Narrative Concerns

Ethical Criticism in Literature, Music, and Film

By

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Introduction: The Ethics of Reading

"The heart of ethics is the desire for community." (202)

—Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (1988)

In *Postmodernity, Ethics, and the Novel* (1999), Andrew Gibson contends that before the cultural, philosophical, and artistic turn to postmodernity the vast majority of literary scholarship focused, at least in part, upon an ethics of reading. Texts, especially those texts deemed literary or artistic, were believed to carry ethical value and import. While such a position often represented a veiled agenda for one's own idiosyncratic moral position—the work of F. R. Leavis offers a more obvious example of such criticism—this kind of writing, nonetheless, pointed toward spheres integral to our experience: the ethical, spiritual, and moral dimensions of human life. Throughout the last several decades, Gibson reminds us, the examination and discussion of the political work of a given text usurped any attempted investigation of how an author or a story or a reader might reconcile the ethical, spiritual, or moral nature of a literary work with his or her own lived experiences beyond the text.

In recent years, the study of the intersections between ethics and literary criticism has emerged as one of the most productive and illuminating arenas of contemporary critique. As an interpretative mechanism, moreover, ethical criticism provides scholars and readers alike with a revelatory means for evaluating our ethical relationships with literary texts, the substantial impact that these texts exert upon the cultures in which they are read, and even the act of criticism itself. In addition to addressing the ethical complications inherent in literary study, ethical criticism also encounters the conflicts and compromises involved in

the cultural production of those same narratives, as well as the factors that determine the kinds of texts that we receive and the mechanisms via which we consume them. By challenging the very nature in which we conduct the theoretical project, ethical criticism offers useful forays into a wide range of disciplines, from feminism and gender studies to cultural criticism and the dynamics of race and ethnicity.

The authors and their works that represent the focus of *Narrative Concerns* clearly do not shy away from events and characters that raise interesting, provocative, and often moving questions of an ethical nature. Similar to scholars who felt shackled by the stringent demands of formalist criticism, many critics today long to break from the rudimentary and often crass politicization of theory to find an innovative language that provides the opportunity for traversing new vistas for reading and thinking about postmodern texts. As Ihab Hassan passionately implores in *Paracriticisms* (1975), "I believe that an answer must go beyond our current shibboleths: disconfirmation, decreation, demystification, deconstruction, decentering, depropriation, difference, etc. Perhaps we need to go beyond Irony (as Nietzsche sometimes did), beyond the current aversion to Wholeness and Meaning, to some working faith in . . . What?" (xv). As the growing theoretical interest in the interpretive paradigm of ethical criticism reveals, a wide array of critics and readers appear to be increasingly concerned with these very issues. Although many critics who examine texts in some way related to multiculturalism or genocide or apartheid now produce a kind of writing that takes into consideration ethical, political, and even spiritual questions, such criticism rarely considers how these matters relate to postmodern theory.

As Ted Nannicelli demonstrates in *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism* (2020), the need for addressing the ethical conundrums in contemporary life has arguably never been more pressing. In 2017, Nannicelli points out, "a man who openly bragged about sexually

assaulting women was sworn in as president of the United States" (1). And in 2025, Donald J. Trump was reelected in spite of having been convicted on 34 felony counts. In short, order, President Trump's second administration began rolling back human rights protections and entitlements that would affect hundreds of millions of American citizens, while vastly scaling back progressive US programs around the world. Even more beguiling, much of this effort took the form of a proxy effort being led by billionaire Elon Musk, seemingly ushering in an oligarchal state that threatens the heart of American democracy. At the same time, President Trump has challenged the sovereignty of Canada, a longstanding US ally and much-valued neighbor, arguing that the nation should be absorbed as the 51st state.

Such troubling disconnections between our basic understandings about right and wrong, fairness and greed have seemingly never been rife. An ethical criticism that explores the ways in which we render moral judgement has never been more vital as we seek to teach the conflicts that characterize contemporary life. Today's sociocultural challenges are not merely "academic matters," Nannicelli reminds us. "Rather, general uncertainty and disagreement about a number of abstract, conceptual questions are rampant in the debates that have been playing out in popular fora." Our ability to make ethical distinctions has never been more under siege, Nannicelli adds. "How can the meaning of an artwork objectively ground the ethical evaluation of a work if meaning itself is contested?" (1). Yet if we are to agree that the act of meaning-making has never been more paramount, then establishing a space for debating moral issues must remain a central aspect of our humanistic missions. And the time is now. As Adam Zachary Newton avers in *Ethics and Literary Practice* (2020), "Bringing such multifarious perspectives to the topic feels only more urgent as language, meaning, and expression into the crucible of a 'post-truth era.'"

Ethical criticism's detractors have long argued that the vexing specter of moral relativism always linters on the horizon. Indeed, Nannicelli remarks that "contemporary philosophers of art have tended to assume and advocate for an approach to the ethical criticism of art that evaluates the work in terms of the ethical perspective it expresses, embodies, endorses, or prescribes its audience to adopt—a view I call 'perspectivism'" (2). In fact, "perspectivism" is itself one of ethical criticism's strongest suits. By recognizing the positions that artists take in their work, we create (generally) safe spaces for debating the issues of the day and are innate human desire for establishing community rather than espousing division. *Narrative Concerns* will occasion these debates by illuminating the ways in which a variety of different readers reconcile the moral void created in the wake of the crumbling grand narratives of the Enlightenment and the modernist era. These writers frequently explore our postmodern preoccupation with the void in new and often innovative ways—from their challenging perceptions of the family, humor, and narrative design to their examinations of the past, the irrevocable power of history, and the redemptive nature of humanity.

In *Narrative Concerns*' first section, "The Ethics of Selfhood: The Power of Cataleptic Impression," examines the revelatory manner in which the moral-philosophical phenomenon of the cataleptic impression impacts our understanding of ethics and literary character. A form of epiphany, the cataleptic impression reveals the ways in which literary characters respond to their ethical experiences and attempt to foment genuine change in their lives. Drawing upon texts by a diversity of *auteurs* and authors from Steven Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino, and Donald Hall to James McManus and Jean Rhys, the chapters in this section demonstrate a fascinating assortment of literary characters in the act of generating new conceptions of selfhood.

The chapters in the volume's second section, "The Ethics of Style: Form, Function, and Feeling," investigate the intriguing ways in which narrative form and design share in the production of ethical meaning. Using such divergent filmic, literary, and musical texts as *Shakespeare in Love*, *Lone Star*, *Titanic*, John Irving's celebrated novel *The Cider House Rules,* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, these chapters underscore how a given text's construction affects our understanding of the often ethically motivated acts of authorship and storytelling. The chapters in the volume's final section, "The Ethics of Family: Postmodern Culture and Community," address the powerful bonds of human community, particularly in terms of its ethical influence upon the direction of lives and our relationships with others. Drawing upon texts by Norman Maclean, Anthony Burgess, Kurt Vonnegut, Jim Harrison, and Mary Oliver, the chapters in this section demonstrate Tobin Siebers's meaningful contention that "the heart of ethics is the desire for community."

In this way, *Narrative Concerns* provides readers with a valuable investigation of the ways in which we struggle for the ethical possibilities of redemption despite the often numbing social, political, and cultural realities of our postmodernity. Although postmodernism calls into question the very idea of a unified, essential subject, this study usefully reveals the ways in which the postmodern subject nonetheless lives pragmatically as if the grand narratives of the past remain firmly intact. When we speak of love or hate in our relationships—of the oppression of racism or the liberating freedom of tolerance—we do so using a modernist model of the individual subject; via a form of postmodern humanism—and despite the claims of many postmodern theorists—a variety of contemporary storytellers continue to memorialize the manner in which we seek to posit essence or value in our lives. And as Nannicelli and others have so passionately reminded us, we need them more than ever.

Part I

The Ethics of Selfhood: The Power of Cataleptic Impression

1.

The List Is Life: *Schindler's List* as Ethical Construct

"He who saves a single life saves the world entire."

—The Talmud

Despite its tremendous acclaim in the popular press and its significant role in revisiting the Holocaust for a contemporary global audience, Steven Spielberg's film adaptation of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) has received a generally unfavorable response from the intelligentsia.[1] Critics of *Schindler's List* (1993) often denounce Spielberg's film because of his violation of the Jewish notion of *Bilderverbot*, his ostensibly didactic pretensions, his failure to adapt Keneally's novel in an authentic and responsible fashion, and his brash sentimentality as both storyteller and director. Yet Spielberg's many detractors neglect to account for his desire to tell Oskar Schindler's remarkable narrative of altruism within the larger context of the Holocaust. "*Schindler's List* must never be looked upon as *the* Holocaust story," Spielberg himself remarks. "It is only *a* Holocaust story" (qtd. in Nagorski 77). Fearing that *Schindler's List* will become the master text of the Shoah—a reasonable concern, given the popular success of Spielberg's film and the director's considerable reputation as a populist filmmaker—a number of critics in the academy question Spielberg's depiction of the Holocaust and essentially overlook his substantial ethical intentions for bringing Schindler's story to bear on the lives of an audience many decades removed from the atrocities of the Second World War and Nazi genocide. A reading of *Schindler's List* drawing upon insights

in moral philosophy and ethical criticism provides us with a mechanism for understanding the moral and pedagogic motives that undergird Spielberg's narrative.[2] In addition to addressing the director's struggles in the film with such philosophically vexing issues as truth, responsibility, and altruism, interpreting *Schindler's List* as an overtly ethical construct allows us to examine Spielberg's narrative in terms of the historical moment for which it was produced and the popular audience for whom it was explicitly intended.

The form and content of Keneally's novel and Spielberg's film entreat us to explore the ethical imperatives inherent in each narrative.[3] While other schools of literary criticism might prove revelatory regarding the investigation of such issues as gender, aesthetics, and language, such theoretical approaches invariably direct our attention away from the ethical conflicts that confront us within the fabric of all narratives, particularly in those stories that ask difficult questions about our human capacities for good and evil. Ethical criticism, with its express reliance on the insights of contemporary moral philosophy, challenges us as readers—and, indeed, as viewers—to reflect inwardly upon our own ethical choices in relation to the moral dilemmas that literary characters encounter in a given text. The act of telling Schindler's story necessarily confronts Spielberg with the difficulty of presenting a compromised hero, a protagonist of ambiguous moral character whose most problematic traits serve him well in his ultimate quest to save the lives of more than 1,100 Jews. A member of the Nazi party, a womanizer, and a shameless wartime profiteer, Schindler makes for an unlikely hero by any standards. As Schindler's wife, Emilie, admits, "Oskar had done nothing astounding before the war and had been unexceptional since. He was fortunate, therefore, that in that short fierce era between 1939 and 1945 he had met people who summoned forth his deeper talents" (Keneally 396-97). Schindler's unremarkable life before and after the war makes his wartime accomplishments seem even more poignant. Quite obviously, no one would

question a popular narrative in which the protagonist saves numerous lives while simultaneously resisting the Nazi party, remaining faithful to his wife, and never profiting from the easy spoils of war. Yet those are the clichéd trappings of melodrama, not the conflicted stuff of real life.

Schindler's wartime experiences clearly confronted him with special ethical challenges, many of which he simply refused to contemplate. As Keneally's novel makes clear, Schindler scarcely considered, if at all, the ethics of his numerous marital infidelities, his questionable dealings with various officers of the Third Reich, or his staggering financial success during a race-driven war. Keneally freely admits that we do not know the "condition" of Schindler's soul (190). Yet the vivid memories of the Jews that he saved—the *Schindlerjuden*, as the survivors affectionately refer to themselves—offer convincing testimony to the veracity of Schindler's deeds and to the unwavering conviction with which he ultimately carried them out. In his introduction to *Schindler's Ark*, Keneally acknowledges availing himself of the novel as a literary mode, yet attempting at the same time to "avoid all fiction, since fiction would debase the record" of the ambiguities of Schindler's life (10). Spielberg recognizes a similar dilemma in his appropriation of the feature film as the means of telling Schindler's story. The conventions of the silver screen encourage any director of popular films to entertain, to simplify the often-convoluted storylines of history, and to maintain the audience's interest at all costs. In an interview with Franciszek Palowski, Spielberg contends that with *Schindler's List* "I feel like more of a journalist than a director of this movie. I feel like I'm reporting more than creating. These events," he adds, "this character of Oskar Schindler, and the good deeds he did at a terrible time weren't created by me, they were created by history" (172).

Despite the director's claims of journalistic impartiality and the necessity of historical distance, the film adaptation of Schindler's story confronts Spielberg with a variety of philosophical and narrative quandaries concerning the nature of such concepts as truth, responsibility, and altruism. Contemporary moral philosophers continue to engage in debate over these very issues because their adherence to temporality and the historical moment never truly diminishes. The notion of truth—particularly when considered in terms of biographical and historical representation—calls into question the problematic aspects of creating a genuinely factual depiction of Schindler's story in specific and of the Holocaust in general. While Spielberg seeks to don the guise of journalist in his film, he ultimately shuns the requirements of facticity in *Schindler's List* in order to establish the larger truths that dominate his narrative.[4] Terrence Des Pres reminds us that such narratives essentially function as the testimony of survivors and are "rooted in a strong need to make the truth known" (30). The eyewitness accounts of the *Schindlerjuden* in Keneally's novel, then, imbue Spielberg's adaptation with a profound sense of responsibility to represent the truth about their experiences during the Holocaust.[5] In *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (1994), Annette C. Baier observes that "great and influential moral theorists have in the modern era taken *obligation* as the key and the problematic concept, and have asked what justifies treating a person as morally bound or obliged to do a particular thing" (4). In addition to obliging Spielberg to offer an accurate representation of the Holocaust, faithfully narrating Schindler's act of altruism demands that he resist the temptation to sanctify his protagonist, to render Schindler into an uncompromised figure of mythological proportions.

Schindler's List finds many of its most compelling aspects in Spielberg's ability to portray Schindler as an imperfect and often unseemly character. The success that Spielberg achieves in underscoring the depths of Schindler's flawed persona in the film's early stages ultimately

serves, moreover, to enhance the intensity of his later ethical transformation. By primarily focusing the film upon Schindler's act of altruism—rather than allowing the atrocities of genocide to overwhelm his narrative—Spielberg invites us to ponder the individual human stories that bring the larger catastrophe of the Holocaust into relief. "Moral knowledge," Martha C. Nussbaum writes in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), "is not simply intellectual grasp of propositions; it is not even simply intellectual grasp of particular facts; it is perception" (152). It is this sense of moral recognition that most eludes the many critics of *Schindler's List*. For them, the tragedy of the Holocaust often looms too large to merit anything but cinematic silence in the face of an ostensibly unknowable, possibly unredeemable event. For this reason, Spielberg opts to tell his story using the stark reality of black-and-white stock:

> I think black and white stands for reality. . . . I don't think color is real. I think certainly color is real to the people who survived the Holocaust, but to people who are going to watch the story for the first time, I think black and white is going to be the real experience for them. My only experience with the Holocaust has been through black-and-white documentaries. I've never seen the Holocaust in color. I don't know what Auschwitz looks like in color. Even though I was there, it's still black and white in my eyes. I think color would have added a veneer of almost farce. (qtd. in Schleier 12)

By forcing his audience to confront the awfulness of the Holocaust, Spielberg creates an ethical forum in which a contemporary audience might hopefully perceive the reality inherent in Schindler's improbable act of altruism.

The notion that *Schindler's List* violates *Bilderverbot*—the Jewish taboo against visually representing the Holocaust—functions as a significant moral dilemma for many of the film's critics. Claude Lanzmann,

the director of the celebrated documentary *Shoah* (1985) and one of Spielberg's most vocal detractors, describes the Holocaust as "unique in that it erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline that cannot be crossed because there is a certain ultimate degree of horror that cannot be transmitted. To claim it is possible to do so is to be guilty of the most serious transgression" (14).[6] Other critics such as Simon Louvish fear that Spielberg, the director of such fantasy- and adventure-driven films as *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Jurassic Park* (1993), will construct a cinematic "Holocaust theme park": "At the end of the day, the most Spielberg can do is to draw his spectators, for the three hours the film runs, into his Holocaust theme park," Louvish writes. "See the amazing Schindler factory. Quake at the imminent departure of the train transports. Shiver as you pass beneath the Dantesque archway with snow falling" over Auschwitz (15). Louvish's damning remarks about *Schindler's List* underscore the deep emotional response that many in the intelligentsia feel regarding what they perceive to be Spielberg's blatant violation of *Bilderverbot*.[7] The mere existence of *Schindler's List* obviously infringes upon the taboo against visual representation.

Yet Spielberg's motives for recreating the horrors of the Kraków ghetto, the Plaszów labor camp, and Auschwitz clearly do not find their origins in any desire to transgress the strictures of *Bilderverbot* or to offend his audience. The story of Schindler's redemptive act compels Spielberg—as with Keneally in *Schindler's Ark*—to employ these infamous locales as his setting. Rather than remaining silent in the face of Schindler's singular and moving act of heroism, Spielberg chooses to reproduce Keneally's novel for the screen in spite of the fact that such an adaptation forces him to stage acts of human devastation of which Lanzmann's *Shoah* merely speaks. While he often struggles himself with the issue of narrating the Holocaust, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel asks, "Is silence the answer? It never was. And that is why we try to tell the tale" (19). Simply put, Spielberg *must* tell Schindler's

story. As with other works of Holocaust literature, Spielberg's film recognizes that mere silence hardly begins to account for the all-encompassing, banal forms that evil takes on in such moments of human cataclysm.[8] From the horrors of an SS *Aktion* in the Kraków ghetto during which two German soldiers pause to discuss classical music to Jewish children frolicking on a playground amidst the starvation and human ruin of Plaszów, *Schindler's List* demonstrates the seemingly incomprehensible ways in which an abiding sense of evil intermingles with workaday human existence. In such moments, the course of life and death seems both more *and* less arbitrary.

Critics of the film often malign Spielberg for engaging in a form of unrestrained didacticism in *Schindler's List*. According to Bryan Cheyette, "*Schindler's List* maneuvers restlessly between clichéd pieties and a more neutral documentary realism. It is," he adds, "finally unable to contain the uncertain certainties of its didactic pretensions" (237). There is little question that some of Spielberg's motives in *Schindler's List* are didactic in nature. To describe his philosophy in the film as mere pretense, however, defies the ethical strength of *Schindler's List*'s formal structure. In his adaptation of *Schindler's Ark*, Spielberg draws upon the series of character binaries that undergird Keneally's novel. In the film, Spielberg emphasizes in particular the peculiar relationship between Schindler (Liam Neeson) and Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), as well as the more ethically productive liaison between Schindler and his Jewish accountant Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley). The filmmaker clearly utilizes the former relationship as a means for highlighting the power of Schindler's transformation and for underscoring the evil that permeates the human soul as embodied by Goeth, Plaszów's demented Commandant. The currency of their relationship finds its roots in the notion of "gratitude," as they each define it in a significant early encounter. Schindler's gratitude often manifests itself in the form of bribes, elaborate parties, and black-market gifts. "Among men like Goeth and Oskar," Keneally writes, "the word

'gratitude' did not have an abstract meaning. Gratitude was a payoff. Gratitude was liquor and diamonds" (172).

Armed with this knowledge, Goeth extracts numerous "gratuities" from Schindler throughout the film in exchange for a variety of "favors." Such instances include Goeth's provision of Jewish slave labor for Schindler's Kraków factory, his eloquent testimony in Schindler's defense after Schindler impulsively kisses a Jewish girl, an illuminating moment in which he acquiesces to Schindler's pleas to provide water for a group of Jewish prisoners awaiting transport to the Mauthausen concentration camp in sweltering boxcars, and, ultimately, when he accepts payment for the liberation of the *Schindlerjuden* from Plaszów. As with the film, Keneally's novel establishes Goeth as Schindler's "dark brother," his unethical *doppelgänger*. Keneally makes clear that "Oskar abominated Goeth as a man who went to the work of murder as calmly as a clerk goes to his office. Oskar could speak to Amon the administrator, Amon the speculator," Keneally writes, "but knew at the same time that nine-tenths of the Commandant's being lay beyond the normal rational processes of humans." Yet at the same time, Keneally reminds us that Goeth "was the berserk and fanatic executioner Oskar might, by some unhappy reversal of his appetites, have become" (171). Both Keneally and Spielberg underscore the precarious fraternity that marks Schindler and Goeth's relationship in the aforementioned, revelatory scene in which Schindler cajoles the Commandant into allowing him to hose down the cattle cars destined for Mauthausen. Initially amused by his friend's seemingly impetuous behavior, Goeth evinces concern as he recognizes a perceptible change in Schindler's demeanor: Schindler is "not so much reckless anymore but possessed," Keneally writes. "Even Amon can tell that his friend has shifted into a new gear" (267). Terrified by Schindler's dangerous, public, and illegal efforts on behalf of a group of Jewish prisoners bound for certain death, Goeth demonstrates an unlikely compassion for Schindler, whose behavior, he fears, will

land him in Poland's notorious Montelupich prison, or perhaps even worse, at Auschwitz.

Goeth's fully realized character—skillfully developed as Schindler's violent other in Keneally's novel and deftly replicated in Spielberg's film—continues to confound *Schindler's List*'s detractors. Anticipating a flat, one-dimensional cipher, critics such as Cheyette deride Goeth's onscreen representation as "reminiscent of B-movie Nazis" (236); Sara R. Horowitz similarly describes him as the "outrageously evil Goeth" (137). Such adventure-driven fare as Spielberg's own *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1982) often exploits caricatures of SS officers and German soldiers in their narratives, providing us with little detail, if any, regarding the characters' particularity. Surely, the same cannot be said for Goeth's appearance in *Schindler's Ark* or in his later characterization in *Schindler's List*. In the novel, Keneally provides us with a careful and expansive rendering of Goeth's convoluted persona:

> He was sentimental about his children, the children of his second marriage whom, because of his foreign service, he had not seen often in the past three years. As a substitute, he was sometimes attentive to the children of brother officers. . . . He considered himself a sensitive man . . . a *Literat*: a man of letters. And, though, at this moment, he would have told you that he looked forward to his taking of control of the liquidation operation, . . . his service in Special Actions seemed to have altered the flow of his nervous energies. (160)

Although he, too, refuses to placate Goeth's homicidal tendencies, Spielberg also demonstrates the more complicated dimensions of the Commandant's character in a number of instances.

While Spielberg never allows us to consider Goeth's behavior as anything other than deplorable—the Commandant of Plaszów in fact spends much of his screen time engaged in the random persecution

and murder of his prisoners—the filmmaker also makes us privy to Goeth's own struggles with his attraction to his Jewish maid. In one of the film's more dynamic sequences, Spielberg shifts between scenes of a buoyant Schindler at a glamorous social event, a surreptitious Jewish wedding in the Plaszów prison barracks, and a deeply conflicted Goeth fighting against the temptation of his infatuation for his servant Helen Hirsch (Embeth Davidtz). In a lengthy monologue, a tormented Goeth questions his attraction to Helen—"Hath not a Jew eyes?" he asks, in a mock-Shakespearean tone—before ultimately denying his feelings and unleashing his wrath upon her. When Schindler later attempts to win Helen's liberation from Goeth's villa in a card game, Goeth initially balks at the possibility of her departure. In the film, Goeth fantasizes about returning to Austria with Helen and "growing old" with his maid. After Schindler convinces the Commandant that his twisted affection for Helen can result in nothing but her death, Goeth agrees to gamble his servant's destiny. Such moments demonstrate the great lengths to which Spielberg goes to flesh out Goeth's character. The filmmaker leaves the issue of Goeth's affections intentionally unresolved—is he gambling her future out of greed or affection?—and in so doing provides us with a more nuanced and richly textured image of unregenerate evil.[9]

In dramatic contrast with his crassly mercantile relationship with Goeth, Schindler's more meaningful association with Stern likewise finds its roots in a purely business relationship. Originally the accountant at Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik (DEF), Schindler's Kraków factory, Stern provides the ethical companionship necessary for Schindler's unlikely moral transformation.[10] In the film, Stern functions as Schindler's *de facto* moral guide, offering the kind of redemptive fraternity unavailable to Schindler through his relationship with Goeth. Stern initially wins Schindler's favor through his abilities as an accountant, as well as through his capacity for understanding and manipulating the slippery commerce of a wartime economy. For Schindler, Stern at

first represents an essential cog in the machinery of his business. He performs a variety of integral functions for Schindler, including assembling DEF's labor force, arranging Schindler's schedule, managing the factory's accounts, and assisting Schindler with the many bribes and black-market negotiations that ensure DEF's profitable existence. Yet the evolution of their unexpected friendship also allows Stern to influence the gradual shift in Schindler's ethical consciousness.

Spielberg highlights two telling scenes that demonstrate Schindler's moral transformation under Stern's tutelage. In the first scene, Stern arranges a meeting in which a one-armed, elderly Jewish machinist wishes to thank Schindler for his employment at DEF and for the refuge that Schindler's factory provides. "You're a good man," he tells an angry and embarrassed Schindler. "You saved my life. God bless you." Although he initially fumes at Stern for placing him in an awkward situation, Schindler later demands reparations from the German government after two SS guards murder the machinist in a random *Aktion*. A later scene with Stern confirms what the audience already rightly suspects—that Schindler's purely mercantile approach to the welfare of his workers merely functions as a façade. In an intense moment of reflection, Schindler struggles with his own transformation from a strictly self-driven egotist to a more selfless being on the verge of tremendous personal sacrifice. In an angry outburst, Schindler bellows at Stern because of the anxiety that characterizes his agonizing shift in interpersonal values:

> People die. It's a fact of life. . . . What am I supposed to do about it? Bring everybody over? Is that what you think? Send them over to Schindler. Send them all. His place is a haven, didn't you know? It's not a factory. It's not an enterprise of any kind. It's a haven for rabbis, and orphans, and people with no skills whatsoever.

No longer able to perceive his workers as mere gears in his financial engine, Schindler recognizes the individual humanity of his Jewish staff at DEF. For Schindler, they now exist as essential members of his ethical community.

Facilitated by Stern's moral agency, Schindler finds the origins of his ethical redemption in an epiphany of sorts. As with Keneally's novel, Spielberg accomplishes this end through an event that moral philosophers describe as a "cataleptic impression"—a cognitive, philosophical phenomenon that, according to Nussbaum, "has the power, just through its own felt quality, to drag us to assent, to convince us that things could not be otherwise. It is defined as a mark or impress upon the soul" (265). Schindler experiences precisely such a moment while horseback riding in the hills above the Kraków ghetto with Ingrid (Béatrice Macola), his secretary and lover. "They were impeccably turned out," Keneally writes, "in long hacking jackets, riding breeches, and dazzling boots" (127). Below them, SS guards violently liquidate the ghetto. Moving from building to building, they round up the Jews for transport to Plaszów, pausing only to commit summary executions and beat their prisoners into mind-numbing submission. "Schindler felt an intolerable fear for them," Keneally writes, "a terror in his blood which loosened his thighs from the saddle and threatened to unhorse him" (129). His horror at the brutal destruction of the ghetto becomes personified by the figure of a toddler in a scarlet coat. Spielberg's colorization of her clothing succeeds in highlighting the toddler's particularity, an essence of uniqueness which might otherwise be lost against the black-and-white tableau created by the ghetto's doomed citizenry and their indifferent tormentors. After witnessing the ghetto liquidation and its dehumanizing savagery, Schindler can simply no longer

> ignore the evil that threatens to engulf, and ultimately erase, a community that he has come to value. "Beyond this day," Schindler would later claim, "no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system" (Keneally 133).[11]

Spielberg's over-arching desire to capture the impact of Schindler's ethical transformation occasionally leads him beyond the cold confines of historical authenticity and into the brash theater of sentimentality. It is in such moments that Spielberg's film most dramatically diverges from the strictly biographical intentions of *Schindler's Ark*. As a number of critics have astutely observed, the inherent visual power of film often becomes dangerous when audiences receive film as literal truth without the benefit of critical distance. In such instances, a given film's historical representations become concretized, whether it may be fictional, nonfictional, or otherwise. "Verisimilitude," Horowitz argues, "is not reality but artifice posing as reality. When this 'as if' posture goes on uninterrupted by a self-conscious moment, the film presses its claim for historical truth simply by virtue of being film" (122). In this way, the pseudo-historical representation of reality in films such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995), as well as in John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), may come to be seen as the "truth" by an uncritical audience. Clearly guilty of fabricating scenes of historical and biographical import without factual antecedent—most notably, in the critically maligned shower scene in which the *Schindlerfrauen* are bathed in water rather than the expected lethal dose of Zyklon B, as well as in Schindler's emotional parting with the *Schindlerjuden* in Czechoslovakia—Spielberg sometimes abuses the notion of historical authenticity in order to fashion moments of sentimental power that may lead his audience to comprehend larger ethical truths.[12]

Spielberg's affinity for sentimentality—for the filmic construction of a grandiose gesture—distresses many of the film's most vocal critics. David C. Toole, for example, argues that "where Keneally avoids the sentimentalism that he knows will drain his story of its earth-shaking power, Spielberg delivers pure sap" (288). Spielberg's decision to embellish Schindler's farewell scene in Czechoslovakia offers a useful case in point regarding his penchant for sentimentality. In Keneally's novel, Schindler's departure seems understated. His Mercedes quietly rolls out of the compound's gates because "everyone was too unnerved to make formal goodbyes" (375). For Spielberg, such an ending fails to satisfy his theatrical desires for underscoring once more the epic and moral proportions that he perceives in Schindler's story. During his tearful departure in the film, an emotional Schindler becomes awestruck by the enormity of the Holocaust, wishing that he had purchased freedom for even more Jewish prisoners. "I could have gotten more out," he laments. "I threw away so much money." Such a sentimentalized gesture, of course, runs counter to the sensibilities of many contemporary critics. As Paul Lauter explains in *Canons and Contexts* (1991), "The dominant view, certainly since the modernist revolution against nineteenth-century gentility and emotionalism, has been suspicion of literary sentiment; indeed, among the most damning terms in a critic's arsenal has been 'sentimental.' We have much preferred the detachment and aesthetic distance of irony" (106). Rather than maintain a sense of artistic distance in *Schindler's List*, Spielberg not only wishes to draw the characters in his film into close proximity with one another by virtue of a group embrace, but also to dissolve the emotional distance between audience and story.

Remarkably cognizant about the "presentness" of his film, Spielberg explicitly collapses conventional notions of aesthetic distance in *Schindler's List* in an effort to celebrate Schindler's exemplary act of selflessness with generations of moviegoers. "Let us not forget," Judith E. Doneson astutely observes, "that a historical film is as much about the

present as it is about the past" (149). Spielberg highlights *Schindler's List*'s presentness through the colorized sequence that concludes the film. In this moving scene, the director unites the past with the present as the surviving *Schindlerjuden* and their film counterparts place ceremonial stones upon Schindler's gravestone to the hopeful strains of "Jerusalem of Gold." Clearly, *Schindler's List* fulfills a range of important purposes for a contemporary audience. In a world in which Holocaust "revisionists" absurdly dispute the catastrophic proportions of the Shoah, *Schindler's List* forces viewers to contemplate the enormous scope and devastation of genocide.[13] Spielberg's film also performs a useful memorial function for a culture that accesses much of its knowledge and history through visual media. "As a contribution to popular culture, [*Schindler's List*] can only do good," John Gross writes. "Holocaust denial may or may not be a major problem in the future, but Holocaust ignorance, Holocaust forgetfulness, and Holocaust indifference are bound to be, and *Schindler's List* is likely to do as much as any single work to dispel them" (16).[14] By participating in numerous educational seminars and subsidizing the commercial-free broadcast of *Schindler's List* on national television, Spielberg has ensured the film's didactic function for future generations. In the end, it seems that Schindler's singular act of altruism will share in humankind's most significant obligation. Plainly and simply, it will teach.

2.

Shepherding the Weak: The Ethics of Redemption in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*

Although a number of critics in the popular press[1] laud Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) for its non-linear narrative, quirky performances, and oddly resonant dialogue regarding such issues as hamburgers, television pilot episodes, and foot massages, critics in other circles such as Anthony Lane (*The New Yorker*) and Tom Whalen (*Literature/Film Quarterly*) deride Tarantino's creation for its extreme violence and lack of moral clarity. In "Degrees of Cool," Lane maligns the film for the director's over-arching reliance upon pop-cultural minutiae and its "blank morality and wicked accoutrements" (97), while in "*Film Noir*: Killer Style" (*LFQ* 23.1), Whalen argues that *Pulp Fiction* functions upon a cinematic tableau devoid of meaning and further suggests that the characters who populate Tarantino's *oeuvre* live in a world that operates beyond the strictures of morality. Whalen writes: "Greed and drugs, chance and what wits these characters have left after their ears have been deafened by the gun blasts are what they live by" (2). Such critical assessments of the film, however, neglect to account for the remarkably palpable elements of metamorphosis involved in the redemption of the character who functions largely as *Pulp Fiction*'s moral axis, Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson). His dramatic struggle with the notion of divine intervention in the film's final reel—in addition to the ethical crises that confront Butch Coolidge (Bruce Willis) as he maneuvers through *Pulp Fiction*'s labyrinthine middle-third—belies any rudimentary evaluation of the film as a morally vacuous vehicle that emphasizes Tarantino's lust for the

flashy entrails of pop culture over the sublime qualities of artistic substance.

By engaging in a moral reading of *Pulp Fiction*, we will reveal the manner in which Tarantino utilizes the otherwise mundane moments of conversation and reflection in the lives of gangsters—perennially employed as mere plot devices in the annals of American cinema, but rarely depicted as fully realized characters engaging in workaday human experience—as a means for exploring ethical and philosophical questions regarding faith, morality, commitment, and the human community. In his prodigious volume, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Booth advocates a form of criticism that examines a work of art in order to discover and make explicit the moral sensibility informing that work. If we are to accept the proposition that narratives reflect human experience while at the same time they affect human experience, that narratives are both a product of the social order and help establish and maintain that social order, it becomes clear that—in its desire to examine the moral and ethical nature of a work of art—ethical criticism establishes an important bond between the life of the narrative and the life of the reader. Patricia Meyer Spacks contends that while fictional narratives offer opportunities for ethical reflection, they are not imperatives for behavior; rather, according to Spacks, "paradigms of fiction provide an opportunity for moral playfulness: cost-free experimentation" (203). While the conditions of the visual experience inherent in film underscore the remarkable power of narratives to impinge upon human experience, or what Spacks calls the "experience of agency or its illusion" (203), those experiences acquired through cinematic representation—although powerful and affecting—may be understood as activities that afford experimentation, the trying on of new possibilities without the finality or consequences of life beyond the comforting walls of the cineplex.

Although *Pulp Fiction*'s detractors might balk at the very notion of "cost-free experimentation" within the nefarious context of the gangster milieu, as Michael Wilmington remarks, *Pulp Fiction* "doesn't feel like the usual high-tech, nasty blood-and-guts thriller, those mercenary super-trash studio hits pumped out by Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, or Steven Seagal" (C). In fact, Tarantino's film produces a mere six on-screen corpses in comparison with the nameless and faceless thousands who perish for the sake of box-office dollars and "money shots" in such films as Stallone's *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985), Jean-Claude Van Damme's *Cyborg* (1989), or Seagal's *Marked for Death* (1990). Instead, surprising images of community built upon individual struggles with faith, loyalty, pride, and—perhaps even most remarkably—love resonate long after the final, *accidental* report of Vincent Vega's (John Travolta) .45. Throughout *Pulp Fiction* Tarantino seeks to establish a community not only among his fictional characters but with his viewing audience as well.[2] The witty repartee that many critics praise as the film's singular strength in fact affords its audience with a pop-cultural inroad into Tarantino's fictive world—a universe rendered even more tangible through its myriad representations of shared cultural ephemera such as the ethics of five-dollar milkshakes and the French translations of McDonald's fare that oddly but inevitably lead to larger ontological discussions concerning the existence of God and the veracity of miracles.[3] The uncanny ease with which Vincent and Jules traverse such topics despite their ignoble vocation finds its roots in the heritage of their (and our own) shared experiences, and, as Nussbaum remarks, the search for the good human life invariably includes "joke telling, hospitality, friendship, love itself" (50).

These moments in their fictional representation afford Vincent and Jules with the trappings of verisimilitude, rendering them into fully realized human characters, rather than mere gangland caricatures. In short, we discover ourselves laughing with them while viewing

Tarantino's film because—aside from the weapons and drugs that mark their world—many of their thoughts and concerns seem not so different from our own. According to Jorge Luis Borges, this cognitive phenomenon—*dédoublement*, the process through which we recognize ourselves within the margins of a dramatic presentation—disconcerts us because of its implicit suggestion that we might be characters within someone else's fiction (193-96). Tarantino's vision finds its power in the conversations between Jules and Vincent, and with each casual connection we find ourselves caring for the inner lives of those we might ordinarily find reprehensible. For this reason, the conversion from hired killer to man-of-faith that we witness in Jules, contrasted with Vincent's unwillingness to invest in any relationship or activity that fails to satisfy his own desires, impacts us even more profoundly. At the same time, we empathize with Vincent and his id-driven desires for personal satisfaction and pleasure. Although we might recoil from the chilling scene in which the smiling, drugged Vincent drives through the darkness on his way to meet Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman), his sudden death later in the film still possesses the power to shock and sadden us. As Lane notes, despite his narcissistic behavior Vincent nevertheless "reminds us of the pleasures of inactivity, the deep need to hang out"—moments evinced by "the rather endearing shots of him sitting on the toilet reading *Modesty Blaise*" (97).

While Vincent possesses considerable on-screen charm in *Pulp Fiction*, his abiding narcissism in fact precludes his ability to experience sustained human relationships without the benefit and security of emotional distance. In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva contends "that the narcissist . . . is precisely someone incapable of love" (33), and for this reason, in *Pulp Fiction* Vincent must irrevocably reposition the mirror in an effort to reflect his own needs, deflect the desires of others, and gaze fully upon his own image. The emotional distance that Vincent's narcissism fosters inevitably problematizes his ability to foment human interconnection, as demonstrated by Tarantino's depictions of

Vincent's behavior in interpersonal relationships. In the first of the film's three interwoven, achronological stories, "Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife," Vincent engages in friendly banter with his drug-dealer friend Lance (Eric Stoltz), yet their conversation never truly moves beyond the explicit reason for their meeting—a drug transaction to satisfy the cravings of Vincent's addiction. The pride that motivates Vincent's narcissistic behavior permeates the entire scene with Lance, as revealed by the bravado that Vincent evinces in his blustery descriptions of the European drug trade—"Remember, I just got back from Amsterdam" (33)—and in his later, caustic remarks about the revenge that he imagines for the vandal who damaged his prized Chevrolet Malibu: "I just wish I caught em doing it, ya know? Oh man, I'd give anything to catch em doing it. It'a been worth him doing it, if I coulda just caught em, you know what I mean?" (34).

Vincent undertakes a transaction of another sort in his dealings with Mia, the wife of his mob superior, Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). When the mob boss travels to Florida on business, he orders Vincent to spend an evening with his wife during his absence. Vincent's principal concerns during his evening with Mia find their roots in his instinctive proclivities for satisfying his personal desires and ensuring his self-preservation. During their visit to the nostalgic 1950s-style restaurant, Jackrabbit Slim's, Mia and Vincent amuse themselves with the same brand of playful banter that characterizes all of Vincent's relationships, and, as the evening unfolds, the "couple" share a contest-winning dance and Mia penultimately invites Vincent in for a nightcap. The deliberately unhurried pace of their "date" allows Tarantino to infuse the scene with the archetypal cinematic expectation—for both the characters, *and* for the audience—of sex. While Mia glides in the living room to the strains of Urge Overkill's acerbic version of Neil Diamond's "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon," Vincent retires to the bathroom for an anxious moment of ethical reflection.