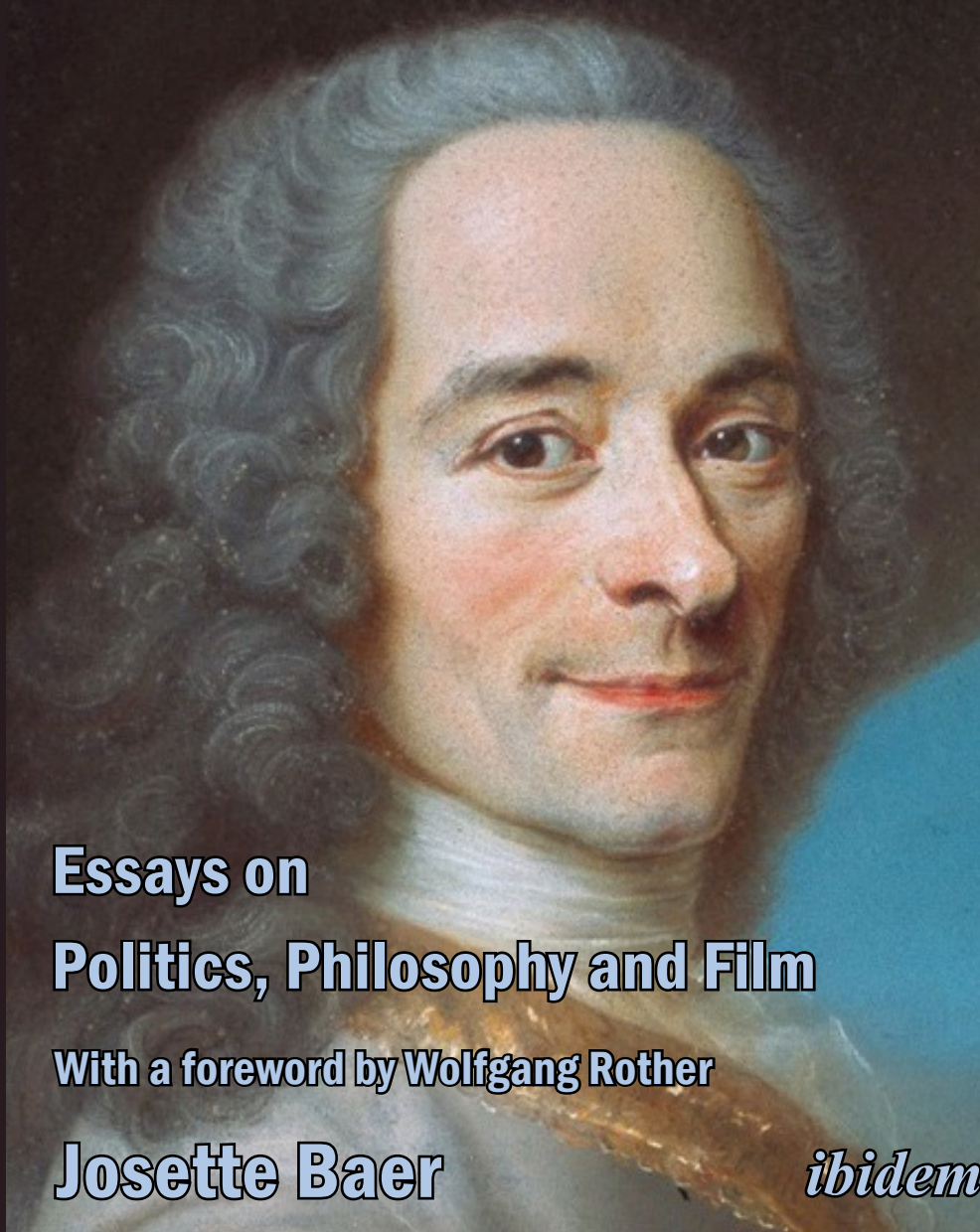


Saul Goodman - the American Candide?

A portrait of Voltaire, a French philosopher, writer, and historian. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a white cravat and a dark coat with a gold brocade lining. He has long, curly, light-colored hair and is looking slightly to the right with a subtle smile.

Essays on

Politics, Philosophy and Film

With a foreword by Wolfgang Rother

Josette Baer

ibidem

Josette Baer

Saul Goodman—the American Candide?

Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Film

With a foreword by Wolfgang Rother

Josette Baer

**SAUL GOODMAN—
THE AMERICAN CANDIDE?**

Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Film

With a foreword by Wolfgang Rother

ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-7674-8

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Hannover • Stuttgart 2024

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

DEDICATED TO

H. G. TUDOR

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	9
Introduction and Method.....	11
Foreword by Wolfgang Rother, University of Zurich UZH ..	13
I. Thomas Sowell's <i>Black Rednecks and White Liberals: The Best of Enemies</i>	21
II. Simone de Beauvoir's <i>Girl: La Journée de la Jupe (Skirt Day)</i>	37
III. Immanuel Kant's Perpetual War: <i>Fauda</i>	55
IV. Antique Concepts of Love and Hatred: <i>The Lost Daughter</i>	113
V. Niccolò Machiavelli and the CIA: <i>Homeland</i>	151
VI. Thomas Hobbes in New Mexico: <i>Breaking Bad</i>	197
VII. Voltaire's <i>Candide</i> or Optimism: <i>Better Call Saul</i>	237
Appendix	
Index	263

Acknowledgements

Wolfgang Rother, the author of the foreword, has been my friend and colleague at the Department of Philosophy at UZH for many years. He is the editor of CONEXUS, the online journal of senior scholars at UZH. Thanks to his philosophical curiosity and editorial generosity, I began to write about aspects of political theory in film—and this book is the result.

Peter Horváth, Jaroslav Mihálik and Martin Švikruha are great bosses—they are making my employment at UCM Trnava a sheer joy. Tatiana Tökölyová and my colleagues at the UCM Faculty of Social Sciences are like family to me. I thank Peter Thomas Hill, who has been teaching me scholarly English. One never ceases to learn.

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

I. Thomas Sowell's *Black Rednecks and White Liberals: The Best of Enemies*

Introduction

Thomas Sowell's (*1930) essay "Black Rednecks and White Liberals"¹ explains the history of slavery in the USA and its connection with the contemporary so-called black ghetto culture. His text is superbly researched; his analysis of the often ruthless and violent behaviour of some black citizens and communities can be traced back to the years of slavery, when white Americans in the South often treated their black slaves worse than cattle.

Indeed, one is astonished to learn that the behaviour of the whites has its origins in the immigrant communities from the Celtic fringe, Scotland, and Ireland. Immigrants of these communities had settled in the south of what would become the USA in the centuries prior to slavery—and, back home on the British Isles, they were being civilized by the British, who, in the 18th and 19th centuries, were integrating these regions and people to English culture:

"More is involved here than a mere parallel between blacks and Southern whites. What is involved is a common subculture that goes back for centuries, which has encompassed everything from ways of talking to attitudes toward education, violence and sex—and

¹ Thomas Sowell, "Black Rednecks and White Liberals", in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 1-63.

which originated not in the South, but in those parts of the British Isles from which white Southerners came.”²

Traits of such behaviour can manifest themselves in some black communities, certainly not in all. What one can learn from Sowell’s analysis is that contemporary simplistic accusations of racism argue with the Southern slavery system of the 19th century, a system the North abolished by winning the Civil War (1861–1865). Today, bad behaviour of blacks is being explained with past white oppression.

Now, how did the white Southerners behave? Sowell identifies the main characteristic features of white redneck culture: pride and violence;³ poor economic activity or the lack of entrepreneurship;⁴ intellectual activity or disregard for education;⁵ sexual activity and religion:⁶

“What the rednecks or crackers brought with them across the ocean was a whole constellation of attitudes, values and behaviour patterns that might have made sense in the world in which they had lived for centuries, but which would prove to be counterproductive in the world to which they were going—and counter-productive to the blacks who would live in their midst for centuries before emerging into freedom and

² Sowell, 1.

³ Sowell, 7-13.

⁴ Sowell, 13-22.

⁵ Sowell, 22-23.

⁶ Sowell, 23-27.

migrating to the great urban centers of the United States, taking with them similar values.”⁷

What did this behaviour look like? Sowell lists the following, referring to his sources: cultural values and social patterns consisted of an aversion to work; proneness to violence; neglect of or disinterest in education; sexual promiscuity; drunkenness, and reckless searches for excitement.⁸ One can identify some of these characteristics in the community of black rednecks, especially in the behaviour and values of members of ‘gangsta rap’ and its barbarism.⁹ Gang violence, a life determined by criminal behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse and the idea that education is for white folks only, seem to be the features of contemporary black identity:

“The thuggish gutter words and brutal hoodlum lifestyle of ‘gangsta rap’ musicians are not merely condoned but glorified by many white intellectuals—and ‘understood’ by others lacking the courage to take responsibility for siding with savages.”¹⁰

Whether we like it or not, Sowell has convincing facts—alcohol and drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and the disinterest in education prompt bad results: children born of wedlock; teenage pregnancy; families without fathers, that is, no male role models; neglected and lonely male children who join the neighbourhood gang, because the gang has

⁷ Sowell, 6.

⁸ Sowell, 6.

⁹ Sowell, 55.

¹⁰ Sowell, 55.

strict rules, thus operating as *Ersatz* family; socialisation into violence by gang rules; lack of personal hygiene, and a painful lack of personal responsibility.

How can I, as a child, learn hygiene, responsibility, and discipline if I wake up every morning in a filthy flat, seeing my parents passed out on some substance? How to improve without role models? Who is to blame for this social misery? To survive, I need help, coping mechanisms—thus, why not join the gang in my neighbourhood? They have rules and provide a home with a catechism of behaviour. That is the rational choice of a neglected child.

Often, black leaders put forward accusations of slavery, blaming white oppression for black failure. Yet, one might find that this issue is a bit more complicated. Patronizing those blacks who do not share their beliefs, the BLM movement¹¹ claims to represent all blacks in their fight for equality and justice. Yet, BLM fails to explain why musicians such as the band Earth, Wind & Fire, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, and Diana Ross, to name but a few, are global house-hold names, their songs being played all over the world. Actors such as Sidney Poitier, Denzel Washington, Halle Berry, and Viola Davis have excelled because of their talent and professional acumen. The stellar careers of Simone Biles, Kobe Bryant, Muhammad Ali, and Serena Williams prove that to be successful in sports has nothing to do with the colour of your skin.

Londoner Naomi Campbell was the first black model to grace the prestigious cover of French VOGUE in the 1980s—

¹¹ <https://blacklivesmatter.com>; accessed 17 December 2023.

and that because white super models Linda Evangelista and Christy Turlington refused to take on modelling jobs as long as VOGUE kept ignoring black Naomi. Turlington and Evangelista thus stood up for their friend Campbell, making the fashion business aware of its anti-black bias. Excelled have, furthermore, journalist Candace Owens, author Shelby Steele, neurosurgeon Ben Carson, and philosophy professor Cornel West, to name but the most prominent.

Is a nation racist who votes half-black Barack Obama¹² US president for two terms? I certainly do not want to diminish the real suffering of black US citizens, but to simplify such a complicated issue with one-sided accusations is not helpful.

Furthermore, Sowell explains most convincingly, how the civil rights movement, embodied by Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) became a moral endeavour and task of white liberals. This engagement of white liberals, speaking for the blacks, and accusing the whites of racism and discrimination of blacks, has been deepening the gap between black and white US citizens. In German, we have a wise slogan: “Das Gegenteil von gut ist nicht böse, aber gut gemeint.”¹³ It explains that one can have the best intentions but the results of one’s activities can prompt a negative outcome, i.e. well-meant but badly exercised, badly done. Sowell on the white liberals’ apologetics for the bad behaviour of some black citizens:

¹² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/barack-obama/>; accessed 17 December 2023.

¹³ <https://german.stackexchange.com/questions/1753/herkunft-der-re-dewendung-das-gegenteil-von-gut-ist-gut-gemeint>; accessed 17 December 2023.