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Shonini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, vi + 202 pp., \$100.00 US (hbk) / \$27.50 US (pbk), ISBN 9780748642632 / 9781474400428.

In the title of her book, *Cinema of the Dark Side*, Shonini Chaudhuri references Dick Cheney's infamous statement in the wake of the 9/11/2001 attacks on the US: "We also have to work...the dark side." For both Cheney and Chaudhuri, "the dark side" refers to state-sponsored violence. For Cheney, of course, dark methods are justified to maintain the US and its allies as a force for good in the so-called war on terror. Chaudhuri, on the other hand, examines the filmic texts—mostly mainstream feature films and well-known documentaries—that have arisen in the wake of the war on terror with two overarching goals. First she seeks to evaluate films based on whether they encourage an ethical rather than a moral understanding of particular subjects and events. Secondly, she seeks to cultivate in readers an ethical method of viewership. In other words, her goal is to demonstrate that films, properly constructed and viewed, can work against the Manichean frame within which so much recent violence has been justified. The book covers an impressive range of theory, geography, and film genres. Well written and researched, *Cinema of the Dark Side* offers a number of compelling close readings that illuminate an array of strategies available to filmmakers who work on violence. At the same time, this sophisticated approach to film texts is in some cases undercut by a rush to evaluation that precludes alternative readings. Ironically, films sometimes emerge from her analysis as either "good" or "bad" in terms of their ability to arouse ethical inquiry in their viewers in much the same way that the "moral" films that Chaudhuri forcefully critiques define heroes and villains in a manner that sidesteps any consideration of the ethics of particular political contexts.

The volume begins with an introduction that outlines Chaudhuri's major argument and much of the theory that she brings to bear on the texts she analyzes in later chapters. She begins by problematizing the notion of a human rights film, using theory surrounding the gaze to explain how the assumed neutrality of witness films is complicated by considerations of the relationship of the spectator to the images (and people within them) she watches. In this section Chaudhuri touches briefly on a wide range of important considerations, including questions surrounding the representability of trauma, the cooptation of human rights and humanitarianism by state powers through a politics of pity, compassion fatigue, and the links between warfare and visibility. She then suggests a framework for evaluating films based on whether they encourage a moral or an ethical reading of characters and

contexts. She defines morality as “the domain of normative values, manifesting in socially formed laws and codes of conduct” whereas ethics “explores the conditions under which morality is constructed under different circumstances” (14). Films, in keeping with this difference, can be evaluated based on whether they create a Manichean moral universe in which the world is divided between good and evil and encourage spectators’ identification with the former; or whether they instead encourage spectators to contemplate structures of power. Conventional narrative and identification with protagonists often create a “structure of sympathy” that forecloses contemplation. This argument is elaborated more fully in Chapter 1, “Documenting the Dark Side: Fictional and Documentary Treatments of Torture and the ‘War on Terror,’” in which Chaudhuri juxtaposes close readings of the feature fictional film *Zero Dark Thirty*, and the documentaries *Taxi to the Dark Side*, and *Standard Operating Procedure* to illustrate how the first two films construct moral universes (in the first torture is normalized, even justified in a greater fight against evil; in the second a similar moral universe is created in which pity and outrage at the victims and perpetrators of torture are elicited in spectators). In *Standard Operating Procedure*, on the other hand, filmmaker Errol Morris avoids creating such a moral universe both through the techniques and structure of the film (a lack of a narrator, use of different types of material, interview techniques, and attention to the gaze of his interviewees) and its content (its exclusive focus on perpetrators and the creation of complex characters who cannot be reduced to heroes and villains). Instead, by “aligning viewers with the perpetrator mindset, it makes us reflect on how moral norms are altered in the atrocity-producing situation, where brutal acts become ‘standard operating procedure’” (48).

In her second chapter, “History Lessons: What Audiences (Could) Learn About Genocide from Historical Dramas,” Chaudhuri argues that mainstream historical dramas such as *Schindler’s List* and *Hotel Rwanda* also frequently create a moral universe in which perpetrators are represented as evil others. History in these films is a “spectator sport” (52) in which spectators have no role or responsibility vis-à-vis events that unfold on screen. However, as her analyses of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (about a Nazi concentration camp) and *Sometime in April* (about the Rwandan genocide) illustrate, it is possible for a filmmaker to unsettle the impulse to aestheticize the past that characterizes the historical drama. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* the director deploys a counterfactual narrative to treat the question of widespread German complicity with the Nazi Holocaust. In *Sometime in April* a spatio-temporal complexity and certain aesthetic choices (e.g., the adoption of documentary style and victims’ testimonies) discourage a Manichean understanding of events. Chaudhuri argues that in both films narrative attention to an Arendtian banality of evil encourage an ethical rather than a moral engagement with genocide.

Chaudhuri does not argue for a purely rational approach to cinema. Relying on the writings of Jacques Rancière and Gilles Deleuze among others, she argues for the capacity of some films to produce an affective response that in turn gives rise to thought. Her analyses, then, encompass film spectatorship as an embodied experience in which sensations are at least as important as plot and character in developing new understandings of the particular atrocities addressed in the films she studies. In fact, she goes so far as to argue that a multisensory approach to representation is “implicitly more ethical since it relies less on the intrusive gaze” (182). In Chapter 3, “The Art of Disappearance: Remembering Political Violence in Argentina and Chile,” Chaudhuri argues that a number of Argentinian and Chilean films about the disappeared of the 1970s and ’80s use various strategies, including haptic images, elements of horror and thriller genres, fragmentation, disorientation, a blend of testimony and fiction, animation, fantasy, and reflexive performativity to create memory-

worlds that speak to transnational audiences by disrupting spectators' recollections about their own pasts. Chaudhuri devotes the last two chapters to spatial relationships, first in an analysis of several science fiction films that dramatize the post 9/11 fear of the other through dystopian narratives about aliens, immigrants, borders, and walls; and second in analyses of several films, both fictional and documentary, about Israel/Palestine.

Chaudhuri is at her strongest when she deploys film analysis in support of her argument. She writes with convincing authority about the ways in which editing, mise-en-scène, and the construction of particular images work to communicate information, ideas, or affects to viewers. When, for instance, she argues that the image of children playing that is reflected in the white American protagonists' car window in *Missing* suggests that the film is to be read through the lens of Chilean censorship, she not only enriches that film for her readers, but guides them towards developing their own more sophisticated viewing practice. Similarly, her analysis of the mise-en-scène and special effects employed in *Monsters* complicates and politicizes a fairly conventional plot line.

There are times, however, when Chaudhuri adopts a prescriptive stance that forecloses alternative readings and layers of complexity in the texts she studies. In an epilogue she hastily dismisses Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* about the death squads that perpetrated genocidal violence against communists in Indonesia in the 1960s. She faults the film for failing to provide context or political analysis of the events it treats (and in particular, for failing to highlight US complicity in the violence) and for offering portraits of Anwar Congo and his gangster associates as evil "Others" whose distance and difference from the film's Western viewers results in a moral rather than an ethical treatment of the events in the film. This assessment seems to suggest that every "ethical" film must follow the same political territory. Perhaps the allusions to this global political context that Chaudhuri mentions (the McDonald's sign near the start of the film and Congo's obsession with Hollywood movies) are sufficient in a film whose focus is not geopolitics but rather the psyche of the perpetrator. Certainly the events depicted in the film are exotic to American and European audiences, but it is not difficult to read the film ethically in relation to more familiar characters and events. After all, Tony Blair and Dick Cheney move about in their hometowns with as much impunity as Anwar Congo does in Jakarta. What cultural texts, one wonders, helped to shape their world views?

This prescriptive bias is most evident in Chapter 5, "Architectures of Enmity: the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Through a Cinematic Lens." In this chapter she critiques *Waltz with Bashir* for the depoliticization inherent in its focus on the trauma of Israeli soldiers. She appreciates *Budrus* and *5 Broken Cameras* for their courageous camera work, but faults them for their focus on moving the path of the Israeli Apartheid Wall rather than questioning the ethics of its construction. She praises *The Lemon Tree* as "a rare film in that it successfully portrays a dual subject position—both sides of the colonial divide—and attempts to bridge the spaces of self and other" (174) without simplifying or sentimentalizing such an encounter. While there is much merit in Chaudhuri's analyses of these films, they do not cover all aspects of these films' ethical or moral implications. In *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone*,¹ for instance, Gil Hochberg suggests that many critiques of Israeli films about soldier trauma are framed by the ethically bankrupt question, "who is the (real) victim of war?" and operate within a moral universe in which there is a clear distinction between victim and perpetrator; a soldier cannot be both at the same time. Hochberg offers instead a provocative reading of *Waltz with Bashir* as a representation of an Israeli failure to

¹ Gil Hochberg, *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* (Duke University Press, 2015).

witness *on time*, and a search for a means of rendering this failure visible to others. The films *Budrus* and *5 Broken Cameras* can also be critiqued for their place within a political discourse surrounding Palestinian nonviolence that presents a troubling moral universe of its own, one in which Palestinian nonviolence is fetishized at the same time that its history is truncated. Just as their emphasis on the path of the Israeli Wall fails to critique the creation of the wall, their focus on nonviolence contributes to a narrowing of what constitutes legitimate resistance; increasingly over the past fifteen years the debate surrounding Palestinian resistance has shifted away from whether or not violence is effective to whether various acts of unarmed resistance (stone throwing, gathering in ‘mobs,’ engaging in boycotts) should be defined as acts of violence. Moreover, the pinpointing in both films of the start of their movements with the 2003 protests in *Budrus* erases a much longer and sophisticated history of Palestinian nonviolence that has included a range of tactics including general strikes, legal challenges, steadfastness, endeavors to build alternative economic structures, education, art, and performance. This is not to argue that *Waltz with Bashir* is a better film than either *Budrus* or *5 Broken Cameras*, or to suggest that Chaudhuri’s analysis is wrong. On the contrary, as activist films widely used to mobilize support for Palestinians and their struggles *Budrus* and *5 Broken Cameras* have done far more good in the world than *Waltz with Bashir* could hope to do. However, evaluating the ethical positions of particular works is sometimes more complex and nuanced than Chaudhuri suggests.

This complexity can work in the other direction as well. Chaudhuri presents *The Lemon Tree* as one of the most ethically engaged of the films treated in this chapter, calling it “a rare film in that it successfully portrays a dual subject position.” However, precisely because it attempts to maintain this dual subject position, it falls into the trap of an aesthetics of parity that belies the power structures that underlie settler colonialism. Chaudhuri notes the repeated image-mirroring of the two female protagonists within the film: both gaze across the fence and climb over the barrier. In addition, both face problems with patriarchy within their societies, both have a child currently living in the United States. The mirroring extends to the two male protagonists (Mira’s husband, defense minister Navon and Salma’s lover, the lawyer Ziad) who each engage in a politics of cynical and ambitious pragmatism. Both women suffer from patronizing attempts to control their speech and behavior by men from their respective circles. Both women find their love relationships compromised by their partner’s involvement with younger women. As a result the film masks the settler colonial nature of governing structures by locating social and political problems in gender; if the men just got out of the way these two women with their overlapping biographies and repeated gazes at each other would surely be able to live in peace together! In addition, with its focus on female characters and demonization of men, *The Lemon Tree* appears to adopt a feminist position, but fails to actually interrogate the power structures in which both Palestinian and Israeli patriarchy arise. In particular, Palestinian society in the film is characterized by misogyny rooted in tradition while the relationship of both Palestinian and Israeli patriarchy to colonialism and Israeli militarism is never raised.

At the same time, the mirroring, while pervasive, is itself a mask hiding the fact that the film actually fails to take a dual subject position, instead instrumentalizing its Palestinian characters to tell an Israeli story. Mira is a complex character confronting a failing marriage, and an array of thoughts and emotions arising out of her new position as the defense minister’s wife and what appears to be her first real encounter with West Bank Palestinians. Viewers watch her grapple with as yet inchoate but growing discomfort with the ethical implications of Israel’s obsession with its own security. Salma, on the other hand, is an unchanging type: the steadfast Palestinian peasant whose main role in the film is to serve as a

foil for Mira. The film has nothing to say about her as a character except to extoll her beauty, courage, and integrity. One can also critique the film for images and details that are dishonest on both a literal and figurative level. Mira's facility with Arabic is not credible given her general ignorance and previous lack of interest in Palestinians or Arabs. The depiction of Itamar, the soldier guarding the lemon grove, as a harmless buffoon belies the very real violence that arises when guns are put in the hands of naïve young men. The final image in which Defense Minister Navon's picture window is blocked by the wall his security forces have built belies the fact that the actual wall is largely hidden from Israeli view. Most damningly, the image of the wall looming a few short feet from his window implies that the source of Israeli violence is to be found in its excessive concern with security (an impression reinforced by the fact that a "terrorist" does actually infiltrate the grove and shoot at the minister's house in the film) whose outcome is a stunted Palestine and an imprisoned Israel. As such, it is politically closer to *Budrus* and *5 Broken Cameras* than Chaudhuri's analysis implies. A more accurate image of the settler colonial forces governing Israel's treatment of the Palestinians would have portrayed the wall on the nether side of Salma's lemon grove (thereby presenting it as the land-grab it really is), and artfully concealed from the general's view (thereby illustrating the ways in which citizens of settler colonial states are shielded from their own violence).

Despite these shortcomings *Cinema of the Dark Side* is an impressive piece of scholarship. It will be particularly valuable in the undergraduate classroom, especially if the various chapters are used as starting points for conversations that explore ambiguities and multiple readings of the ethical dimensions of the films discussed.

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