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Cinema of the Dark Side, Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship by Shohini Chaudhuri (2014)

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Reviewed by Teri Howson

Shohini Chaudhuri's *Cinema of the Dark Side*, *Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* addresses key issues centring on ethics and morality in cinematic representations of war and conflict within twenty-first-century cinema. Its central subject is on the representation of atrocity in terms of the way in which perpetrators position themselves within conflict. It also considers the fluidity of morality itself, as well as the aesthetic choices made by the film-maker in directing the viewers' encounter. Chaudhuri refers throughout to Dick Cheney's employment of 'work[ing] the dark side' (180), alluding to *Star Wars*(1977, George Lucas) and the justification of war based on invocations that conflict is necessary in a continuing metaphor of 'good' versus 'evil', often perpetuated through Western concepts of this duality.

Cinema of the Dark Side is divided into five chapters seeking to address, through a variety of cinematic forms, the ways in which we consider not only the viewers' relationship to the screen image but also the ways in which the image promotes or supports certain ways of thinking about atrocity that covers 'torture, genocide, enforced disappearance, deportation and apartheid' (19).

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the ways 'good' and 'evil' are polarised through focusing on morality. Chaudhuri's discussion of the axis of morality is presented through a focus on the 'War on Terror' with predominant attention given to three films: *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012, Kathryn Bigelow), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007, Alex Gibney) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008, Errol Morris). Here, Chaudhuri particularly challenges prevailing thoughts on *Standard Operating Procedure* that suggest the film lacks in morality. In her discussion of the film, she states that it is the most ethical of the three films by the way it creates discomfort, challenges gender politics of torture, presents the complexities of individuals rather than fixing them as 'good' or 'evil' and questions the 'truth' of the image and what is absent from it. Her focus on the 'aesthetic choices' (23) in film-making and the screen image offers a thought-provoking challenge to existing emphasis on the 'truth' or 'fiction' of documentary film that recognises the 'careful crafting' of images within film-making (23).

Chapter 2 concentrates on historical dramas and the way in which they can inform an understanding of atrocities. This is presented in relation to *Hotel Rwanda* (2004, Terry George) focused on the Rwandan genocide and *Schindler's List* (1993, Steven Spielberg) centred on the Holocaust, with further readings on *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008,

Mark Herman),*Sometimes in April* (2005, Raoul Peck) and *The Night of Truth* (*La Nuit de la vérité*, 2004, Fanta Régina Nacro) providing additional contexts. This chapter argues that historical drama has tended towards a moralistic polarisation of 'good' versus 'evil'. Furthermore, Chaudhuri asserts that a Eurocentric viewpoint is prevalent in the dismissal of genocide as 'tribal rivalry' (in the case of Rwanda) and a denial that people 'like us' (a morally just audience who are placed in opposition to 'evil' perpetrators (51), could be imbued with alternative moral codes of conduct that justify killing entire groups of people (as in the Holocaust). This chapter also stresses a negation of the prevalence within historical dramas to frequently dismiss war as something past. It seeks to question what is happening in the present and how this might impact the audience's sense of the world around them and their relation to it.

Chapter 3 is predominantly concerned with transnationalism and problems of memory in relation to hidden conflicts within one's own lifetime, focussing on the disappearances of people in Chile and Argentina represented through numerous genres of film. Here, emphasis is placed on the interconnections between histories as 'multidirectional memory' (85), where one conflict can be both general and specific to a transnational audience, something that has been frequently problematised in criticism to date.

Particular genres such as science fiction are also given consideration, with Chapter 4 discussing the role of science fiction in presenting a parallel to present day conflicts in representing issues such as immigration, detention and deportation. *Children of Men* (2006, Alfonso Cuarón), *Monsters* (2010, Gareth Edwards) and *District 9* (2009, Neil Blomkamp) explore the politics of security, exclusion and foreignness. Although seemingly 'other' worlds, the chapter stresses the relationship to the real that is at a slight remove that allows for direct comparison and discussion to contemporary and historical scenarios. Each film portrays attitudes towards dispossessed and relocated populations and Chaudhuri highlights the importance of science fiction to deal with these subjects in a way that extends beyond the triviality often critically bestowed upon this genre.

Chapter 5 also considers cinema's use of space with a focus on Israel and Palestine to demonstrate the capabilities of space to represent the everyday political and historical aspects of conflict that may be absent in attentions to traumatic events. The interests of Western politics and a buried history of how the conflict has emerged are given consideration, as are the ways in which conflict is described and aligned through Western media.

The Conclusion discusses the subtleties of cinematic image to expound the complicated facets of war that sometimes require a keen eye to discern them. Chaudhuri argues that much of cinema that has dealt with war and violence has done so through the view of global capitalism with which she sees cinema itself as a part of. She particular draws attention to films use of 'perpetrators as sadistic Others' (179) distancing the audience from those who commit acts of atrocities. What is lacking, which Chaudhuri alludes to, is detailed knowledge of the events which audiences are viewing a representation of, or incidences where dominant moral narratives absent a large part of the context surrounding these complex and multifaceted conflicts.

Chaudhuri's separation of, and argument for, attention to be given to both ethics and morals within our considerations of cinema suggests that in many films there is an either/or

approach, presenting either the morality or ethics of a given conflict. This is evident in her reflection of *The Act of Killing* (2012, Joshua Oppenheihmer). In her Conclusion, she argues that the film's moral compass in directing judgement thwarts any ethical reflection on the West's involvement in the Indonesian genocide of 1965–1966. Chaudhuri's conclusion (that our definitions of morality are more fluid than we might consider) is apt, requiring consideration in relation to a particular time frame or moment in history, such as the prominent 'War on Terror' referenced throughout. Her offer is a move toward a sensitised and a reorientated view of conflicts that consider the larger scale of their historical causes and contexts that has been difficult to attain through a focus on trauma narratives.

Through a style both accessible and engaging, Chaudhuri tackles specific ethical challenges in conflict cinema whilst also raising larger questions around cinematic representations of atrocity. The inclusion of a discussion on notions of 'embodied spectatorship' allows for contemplation on the multi-sensory encounter of the audiences experience and presents the possibility of connections to one's own personal memory in response to watching cinematic representations of conflict. This creates potential for connection within – as opposed to separateness from – those represented in conflict narratives that allows for important considerations of atrocities within transnational and global systems, thereby strengthening arguments for a 'bodily investment in the screen image' which recognises our constant positioning of self in relation to others (18).

Chaudhuri argues for a change to the 'thinking' behind cinema and the way the film is structured to affect its audience. This is informed by a Deleuzean perspective that film has the capability to shift (and indeed shock) our perspective (16–17). Whilst she states her aim is to challenge readers to view the films analysed or those that are similar in new ways, it will take a more fundamental change to film-making itself to reach her desire for a shift towards recognition of the greater contexts and causes of atrocity that surround the narrative. This book, however, marks an important change in elucidating some of the complexities of atrocity narratives beyond the dominating political and social hegemonies.