

AESTHETICS

Philosophy Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Philosophy

By CHRISTOPHER FALZON

Routledge, 2002. x + 230 pp. £45.00 cloth, £11.99 paper

Philosophy through Film

By MARY M. LITCH

Routledge, 2002. viii + 242 pp. £55.00 cloth, £15.99 paper

On Film

By STEPHEN MULHALL

Routledge 2002. viii + 142 pp. £40.00 cloth, £7.99 paper

The first two books, by Falzon and Litch, seek to introduce and explore basic questions in philosophy by using film. Hence the first half of the review will be taken up with them both. The rest of the review will be taken up with Mulhall's book. This is a different kind of beast, constituting a meditation on, primarily, the *Alien* quartet and the ways in which it explores philosophical questions in its own right.

With respect to Falzon's and Litch's books, it is slightly odd that Routledge should issue them at the same time, competing as they do for similar markets and having almost identical goals. Both seek to set up fundamental philosophical questions and examine them in the light of various movies. Indeed, in certain cases both authors concentrate on the very same films, in ethics for example Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is thoroughly discussed. The areas covered by both books overlap to a large extent, though they are distinct. Falzon's book consists of six chapters covering, respectively, theories of knowledge, the self and personal identity, moral philosophy, social and political philosophy, society, science and technology and critical thinking. Litch's has eight chapters on scepticism, relativism, personal identity, artificial intelligence, ethics, free will, determinism and moral responsibility, the problem of evil and existentialism. Both Litch and Falzon use films to illustrate, explicate and help explain independent philosophical positions and arguments, covering familiar fundamental arguments from Plato through to Descartes, Kant and beyond. The role of film here is thus primarily illustrative and instrumental. Film is a good means of rendering psychologically close or vivid philosophical issues that in the abstract can seem very distant. No doubt those taking first year lectures involving Descartes have been glad of *The Matrix* for this reason for the last few years.

As to their relative merits the books again overlap though they are distinct. Both cover the ground they set out for themselves engagingly, the discussion of films used is interesting in its own right and genuinely illustrative. Litch's philosophical expositions on each theme are more closely integrated with one or two particular films in each case. The reader is often directed in some detail to particular scenes (the story lines of the main films discussed are given by elapsed time in the appendix). The text itself is more directly focused on

prompting students' questions and there's a useful list of questions at the end of each theme for them to consider further. Falzon's text has a slightly different feel. It is more urbane, engagingly written and has a less text book style feel about it. Rather than devote as much space as Litch's does to the development of particular positions, finessing philosophical distinctions and so on, Falzon chooses to range more broadly over the issues. I am assuming that the intended market for both books is the general reader interested in finding out about philosophy and the first year student taking a basic philosophy course for the first time. To give a sense of the differences between the two, I would say that Falzon's book would be the better for the general reader. The writing style and range recommend it for this readership and Litch's text is just too dense and text book orientated for such a person—they are likely to balk at talk of the transitivity of identity and conceptual schemes. Both would be admirably suited for someone taking a basic philosophy course using film, though the teacher would have to do more work if using the Falzon than the Litch. Litch's would be preferable for a basic philosophy course where the students were likely to go on to do more philosophy since it achieves greater depth and makes greater demands on the reader. In my own teaching context I think little would be gained, and something lost, by introducing students to basic philosophy strictly via film in this illustrative way. Nonetheless, in other contexts the pedagogical gain, motivating interest by using an art form most students are predisposed to love and be familiar with, may be much greater. For someone tempted by the thought of putting on courses introducing students to philosophy via film, both have much to recommend them.

The title of Mulhall's book, *On Film*, is somewhat misleading. It should perhaps have been titled something like *On Aliens*, though that no doubt would have attracted entirely the wrong audience. In essence it is an extended philosophical exploration of the Alien film quartet. The series consists of Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), David Fincher's *Alien 3* (1992) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien Resurrection* (1997). The central character is Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) who confronts in various forms the threat posed to her, others and humanity in general by the potential spread of a viciously hostile alien species. The nature of the aliens, the responses of the various crews and the machinations of the company for which they work enable the films to explore themes concerning bodily integrity, gender, humanity and redemption. Mulhall aims to show that the series is no mere illustration of philosophical argumentation but themselves constitute a serious, independent exploration of views and attitudes with respect to such themes. He further claims that the series foregrounds questions about the conditions of cinema as such. In pursuing his argument, devoting a chapter per film, Mulhall examines the way film genre conventions, such as science-fiction and horror, and the general conditions of Hollywood film-making can both support and resist the achievement of artistic excellence. The nature of the series also enables him to explore the ways in which each film reveals what is distinctive about each director's artistic vision, bringing to bear discussion of the respective directors' other films to support his judgement.

Mulhall's philosophical discussion of each film is highly stimulating. His discussion of the aliens' pure, blind viciousness in the service of their drive for parasitic reproduction, as introduced in *Alien*, is illuminating. The representation of the impregnated humans as victims of their own flesh and blood, their bodies rendered alien to themselves, shows how the film deftly explores what it is to be human. Our fears concerning embodiment, animality and humanity are connected thematically to Ridley Scott's later *Blade Runner*, concerned as it is with the chasing down of wayward replicants doomed to die in 4 years. There are points at which readers will no doubt want to take issue with Mulhall's elaborations and judgements. This reader, for example, thought that the dismissal of *Blade Runner The Director's Cut* failed to recognise that the replicants themselves had in a sense become more human, in their capacity to feel and respond to life in the light of mortality, than most *homo sapiens* in the world represented. And some of the analysis of James Cameron's *Aliens*, a superb chase in space suspense movie, seemed overly strained. But the analysis of Fincher's *Alien 3* in terms of redemption finally gives that film its rightful due. But whatever disagreements individual readers will have is in part a tribute to the fact that the analysis is always engaging, stimulating and makes one want to revisit the films in their own right.

Although much of Mulhall's aims are fulfilled by his discussion, it's far from clear whether he shows all his claims to be well grounded. What is philosophically distinctive about the series as film as distinct from other forms of narrative? What is gained, we might ask, by seeing the fictional worlds represented as films as opposed to their being represented by literary texts? No doubt much is added imaginatively and immersively, in terms of visceral, emotional impact. But it is telling that much of Mulhall's analysis rests upon general narrative features of the films rather than features particular to them as films. Although Mulhall does make suggestive and provocative remarks we never really see an argument or line of thought developed which suggests why we should take the series in terms of film as philosophy (as opposed say to narrative as philosophy). Nonetheless it is a provocative and engaging book which makes for stimulating reading for anyone interested in both film and philosophy.

THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

MATTHEW KIERAN

A Philosophical Study of T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets

By MARTIN WARNER

Edwin Mellen Press, 1999. xii + 138 pp. £41.50

This is a very *clever, well-researched* and *useful* book. At least, it will be very useful for those interested in Eliot's work, and more generally for those interested in how (if at all) one can treat poetry *as* philosophy. More indirectly, it raises interesting questions about the scope and (perhaps necessary) limitations of the project of literature functioning as (in effect) non-literary assertion.

Warner's short book efficaciously works through the influences upon Eliot, making an indisputable case in particular for the thoroughly Augustinian

metaphysics and phenomenology at work in the poem—or at least in the poem as Eliot created it and saw it.

Now, genuine poetry, according to Eliot, can communicate without being understood (p. 1). The difficulty I have with Warner's impressive scholarly presentation is that he mostly reads Eliot as (in his poetry) communicating with us essentially indirectly, but ultimately not unprosaically. I mean: he reads Eliot (and indeed this is in practice sometimes, unfortunately, how Eliot would, I think, have liked to have been read) as communicating things that are in the end in themselves (as opposed to in their mode of presentation) not much different from things that might be communicated in a set of theoretic assertions, in a plodding philosopher's thesis.

Eliot correctly observed that, "The reader's interpretation [of a poem] may differ from the author's and be equally valid—it may even be better. . . .". I suspect that the very best 'interpretations' of *Four Quartets* are mostly not those that Eliot himself would have offered, not even as (thoroughly and in a way very admirably) paraphrased and 'footnoted' by Warner. I think that Eliot did not understand just how fine his own grasp of the musicality and philosophically-astute tonality of English—of poetry—could be, when left in his poetry. Warner writes rightly (p. 128) of the "linguistic 'music' of *Four Quartets*", but very little of his analysis actually moves in that register. Reading Warner's book, one might almost miss the extraordinary (and, I believe, important) *sound* of lines such as:

Distracted from distraction by distraction,
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning . . .

Here, the plainness of "empty of meaning" importantly contrasts with the qualitatively complex sound of the line and a half preceding it. Much later in *Four Quartets*, we have:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.

I believe that one does not hear the word-music here deeply enough, if one does not pay specific attention to the way the rhythms and repetitions in the poem are *not separable* from the philosophising one can hear Eliot as here undertaking *vis-à-vis* the nature of time, of meaning, and so on.

My sketched criticism here is not however only of Warner: the same difficulty is, again, in Eliot himself. Warner quotes Eliot's important essay, 'The music of poetry' (p. 2): "[T]he poem means more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate." Yes; but I would claim that a deeply-rewarding interpretation of *Four Quartets* would pay *more* attention to the musicality of,

and the 'display' of, language in that poem than Eliot in actuality sets out the ground for in that essay of his. The *sound* of presented paradoxes and indeed of conceptual impossibilities, impossibilities that force one to philosophise for oneself, from them: that is what Eliot I think (almost unknowingly) gives us in the greatest passages in 'Burnt Norton' and 'Little Gidding' (and in the poem's 'coda') in particular. That is how a poem means 'more', not less, than 'ordinary language'. It is not that a good poem concentrates a heavy dose of ordinary meaning into a small pill of words. It is that it sounds or displays the ordinary—or nonsensical violations of the ordinary—and thus gives us a marvellous *illusion* of managing to mean so much, when *in the ordinary sense* it does not mean anything at all.

What is regrettable is that Eliot himself has I think too unsubtle and unpoetic a notion of what it is for a poem to communicate. A poem should above all communicate *itself*. In theory, Eliot believed this (there are famous witty episodes of his refusing in various ways asinine requests for him to explain his poetry to listeners), but in not understanding this in much of the actual practice of his literary theory and criticism, and perhaps also failing to stay true to this thought at some key moments in *Four Quartets*, Eliot probably communicates his own works without (or at least 'before') understanding them. . . .

Eliot's poetry, 'even' in *Four Quartets*, is, I submit, at its best when it is starkly 'untranslatable', unparaphraseable—when it resists all of Warner's fine efforts. The language of great poetry ("In order to arrive there, to arrive where you are . . .") is the language of paradox; great poetry, in my opinion very like the greatest philosophy, starkly and bluntly resists being prosified, largely because it retains a condition of paradoxicality even when (intelligently) spoken of or criticised. Warner sees this (on p. 122, for example) but is not fully comfortable with it; in my view, he is too concerned to have Eliot's "vision" end up as "coherent" (his words). This is in effect to attempt to reveal the meaningful and coherent (non-literary) assertion(s) allegedly latent in Eliot's work; and misses I think the moments when Eliot's writing is greater and stranger than even he knows.

I do not think Eliot quite as great a poet as (say) Wallace Stevens, because the latter's (also clearly philosophical) poetry has consistently stronger styles and distinctiveness than Eliot's. Stevens's voice is, one might venture, more distinctively that of a poet, whereas sometimes Eliot seems almost to want to be how Warner apparently wants him to be: that is, more prosaic than he actually is. Stevens (like with the unparaphraseable 'prose' of Faulkner or Woolf) develops more of a 'language' of his own, a 'language' that can never be our language, never be a language in use. Thus he endlessly forces us to understand the form of our language, and to realise (through the absurdities he draws out) the nature of sense. A book like Warner's written of Stevens, however deeply-learned, would more definitely fail.

Whereas Eliot, especially at times in *Four Quartets*, *invites* Warner's approach. But that still does not imply that the very best thing to do is to accept Eliot's invitation. (Eliot is among other things a poet who seems to believe both that poems communicate in unparaphraseable ways and that they provide stuff for

exegesis—if, as I suspect, this just is incoherent, then continuing to strive to find the coherence in his vision is going to be subject to the law of diminishing returns.)

In sum, this is a very effective book, on its own terms. My only regrets are first that it doesn't pick up on the Buddhist allusions and aspects of *Four Quartets*, especially in 'Burnt Norton' and 'East Coker'; and, second, and most crucially, that it accepts Eliot a little too much on *his* own reflective terms, rather than treating him as the fairly strong philosophical *poet* who he actually is. Warner's is a book that in effect supplies an extended set of brilliant and erudite footnotes to Eliot's great long poem (footnotes of roughly the kind which Eliot himself famously and perhaps regrettably provided in the case of *The Waste Land*).

A last word: I wonder that more has not been made by literary critics (and philosophers) of the bizarre *title* of Eliot's work, *Four Quartets*. For the poem seems to consist of four *quintets* of poems, plus, perhaps, even a fifth, relatively short poem (or else 'Little Gidding' is a sextet—I am referring of course to the so-called 'coda' of 'Four Quartets'). Light can possibly be cast on this, if one reads section I of each of the four named poems in *Four Quartets* in turn, then section II, and so on. [If you want to try this for yourself, I suggest you try it first with section V of each named poem.] My suspicion is that Eliot's poem is at least as much *Five Quartets* as it is *Four Quintets* (and perhaps the 'coda' itself is already a hint in the direction of the 'criss-crossing' reading I am intimating here). So, is Eliot's great 'numbered' work perhaps comparable to Wittgenstein's, not only in 'leaving everything as it is', but also in approaching the same points over and over again from different directions, in sequences both deliberate and (yet) inviting re-reading in a different order? After all, Wittgenstein remarked both that his own philosophical writing should be read as a kind of poetry, and that if his remarks came out as verse, then that would be a (bad) mistake. This latter point relates crucially I think to the brief discussion of musicality and philosophy, above—and all this might be a worthy topic for philosophical study and investigation, continuing in the footsteps Warner has begun to tread for us.

THE UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

RUPERT READ

Philosophy, Literature and the Human Good

By MICHAEL WESTON

Routledge, 2001. xix + 198 pp. £45.00 cloth, £14.99 paper

The last three words of the title could well have been in scare quotes, since Weston is sceptical of the notion of there being some unitary 'human good'; "to say a view of life is 'true' is to see one's own life in its terms" (p. 156) he maintains, displaying a wide variety of such terms.

We are first taken from the Kantian attempt to show that we cannot know the way things really are, though poetry can give us "a quasi-experience of what cannot be experienced" (p. 67), through Schlegel's and Nietzsche's questioning of the intelligibility of such a notion allied to proposals that we

should, consequently, conceive of life in terms of art, to the responses to the collapse of such proposals of, successively, Bataille, Blanchot and Derrida. For the latter we are in our thinking 'implicated' in some notion of finality, but the attempt to think such a notion inevitably fails and literature can help to bring this out.

Weston distances himself from this familiar narrative, doubting the implication claimed, and also from Rorty's 'literary' attempt to conclude it with an 'ironist' vision which, since no view of life can be transcendently grounded, involves "inability to love one thing with all one's heart, soul, and mind" (p. 105). This "lack of seriousness" (p. 107) Weston sees as complicit with transcendentalism (why otherwise should the lack of transcendental warrant lead to such inability?), contrasting such eminently 'serious' writers as Murdoch and Nussbaum, who involve literature in their inquiries into the human good. Their own criteria's failure to adjudicate between them leads Weston to conclude that the latter have misunderstood their own projects, which are better seen as historically situated explorations "of the nature and possibilities of making sense of life" (p. 156). This brings their projects closer to Cavell's explorations of literature's and philosophy's aspirations to an impossible, transcendently certified, safety, addressed creatively in their very different ways by Shakespeare and Wittgenstein. Weston is critical of Cavell's 'perfectionist' turn as being, again, complicit with what it rejects, and—*via* invocation of a Kierkegaardian conception of "the truth in which to exist" (p. 136)—endorses D.Z. Phillips's concern to disentangle existential from cognitive issues and his perception of the importance of reminders, both literary and philosophical, of the possibilities for the appropriation of religious, moral and related concepts in our lives. Without such reminders certain possibilities may become unavailable to a culture. Weston concludes with Phillips's account of R.S. Thomas's "long journey in verse . . . [to] the sense of waiting on a hidden God" (p. 149), with all the problems of self-deception this may involve, and his own reading of Conrad's *Lord Jim* where the central issue is that of self-deception with respect to "what it is to live in terms of a conception of life's significance" (p. 175); what is shown is "that self-understanding here is, at a certain depth, necessarily obscure and precarious" (p. 176).

The accounts of the various thinkers are generally fair and perceptive, though there are occasional passages of slack writing (for example, some curious slippages between 'signified', 'signifier', 'sign' and 'word' in the discussion of Derrida; pp. 52–55), and often luminous and finely judged. Rather than enter into the obvious controversies I simply remark that, as so often with philosophical writing on literature, I had a sense of reading *Hamlet* without the Prince. Despite Kant's (and Blanchot's) foregrounding of poetry, and the attention to R.S. Thomas, there is no serious engagement with the potentialities of poetry as image, symbol and metre, as distinct from narrative. While it is conceded that "What a work of literature says cannot be separated from how it is said" (p. 152), it is noted that in Phillips "poetry's power as poetry is largely taken as read" (p. 154); the same goes generally for Weston (though, to be fair, he does address structure and tone in Conrad's novel), yet

how can one properly consider what literature (especially poetry) says without attention to the way it says it, if the two cannot be separated? Reflection on such matters, whether in Sophocles, Dante, Eliot or, indeed, R.S. Thomas, might lead one to query Weston's apparent suggestion that there is an intrinsic incompatibility between literature and claims for "universal validity" (pp. 156–157), but that would be another book.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

MARTIN WARNER

PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry

By GORDON GRAHAM

Routledge, 2002. xii + 196 pp. £40.00 cloth, £8.99 paper

Philosophers often like to think that their characteristic skills can be usefully contributed to just about any field of human inquiry. Maybe they are right. But when a philosopher publishes a book with a title of the form 'X: A Philosophical Inquiry', and his or her grasp of X is shallow and error-laden, then serious practitioners of X will feel quite justified in judging that philosophers should mind their own business. This is how things stand with Gordon Graham's *Genes: A Philosophical Inquiry*. One suspects that his grasp of the relevant empirical material has been gleaned from a few textbooks and popular writers. He as much as admits this in the preface, but the disclaimer hardly excuses what follows (or excuses Routledge for publishing it).

There are just four chapters to this concise and readable little book. The first is short and scene-setting—clarifying a few key concepts like 'technology' and 'science', and drawing attention to the modern ambivalence towards science: rational saviour versus progenitor of immoral abominations. The second chapter is the longest and by far the most problematic. Here Graham discusses 'Darwinism', creationism, the selfish gene, Michael Behe's well-known but widely rejected attacks on the theory of natural selection, socio-biology and evolutionary psychology, and memes. His general thesis is that Darwinism is not the all-encompassing, universal principle that thinkers like Dawkins and Dennett have, in their enthusiasm, claimed it to be. Graham's tone is generally critical of Darwinian thinking, though he certainly never approaches the lunatic fringe. In fact, the moderate position he ultimately prefers is not at all a silly one—it is just that the quality of the discussion and argumentation is extremely ham-handed. A glance at the slender bibliography raises one's eyebrows, and the text gives no hint of a wealth of background research unmentioned in the interests of brevity. Even when describing straightforward matters Graham makes numerous puzzling remarks and flat-out blunders. To give just one example: in arguing for the limited explanatory power of the Darwinian's all-important concept of *fitness*, Graham argues that the reason that dinosaurs are no longer around "cannot be accounted for exclusively in terms of 'fitness'. . . . Crucial to the explanation is a factor that has nothing to do with genetics, namely geological and climatic history"