

Josette Baer

Saul Goodman—the American Candide?

Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Film

With a foreword by Wolfgang Rother

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Note that the essays about *Breaking Bad*, *Homeland*, and *The Lost Daughter* have been previously published in CONEXUS, and I thank Wolfgang Rother and CONEXUS for their permission to publish them here. Note also that in the essays about *Breaking Bad*, *Better Call Saul*, *Homeland* and *Fauda* I have indicated the series and episodes without time stamps. I have used time stamps only in the essays about the films *The Lost Daughter*, *La Journée de la Jupe (Skirt Day)* and *The Best of Enemies*.

I hope that the reader who likes film shall enjoy this little book. Needless to say, but I am saying it anyway: all errors and mistakes are mine.

Josette Baer
Trnava, Zurich and Prague
February 2024

Introduction and Method

This little book is meant for readers who like film. Naturally, I cannot prove that the screenwriters were inspired by theoretical considerations, but that is not my point. I want to draw the readers' attention to the way principles, ideas and thinking about political theory can explain a film script and its main statement or message. My analysis of film plots is intended to widen our horizons and also deepen our understanding of cinema's take on these complex questions.

If we accept a simple definition of film as storytelling with optical means, then that story we see unfolding on the screen operates like a written story: after the introduction of the *personae*, the plot presents the film's main theme with several subplots. Films usually end with a happy or unhappy end, thus revealing the plot as a comedy or tragedy. My method is interdisciplinary, thus very simple: I look at the film and interpret the plot with aspects of political theory, which I have identified in the story. The readers will have to decide for themselves if my arguments and analysis are convincing.

Wolfgang Rother

Why we should not consider films as products of mass culture but as narratives whose philosophical core needs to be uncovered

Violence and hatred, crime and war have characterised human civilisation since the beginning. Murder and manslaughter from the very beginning. According to the biblical myth, Cain kills his brother Abel for base motives. Why is this so? This is a question that still puzzles people today, not only philosophers and theologians, but especially the latter. Social and political reality, especially in our day and age, stands in the starkest possible contrast to the existence of a wise and benevolent Creator and a world ordered according to principles of reason and justice. *Si Deus est, unde malum?* If God exists, where does evil come from? Even if the answer that Leibniz developed in 1710 in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la Liberté de l'Homme et l'Origine du Mal* (Theodicy: Essays of on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil)—evil is the price that people pay for their freedom—is not without good theological and philosophical arguments, the theological and philosophical arguments he makes for his theodicy are based on his optimism that we live in the best of all possible worlds; that God, in his wisdom, his goodness and his love for mankind, had no choice but to create the world as it is. An echo of this view can still be found in Hegel's famous and

notorious dictum in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* of 1821: “What is reasonable is real; and what is real is reasonable.”

Hegel can be accused of opportunism and Leibniz of a large dose of naivety. Voltaire already did the latter in 1759 in his *Candide ou l’Optimisme*—*candidus*, the white man with a clean slate; the pure and innocent man who not only experiences the horrors of war but also becomes a murderer himself. It is obvious to think of Saul Goodman from the television series *Better Call Saul* as Voltaire’s *Candide*, as the title of this book suggests. Voltaire’s satire paints the picture of an optimist as a political-philosophical archetype, which is also represented by the film hero Saul Goodman, whose *nomen* is *omen* (Saul before the Damascus experience and the good man) and whose homophone “S’all Good, Man” (this is the advertising slogan of Goodman’s company) casually sums up Leibniz’s optimism, even if Goodman—the contradiction to the best of all possible worlds could not be more blatant—is a felon who is sentenced to sixty-eight years in prison (Essay VII).

The essays collected here under the title of the “American *Candide*”, whose cover depicts the sage head of the French Enlightenment philosopher and critic Voltaire, are subtitled “Philosophy and Film”. But how do philosophy and film go together? For the founders of critical theory, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, not at all. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was written in exile in California, especially in the long and central chapter on the culture industry, films, as they were produced in the nearby dream factory Hollywood, figure as the epitome of shallow

mass culture and aesthetic barbarism, as goods that are consumed and of interest to the producers not from an artistic but solely from an economic point of view.

However, in my view, this is no reason at all not to deal with the products of the culture industry from a philosophical perspective. It is by no means a question of wanting to ascribe philosophical dignity to films, of ennobling them as an object of philosophical reflection and investigation. What justifies the philosophical preoccupation with phenomena of popular culture? They are, to take up a phrase from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807, figures of the spirit, that is, not only figures of consciousness, but also figures of the concrete world and its history. Manifested in films—even if one can argue about their aesthetic quality and their quality as products of mass culture—there is what appears important to the people of a certain cultural sphere in a certain epoch. And these are the great, ultimately existential, philosophical themes that concern them. What films perhaps have in common with philosophy is that they are, to again invoke Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, their time captured in thought.

Whether the films and scriptwriters are aware of this, whether they can or could present the thematised figures of consciousness in adequate philosophical language, is irrelevant. Because a film is above all a narrative, a story. In Greek terms, it is a myth with an inherent logos, a rational, philosophical core that needs to be uncovered. The close relationship between myth and philosophy was already thematised by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*. According to Aristotle, the friend of myth, φιλόμυθος (*philomythos*), is

also a friend of wisdom, φιλόσοφος (*philosophos*). The philosophical core is already contained in the pre-conceptual myth, as well as in the narrative of a film. The film narrative always points beyond its own sphere of the particular, individual and paradigmatic into the sphere of the universal and philosophical. It is—to quote Hegel one last time, this time his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* in the Heidelberg transcript of 1817—like the myth a “work of fantasising reason”; “the thinking mind, however, must seek out the substantial content, the thought, the philosophical that is implicit in it”. It is precisely this, namely to seek out, find and make explicit what is implicitly contained in the film, that the present essays aspire to and fulfil in an exemplary manner.

The critical perspective that films are mass products of the culture industry and that the film industry is primarily interested in making big money ignores the fact that films, at least those dealt with in this book, address relevant existential, philosophical, political, and social issues. After all, who would deny that the problem of racial discrimination dealt with in Robert Bissell’s *The Best of Enemies* is a politically and socially explosive issue? (Essay I) Even if one considers the happy ending, the reconciliation of the black activist with the white Ku Klux Klan leader, to be too unrealistic and harmonising—which it is not, because the film is based on a true story: *The Best of Enemies* shows a perspective, shows how hatred can and will be overcome through friendship.

The story of Jean-Paul Lilienfeld’s *La Journée de la Jupe* (*Skirt Day*) is just as relevant from a cultural and socio-

philosophical perspective as it is from a feminist one (Essay II). How does a country that was the scene of a world-historical revolution in the name of freedom, equality, and secularism in 1789 and that produced the founder of modern feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, deal with the sexist culture in the violent Arab banlieues today? No happy ending this time: The protagonist, the teacher Sonia Bergerac, who always wears a skirt as a sign of female self-empowerment and therefore attracts the wrath and contempt of the Arab youths, takes her class hostage and dies from a gunshot.

Another sadly topical issue is the award-winning Israeli television series *Fauda*, which focuses on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the fight of an Israeli special unit against the terror of Hamas and Hezbollah (Essay III). As a philosopher socialised in the German-speaking world, it is only natural for her to discuss the ideas from Kant's 1795 treatise *On Perpetual Peace*. Isn't eternal peace rather utopian and political reality eternal war, as the title of the corresponding essay by Josette Baer states?

Maggie Gyllenhaal's film *The Lost Daughter*, which is about a university professor who has two children whom she leaves for a love affair but returns to after three years, can be analysed with a view to the major theme of love and hate (Essay IV). The philosophical background to the analysis, which concludes by discussing the question raised by anti-natalism as to whether we should have children or not, is provided by Hannah Arendt's 1929 dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, and Plutarch's comments on hatred in his *Moralia*.

It is also illuminating how the CIA agent Carrie Mathison, the heroine of the thriller *Homeland*, is read as a figure in whom three important principles of Niccolò Machiavelli's political theory are united: firstly, prudence and humanity, secondly, the need to appear as a person with good qualities, and thirdly, to behave in politics in such a way that one is not hated (Essay V).

What is finally negotiated in the popular and successful television series *Breaking Bad*, with its protagonist, the polite chemistry teacher Walter White, who turns into a criminal in Albuquerque's drug underworld in order to secure his family's financial existence, are central concepts of political philosophy: Thomas Hobbes' theory of the war of all against all and his social anthropology of man as the wolf of man as well as Hannah Arendt's theory of power and violence (Essay VI).

Why this book is important: It is by no means merely a matter of giving a philosophically guided interpretation of films and integrating philosophical aspects into their interpretation, but above all it is about an interdisciplinary cooperation that does justice to the films and their philosophical core, a cooperation between philosophy and art—and film is an art form par excellence, a multimedia work of art that presents stories in texts, drama, images, and music. Philosophy and art can and should complement each other dialectically, to pick up on a thought from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, published in 1970 from his estate. They are dependent on each other: art on philosophy, which exposes its core in order to say what art cannot say; and philosophy on art, because it presents what philosophy itself cannot say.

This important book represents a successful attempt to bring philosophy and film into dialogue with each other in this way.

Gebenstorf, February 2024