

ABSTRACTS

FILM REALISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF USING CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES

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Can film characters serve as moral examples? Virtue theorists suggest that even fictional characters can provide ethical instruction and inspiration, as Martha Nussbaum has illustrated with her analyses of literature. Whatever one's views on the merits of virtue ethics, the claim that we can learn about moral character by way of fictional narratives is intriguing, particularly when applied to film and its ability to provide concrete depictions.

But if we think these characters should influence how we actually think about our lives, then it would seem we want them to depict real possibilities for how one might live; and in that sense, we would want the depiction to convey a certain amount of realism. However, contemporary theorists largely reject the sort of naïve realism that theorists like Bazin embraced – that the camera can just show us how the world really is. Rather, the very nature of film narration compromises its ability to be realistic, because film narration typically leans heavily upon filmic conventions, which may be very different from aspects of actual persons. For example, as David Bordwell explains, spectators make sense of narrative films by employing a variety of schemata, which they learn from exposure to other films, familiarity with film genres, and expectations based on stereotypes from the cultural at large. In short, films are *narratives*, which are based on learned expectations established by narrative conventions. Narrative plausibility, it could be argued, has little to do with what happens in the real world.

Or does it? While I largely agree with these observations, I argue for an alternative approach to film realism that explains why cinematic characters can indeed provide moral examples. Hugo Münsterberg claims that film “tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world” and instead “adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world.” The emphasis here is on how we *experience* the world, and if it turns out that experience is itself essentially a form of narration, shaped by the same sorts of conventions that influence film narration, then films *are* realistic portrayals of how we live.

David Carr puts forward a useful version of narrative identity, showing that we effectively tell a story in relating the events of our lives. In creating that story, we make use of various social scripts, which are themselves the results of cultural conventions. If

this is the case, then, the process of creating a narrative for our lives is not so different from the process of constructing film narratives. Yes, film characters may be the product of stereotypes and conventions, but our own narratives are chosen from among similar schemata.

So if we understand our own identity in narrative terms, the concern with cinematic characters being narrative constructions evaporates. We learn from and are inspired by narratives because we are in the process of thinking about our own narratives. This position shows why, then, cinematic characters can indeed serve as moral examples.

Keywords: Narrative; Narrative Identity; Virtue Theory; Realism; Moral Example.

NIHILISM ON THE METAPHYSICAL SCREEN: THE FATE OF GILLES DELEUZE'S CINEMATIC ETHICS

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"I feel I am a pure metaphysician," declared Gilles Deleuze in a 1981 interview, and although perhaps his statement is more provocation than proof, this article takes Deleuze's admission seriously in a reading of his *Cinema* books. Commentary on Deleuze in film-philosophical scholarship has been largely typical of a reluctance to fully interrogate his metaphysical commitments, epitomised by the recent alignment of his work with the writings of Stanley Cavell. It is ethics that provides the common touchstone for Cavell's and Deleuze's philosophies of cinema, and D.N. Rodowick argues that an imagined "conversation" between the two thinkers can be productive. For Rodowick, Deleuze's ethics of belief and Cavell's Emersonian moral perfectionism are "a sinuous line along which [their] accounts of ontology complement one another." My article argues that this leads to a misreading of the Deleuzian ethics; it will require emphasising Deleuze's metaphysics, his claims on how reality itself is produced, in order to reorient this reading of his ethical project.

Deleuze's ethical problematic concerns "the modern fact (...) that we no longer believe in this world." Rodowick reads this as synonymous with scepticism: the creeping fear of the non-existence of external reality. He posits that Cavell and Deleuze both respond to the problem of scepticism by emphasising the link between cinema and belief, thus arguing that we cannot *know* the existence of the world but that we must believe instead. This is despite the different metaphysical commitments of the two philosophers, and Rodowick states that "Deleuze's Spinozan ontology presents a universe where scepticism should be made irrelevant." This means that Rodowick is led to posit

“Deleuze’s unacknowledged scepticism” as that which unsettles Deleuze’s philosophical position; it is “Deleuze’s difficulty in accounting for the human dimensions” of the existential concerns that arise after World War II that explains this contradiction, and Rodowick reads Deleuze *against himself* to assert a humanist account of his ethics.

I posit that it is as a response to nihilism that Deleuze’s ethics of belief is situated, and I use this metaphysical reorientation to draw out the fatalistic implications of Deleuze’s cinematic ethics, probing the question of whether or not it is *fit for purpose* today. The possibilities of agency and human freedom are diminished within Deleuze’s philosophical system as there is a deferral to a metaphysical reality of primary production that dictates ethical preferences. Instead of pacifying Deleuze by emphasising humanistic values, this article thus attempts to grapple with the full ethical and political implications of the metaphysics underlining Deleuze’s film-philosophy.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze; Metaphysics; Agency; Film-Philosophy; Politics.

STAGING DISAGREEMENT AND ITS ETHICS: A RANCIÈRIAN APPROACH TO LANTHIMOS’ *DOGTOOTH*

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This article analyses Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth/Kynodontas* (2009) on the basis of Jacques Rancière’s *ethics of equality*. It begins with an ethical elucidation of Rancière’s widely-known conception of *disagreement* through which Rancière meticulously conceptualizes politics not as a form of consensus, but as a form of disagreement or dissensus. For Rancière, what accompanies scenes of disagreement is the principle of equality, which signifies equality between each and every speaking being; it is the principle that corresponds to a presupposition of equality that animates both the police and politics. By taking the principle of equality into the centre of our argument, just as Rancière does, we suggest that ethics is the core of his aesthetico-political framework since both the police and politics are dependent upon this principle. Therefore, in the first section, we elaborate respectively the police as an organisation through which the ethical dimension of relationships is delimited and politics as scenes of disagreement in which the ethical dimension of relationships becomes unlimited. This is because politics is an ethical act that opens the undoing of the police order to an infinite number of ethical responses. We propose to name this the *ethics of equality*. Then, the article aims to enrich the discussion on the ethico-aesthetics of politics through a reading of *Dogtooth* as well

as to provide a unique appraisal of the film. Accordingly, we suggest that *Dogtooth* with its narrative provides exemplary settings to discuss the ethics of equality. To argue this, we initially provide a critical analysis of the familial organization in *Dogtooth*, specifically focusing on how the family structurally resembles the police order and how the scenes of agreement and disagreement are displayed within this structure. We then demonstrate how the ethical and aesthetico-political value of the film lies on its capacity to narrate scenes of disagreement, especially in a pre-political sense.

Keywords: Ethics of Equality; Rancière; Disagreement; Aesthetics and Politics; Lanthimos' *Dogtooth*.

LAW AND IMAGE: THE MINOR ETHICS IN KRZYSZTOF KIEŚLOWSKI'S *DECALOGUE ONE*

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The narrative of *Decalogue One*, the first episode of Krzysztof Kieślowski's television series *The Decalogue* (*Dekalog*, 1988), revolves around a rationally unexplainable accident: a child falls through the ice of a frozen lake and drowns, even though his father has ensured with scientific calculations and empirical experiments that the ice should support the child's weight with ease. The series' references to the Ten Commandments suggest the tentative explanation that the child's death is a judgement of God on the father, who has transgressed by elevating human reason above God. This article argues that the possibility of divine judgement is invoked in *Decalogue One* only in order to question the logic of judgement in general as well as the idea of universal moral law on which such judgements depend. In this way, Kieślowski's film is able to bypass the moral code determined by the Ten Commandments and proceed to develop an alternative, cinematic ethics in and of the image.

The aim of the article is to locate Kieślowski's ethico-aesthetic practice within the "minor" tradition of ethical thought as developed by Gilles Deleuze in his reading of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Deleuze upholds a sharp distinction between morality and ethics. For him, morality, with its emphasis on transcendent values, laws, and obedience, represents a misinterpretation of the true nature of reality. Ethics, on the other hand, is concerned with the rectification of such a misconception. It is defined as an epistemic operation of overcoming the natural and habitual conditions of human perception which prevent the attainment of adequate knowledge of the world. Similarly, in *Decalogue One*, ethical practice can be seen as belonging primarily to the domain of perception and

knowledge: the characters constitute a typology of different modes of vision attempting to grasp the central mysterious event of the film. In addition, this article claims that the shift from religious morality to minor ethics in Kieślowski's film brings about a renegotiation of the concept of death as it is wrested away from moral considerations concerning guilt and judgement. Instead, death becomes a site for experimentation with the capacities of the cinematic image itself. It becomes a phenomenon of arrested movement which always also involves the potential for reanimation, for life regained.

Keywords: Krzysztof Kieślowski; Gilles Deleuze; Baruch Spinoza; Ethics; Judgement; Perception; Death.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL IMAGINATION, ETHICS, AND EMPATHY: THE CASE OF EPILEPSY

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In this article, I explore the links between the cinematic development of representations built around iconographies of the body and the empathetic imagination related to epilepsy in fiction films. Accounts of epilepsies continue to associate these neuro-electrical disorders with an unsettling "otherness." Many cinematic representations of epileptic disorders still channel mythical divinity, madness and vulnerability, thus reinforcing stigma. Jerking bodies and falls have fashioned a stereotyped choreography of epilepsy used by various entertainment industries.

This embodiment of the uncanny and its role in generating a reductive normativity of epileptic portrayals in films calls for viewers and, to some extent, filmmakers, to question their perspective on disease stereotyping. How can kinaesthetic simulations of neurological portrayals unreflective of a person's emotions lead to empathy? Can existing movie portrayals of epilepsy encapsulate synergies between various emotional and empathetic elements of phenomenological acting, viewing, and filmmaking? To offer alternative movie portrayals it is important to examine these intricate relationships, and to gain an understanding of the complexities attached to a much-feared disease.

I therefore examine aspects of epilepsy as translated by medical observers as well as potential perceptions of spectators experiencing acted performances of physical symptoms associated with the disease. The supporting film scenes, extracted from five movies: *The Last King of Scotland*, *Augustine*, *The Infernal Cake-Walk*, *Control*, and *Electricity*. These movies link visual objectivity and the appropriation, by both the medical world and the entertainment industry, of a seemingly unmanageable body. The

extracts from these films outline medical, sociological, intellectual, phenomenological and artistic ramifications associated with the multiplicity of symptoms telling of epilepsy. I thus focus on the visuality of depictions of epilepsy performed in films by actors who are presumably not afflicted by the disease and I highlight audiences' latent perceptions correlated to empathetic and affective imagination.

Keywords: Film; Representation; Empathy; Phenomenology; Epilepsy.

TRAUMA AND RATIONALIZATION: ETHICAL TENSIONS AND
CONFOUNDING EMPATHIES IN OPPENHEIMER'S *THE ACT OF KILLING*

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Joshua Oppenheimer's groundbreaking documentary *The Act of Killing* positions the spectator within a besieged ethic, wherein the very language of morality has been co-opted by dictatorial, murderous powers. In such a situation, one can only maintain a sense of justice obliquely and somewhat insecurely.

The ingenuity of Oppenheimer's film is that this project, which initially aimed (and failed) to focus upon victims of genocide, came to be a feature length conversation and cinematic experiment with the killers. The murderers show no remorse, and live comfortably with their pasts, yet still, ironically, feel their true stories have not been properly told. A film, within Oppenheimer's film, becomes their chance to right the "wrong." The results of this experiment are at once reflexive, surreal, humorous, revealing, ethically vexing, and constantly surprising.

And so, *The Act of Killing* is a truly complex rumination on ethical experience, seeking to traverse and somehow corporeally understand the experiential, emotional terrain of great moral blindness.

In addition, I argue that Oppenheimer's film deliberately confuses, mystifies, and destabilizes the ethical instincts of the spectator, precisely by pitting his/her aesthetically-framed moral intuitions against his/her rational/abstract moral reasoning processes (to deploy the categories of the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt). One feels one's moral reasoning warring against the emotional and perceptual experience that normally grounds it.

This vexing, bewildering experience does reveal something critical: our over-reliance on empathy as the primary touchstone for cinematic ethical experience. Given that empathy has become a core virtue in many contemporary ethical theories (cf. the "cinempathy" of Robert Sinnerbrink), this is important and timely. We look vainly for

true empathy, and witness how empathy can be countermanded by cinematic imagination as much as marshaled by it.

Indeed, the film can be seen as a kind of laboratory on the empathy-ethic dynamic in human experience: our intuitions for it, our search for it in others, and our bewilderment at its remarkable absence in the characters before us. At the same time, we unavoidably find interest, humor, and endearing human qualities in the murderous subjects before us, nudging us toward an ethically ironic empathy.

However, the actual experience of the film may be more closely related to the victims' perspective than we might first presuppose, as it functions like an aesthetics of national trauma. Language has been broken by torture and death, and reason, argument, and logic are all immediately found neutered. Through the film's bewildering presentation of national amnesia—the tormented psychology required to live in a society where false narratives and ethical rationalizations are the norm—the viewer is placed in the position of having to witness this amnesic reality while constantly imagining a parallel, critical, and morally corrected reality alongside it. This is at once exhausting and constantly fascinating. Confirming evidence for moral truth is in short supply, but there are several strategic moments where it breaks through, and the cries of the oppressed are suddenly, shockingly heard. It is only at the very end of the film that some hope for a moral center might—tentatively, possibly—be grasped again.

Keywords: Empathy; Trauma; Moral Intuition; Embodiment; Cinematic Ethics.

A PSYCHOANALYTIC ETHICS FOR SCREEN AESTHETICS? THE CASE OF *SPRING BREAKERS*

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In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Jacques Lacan posits the work of the psychoanalytic clinic as an 'ethics of the singular': a practice that aims not at revealing 'a universal truth' but, rather, the 'particular truth' of self-knowledge that 'appears to everyone in its intimate specificity.' This ethics places special emphasis on knowledge regarding the subject's particular mode of *jouissance*—how one 'enjoys' beyond the limits of pleasure and reality principles—where, as Lacan puts it, 'in the last analysis, what subject really feels guilty about' is not immoral action per se, but 'the extent to which he has compromised his desire.' Can such an ethics have a place in an ethics of film aesthetics? This paper considers what a psychoanalytic ethics might add to our understanding of cinema's ethical experience. I take a film that, at first glance, must appear singularly

unethical—Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers*—to ask how its aestheticized experience of transgression might explicate something of the intimate specificity found in the clinic in ways that nevertheless resonate with a collective ethical project. I follow Tim Themi in showing where Georges Bataille’s formulation of a ‘taboo-transgression’ dialectic found in art maps onto Lacan’s registers of the real, symbolic, and imaginary in ways not insignificant to our understanding of cinema’s aesthetic experience. If psychoanalytic film theory first approached cinema as a technology of the imaginary it was in the sense that its imagery and illusions were (pejoratively) associated with an uncritical subject of ideology; the ethics of the psychoanalytic clinic similarly show us where speaking from the imaginary is an obstacle to analysis and the truth of the subject sought therein. If cinema is to provide an ethics in this sense, then, it should aim not at the imaginary ideals of a society but the real conditions of being in and belonging to it. Accordingly, I consider how for Bataille, Freud, and Lacan the function of art (here mapped onto cinema) is in producing an aesthetic experience that reconciles the individual to the collective project of civilisation—the symbolic register founded on taboo and morality—by identifying and granting access to something of the ‘real’ sacrifice that has been made. Significant here is *Spring Breakers*’ sublimated pornographic aesthetic that one is invited to enjoy not in spite of but as *part of* its ethical project. In this, the ethical aesthetic of *Spring Breakers* may be distinguished from other forms of transgressive cinema because its animation of what we have ‘sacrificed’ for the collective sustains a psychoanalytic ‘moral indifference’ to toward the real of desire. That is, the film does not let us remain in ignorance of the sacrifice even as it shows us its necessity. Effectively then, I argue *Spring Breakers* offers what Themi nominates as an ‘ethics of the Real’: an ethical encounter found through transgression that re-affirms taboo its wake, what Lacan might call the ‘maintenance and discipline of desire.’

Keywords: Psychoanalysis; Ethics; Art; Jouissance; Transgression.

“THEY’RE BAD PEOPLE – THEY SHOULD SUFFER”: POST-BRITISH CRIME FILMS AND THE ETHICS OF RETRIBUTIVE VIOLENCE

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In my article, I will focus on Nick Love’s *Outlaw* (2007) and Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List* (2011) – two British films which I propose to call, using Michael Gardiner’s words, “post-British” crime films. According to Gardiner, post-Britishness describes a cultural phase in which the cultural and political promises of the British union are being upended.

Post-British forms of culture, then, prefigure the ethico-political crisis of the British union. I argue that this post-British sensibility bears strong resemblance to Thomas Elsaesser's notion of Europe's "post-heroic" cinema as an ethical and political thought experiment. In my article, I want to focus on a comparative analysis of *Outlaw* and *Kill List* as such thought experiments.

The two films focus on characters who have lost faith in Britain's institutions such as democratic politics or the justice system. The contract killers in *Kill List* and the frustrated ex-soldier in *Outlaw* consider the very idea of Britain itself to be at stake. *Outlaw* paints the picture of a fundamentally corrupt justice system which lets the streets roam with acquitted offenders, while *Kill List*'s narrative ultimately reveals central institutions of power to be run by a Pagan cult, and the two contract killers' final job turns out to be a ritual of sacrifice. In both films, characters are convinced that the only way to reach any kind of ethical standards within a disintegrating national community is to resort to vigilantism and retributive violence. This kind of retributive violence not only points to a crisis of ethics, but also to what René Girard has called a "sacrificial crisis" which is marked by the blurred difference between impure and purifying violence, and which ultimately affects the cultural order of a community.

In that respect, Nick Love and Ben Wheatley's post-British crime films become readable as though experiments in Elsaesser's sense since they render their protagonists within an ethical experiment of abjection: the vigilante outlaws and contract killers themselves assume the status of abjects through what they do and throughout the films' narratives end up in situations that "are situated at the bottom of what is human, as if to test [...] what survives when dignity evaporates and the 'ethical self' disintegrates". Simultaneously, their retributive violence is directed against child molesters and other offenders who likewise inhabit abject positions. It is in these key scenes of violent "abject reciprocity" that the two films unfold their full (if not unproblematic) potentials as 'films as ethics', for here their thought experiments transcend the confines of popular genre conventions and drastically implicate the audience as abject spectators of a violence intended to be purifying.

I will use Elsaesser's concept of film as ethical thought experiment as a framework to demonstrate how these films negotiate the post-British situation as an ethico-political vacuum which finds expression in their narratives as well as in their form: both films ethically implicate the spectator through their suggestive use of long takes and their deliberate deconstruction of genre conventions. In these post-British scenarios, plot and form comment on each other. Notions such as national cinema or genre have become as problematic and as compromised as democratic politics and the idea of justice. Abjection

thus becomes “an ethical foil and a political vanishing point” in these cinematic thought experiments.

Keywords: Post-British Cinema; Crime Films; Ethics of Retribution; Ethical Turn; Film as Thought Experiment /Thomas Elsaesser.