leaves him for the server during their anniversary date. Although this message (i.e. treat people with physical disabilities with respect) is morally good, the unrealistic delivery of this message might provide challenges for Kupfer's theory on moral education through film.

Ironically, Mann's attempt to teach an ethics lesson -- through dialogue so cringey that it makes George Lucas' *Attack of the Clones* sound like *Pulp Fiction* -- might compromise the believability of first order facts of the work. By Kupfer's framework of building higher level meaning off of interpretations of reliable first order facts, using a foundation of unrealistic dialogue and contrived premises can poison the fruit of work. Varying interpretations based on unstable first order facts might be the reason why 110k people "Liked" the waiter video while another few thousand flocked to the comments section with pitchforks and torches. This disparity between interpretations of the same work could present problems for Kupfer since he would need a consensus public opinion on the merit of the short film to determine if it should either be presented as a morality lesson to educate children or shown on a late night comedy show as a cringe bit. The danger here is that breaking away from the intention of the filmmaker in favor of public opinion assumes a large risk that the first order facts in the film might not align with the audience's experiences and create more of the hateful comments sections and vituperative philosophy papers that result from incorrect interpretations.

Reliance upon the empiricism of the audience also alludes to a general criticism of virtue ethics, since some critics believe that it places too much emphasis on an individual's judgment for determining moral action. Developing "good" moral judgment can be likened to Kupfer's concept of developing a successful interpretation and critique. Both are processes in which one usually tends towards public consensus on basic tenets of meaning, or in this case, morality (e.g. don't kill others, tell the truth, etc.). However, there might exist problematic situations in which there is not a public consensus on the morally correct action, which leaves individuals creating their own meaning with no way to check if they are tending towards the good.

Borat

In a 2006 satire film called *Borat*, comedian Sacha Baron Cohen portrays a fictitious Kazakhstani journalist, Borat Sagdiyev who travels to the United States in order to learn more about the culture. The film is a critically acclaimed mockumentary in which Baron Cohen feigns ignorance of all Western social

cues and customs in order to place non actor film participants in incredibly uncomfortable situations. As an offensive stereotype of misguided Western concepts of a middle eastern man, Borat propagates regressive, misogynistic, and anti-semitic ideals that would almost definitely be condemned by an average American in 2006 or 2020.

The comedic appeal of the film -- outside of mere shock value -- lies in Borat's ability to interact with the individuals who aren't "in on the joke." Often Borat is reprimanded by socially conscious individuals who attempt to steer him towards what society believes is good, whether through trying to educate him on the independence and ability of modern women, showing him hospitality at a bed and breakfast, or informing him proper why showing nude photographs are generally frowned upon at a formal dinner. But Borat also discovers people who are all too eager to share in discussing his politically incorrect ideas, including violently misogynist fraternity brothers from USC, Confederate antique store owners, and a war-mongering rodeo crowd. His interactions with people on both sides of the spectrum often leave the non actors suspended between maintaining a sense of morals by declining to entertain Borat's antics but also being polite to someone who appears to be a confused tourist. The movie is able to provide comedic appeal through the reactions of both sides, especially at the expense of those who try to be most patient with him (e.g. the dinner hosts), leaving the only successful response to be walking away from the situation so as not to be pranked.

Much like *It's Always Sunny in Incheon*, Borat provides a pretty tangible example of a poor moral judge, as speaking and acting on his beliefs often belittle those around and put hateful energy into the world. As much as "do unto others as Borat wouldn't do" might prove to be a solid moral interpretation of the film, there are still consequential ambiguities on how others should deal with Borat. Literally the only positive and wholesome relationships fostered by Borat arise from a forgiveness pact with Azamat to kidnap Pamela Anderson and a forbidden romance with a prostitute named Luenell, both of which are condemned by all others in the film. There seems to be no immediately accessible response to the situations in which the film places its non actor participants, preventing them from finding an Aristotelian mean between the vices of being unfriendly to Borat or letting him walk all over them.

A particularly interesting controversial example from the film is the dinner hosts' decision to abruptly end the evening when Borat's prostitute Luenelle arrives at the front door. The hosts had been welcoming and patient with Borat for hours, but they finally draw the line at having a formal dinner with a prostitute, something that their Lord and savior did multiple times in the Bible. Although one man legitimately fears for the illegality of having a prostitute in his home, the film portrays the hosts' stereotyping and cold treatment of Luenell quite negatively, and the audience is encouraged to support her blossoming relationship with Borat as one of the only wholesome aspects of the film.

Even an experienced virtue ethicist like Kupfer would likely struggle with finding the proper response to this situation since it seems to set two of his claims at odds. He can likely lean on his later claim that struggling with moral judgment is good in and of itself (i.e. it's good for the viewer to put himself in the position of these dinner hosts), but his reliance on historical and public consensus for developing a successful critique of this film might be tougher to prove. Since individuals often have trouble coming to a consensus on interpreting sacred texts within religious groups, one Christian might want to show Luenell the patience and love displayed by Jesus in the New Testament while others might flip to Leviticus and start looking for stones. In some of these more controversial areas, Kupfer might need to concede that there is no way to develop public consensus on the proper interpretation of this scene, since one viewer might sympathize with welcoming the likeable prostitute Luenell while another might praise the hosts standing up for themselves in the midst of a quasi-legal imposition made by their guest. Regardless of the public's judgment on the morality of the hosts' actions, the mere action of applying moral consideration to this mockumentary is still a win for Kupfer, it might just lead to different interpretations that cannot be labelled as "successful" or not.

Conclusion

In summary, both principled and degenerate works of film can be processed through Kupfer's theory of moral education through applying virtue ethics to film as narrative case studies for moral practice. At times sacrificing moral ideals for a grittier presentation of first order facts might be more

successful in providing correct interpretations, especially when these works are clearly satirical. However, a combination of the synthesis of individual empiricism in virtue ethics and Kupfer's appeal public consensus might struggle to fully handle complicated cases which lack either reliable first order facts or public consensus to determine the success of interpretations. For the most part Kupfer provides a very solid ethical framework that encourages engagement and individual critical synthesis with mass art which inherently furthers public wisdom on ethics through motivating more moral practice. Although not completely air-tight, Kupfer's framework seems to be positive in and of itself.

Works Cited

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