

Chapter 6

Of Redemption: The Good of Film Experience

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6.1 Encountering Cinema

Two questions have dominated the history of film studies: ‘what is cinema?’ and ‘how do we understand it?’ The first is the question of film essence or ontology. The second is the question of cinematic meaning or epistemology. More rare has been the question of film ethics, of ‘how does film provoke responsibility?’ Film critics and theorists have done an outstanding job of asking ‘Who is speaking and to whom?’ or ‘Who is spectating? Who is reading this text?’ Yet, we have only sometimes asked how this speaking or spectating might relate to a primary responsibility even more fundamental than ‘the politics of representation’ or ‘the authenticity of voice.’ More recently, there has been a significant turn in film studies toward just such questions of the deeper relation between film and ethics.

To be clear, in this chapter, the question of film and ethics centers on the encounter between the self and the other. In the cinema, this encounter plays out (1) between filmmaker and subjects or characters, (2) between subjects or characters themselves, (3) between the subject or characters and the rest of the world, and (4) between the film and filmgoers. (These four locations of the encounter, of course, intersect with the three looks of the cinema: the look of the camera, the looks between characters on screen, and the look of viewers.) Previously, theorists have reduced these encounters to aesthetic, social, or psychological situations and addressed them through political, phenomenological, psychoanalytical, cognitive, and analytical approaches. However, in such instances, questions of ethics have been treated only as problems to be solved and determined either by outside rules or codes or by a return to the self as the center of the moral universe, not by the immediate encounter with the other. Questions of film ethics, until recently, have

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been made secondary to questions of film ontology or film epistemology. The turn toward the question of film ethics (as the first question) challenges these totalising foundational assumptions and approaches and demands film ethics and the ethical encounter be addressed through all its permutations specifically by maintaining it as a question of ethics, of the encounter.

Although the key thinkers to influence contemporary questions of film ethics include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, and a number of feminist and queer theorists, many film theorists writing recently have turned to Emmanuel Levinas. It is the specific turn toward the primacy of the singularity of the other that makes Levinasian ethical inquiry unique. For Levinas, ethics is “an optics,” a “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other”, and “a non-allergic relation with alterity” [15, pp. 23, 43 & 47]. It is a way of looking at the world that is embodied and visible but also beyond the embodied and visible that opens systems and serves to critique as I “encounter the indiscreet face of the Other that calls me into question” [15, p. 171]. Here, ethics immediately arises through encountering the other; therefore, it cannot be based on prior rules and cannot be used to found a system of law as its immediacy delimits it. In its freedom from intermediate or intervening phenomena, ethics comes before ontology and epistemology and cannot rely upon them for its essence or certainty. Furthermore, this encounter provokes a response exterior to myself rather than a return to self-assuredness as the other is seen as exterior to me, ‘irreducibly different,’ unique, and incomparable rather than as ‘different from’ me, like a different version of me or my alter-ego. This description of the *encounter* (sometimes referred to as *the face-to-face*) and of *responsibility* engendered through this encounter with exteriority have led some theorists to consider closely the intersection of filmic specificity and ethical immediacy.¹

6.2 Intersecting Ethics

Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of thinkers have been working to better describe the intersection of film and ethics without reducing either to the same or collapsing them to a third concept. In 2000, Laura U. Marks raises issues about ethics, art, and politics in her study of intercultural cinema and embodiment [17]. In one chapter of *The Brain is the Screen*, Peter Canning writes on Deleuze, immanence, and cinema ethics. More recent work on Deleuze has also taken up the question of an ethics and cinema [7]. My own work on Pedro Almodóvar, Michelangelo Antonioni, Derviş Zaim, and Jay Rosenblatt asks about the connections between genre, pornography, ethics and scepticism, the call for a ‘new ethics’ for a ‘new man,’ the ethics of interruption, and ‘remaining human’ [2–5]. Michael Renov explores the ethics of documentary subjectivity—the one area of cinema studies

¹Editor’s note: the reader is referred to Chapters by Sentilles (Chap. 5), Zarrilli (Chap. 11), and Thompson (Chap. 12), who also discuss Levinas (in relation to photography, performance, and applied theatre respectively).

where discussions of film and ethics has always played a prominent role [18]. Judith Butler and Susan Sontag analyse the ethics of televisual and photographic images as testimony of torture and suffering—asking which bodies matter and how we regard the pain of others [6, 21]. In her 2005 study, Joanna Zylinka proposes a plan for further linking ethics and cultural studies [24]. Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, in the second edition of their *Film Theory: An Introduction*, include short sections introducing new social and ethical concerns within film studies [14]. Interestingly, Lapsley and Westlake provide the most sustained discussion of the debates and rejoinders of any film theory introduction. Frances L. Restuccia outlines the relationship between modern novels and films, Lacanian ‘ethics of desire,’ queer theory, and ‘authentic acts’ challenging heteronormativity [20]. Portions of Barbara Gabriella Renzi’s collection *From Plato’s Cave to the Multiplex* introduce issues behind studying film and ethics [19]. In 2006 Sarah Cooper published *Selfless Cinema?* and in 2007 edited a special issue of *Film-Philosophy* [8, 9]. Both are cited as breakthrough moments in the history of film and ethics debates.

In *Selfless Cinema?* Cooper (following Levinas’s concern over the ethics of encounter) asks what it might mean to maintain the separation between self and other, *not* to see the face of the other as my own but to value and valorise separation from the filmed subject. She asks after encounter as an asymmetrical responsibility toward the other rather than recognition between the self and the other. How might encountering the other interrupt my self-assuredness, my certainty? What might it mean to ask after the other first, without expecting reciprocity? What might it mean to ask how I am responsible for the other? And what might this mean in terms of the cinema and the separation the cinematic apparatus creates but cannot thematise? Cooper examines how filmic looking is always a looking through the eyes of an other at an other and how my experience of cinematic time is always the experience of a time not my own. Through these two experiences, Cooper explains, the cinema affects ethical encounter. She then looks at how we might experience this ethical encounter through the work of Jean Rouch, Chris Marker, Raymond Depardon, and Agnès Varda. All the while, Cooper cautions, separation is what makes the ethical encounter possible because the encounter displaces the ground beneath cinema, the filmmaker, the filmed subject, the film goer, and the ethics of responsibility. In this light, ethics remains the center of Cooper’s study of cinematic experience.

The special issue of *Film-Philosophy* covers a diversity of topics and approaches to film and ethics and raises the possibility that film and philosophy might generate something new, “a commonality in spite of their differences,” while also making plain the problems and barriers that arise when embarking on the study of film and ethics *as film and ethics* [9, p. vi]. The authors develop concerns over the gaze, look, and representation in general—reminding us of the uneasy history between ethics and mimesis (as imitation, mirroring, or mimicry of reality in art). They raise the specter of diminishing film to an allegory for philosophical ideas or reducing philosophy to a lens through which ‘to read’ movies as they highlight the status of the image and sound in cinema. Finally, they focus on the concepts and concerns that remain between film and ethics: the face (*visage*), the caress (*caresse*), the other, difference, art and aesthetics, responsibility, time and movement, and the feminine

and embodiment. Throughout this collection, the authors remind us to attend to the dialogic and dialectic relationship between film and ethics—responding to the specific rigors of both as well as the line between them. Through careful attention to filmic specificity and ethical immediacy, these writers provide an excellent starting point for further discussions of film and ethics.

What remains central to Cooper's engagement with film and ethics is the spatial-temporal intersection at the core of cinematic *mise-en-scène*, which opens film to "the ethical mode" [8, p. 91]. (This focus is not surprising as Levinas so often used the word, although not necessarily in a filmic sense, to describe the ethical encounter.) *Mise-en-scène* is a term borrowed into film studies from theater. It originally meant the 'staging' of a set but came to refer to the overall arrangement of space and time before the camera. A film's *mise-en-scène* is everything experienced on screen—setting, lighting, costume, color and contrast, makeup, character placement and spatial relations between characters, character movement and gesture. Thus, it refers to the space of the film on screen as well as the movement of characters and props through that space. For Cooper, some images, because their *mise-en-scènes* provoke us to see film in the light of other films, compel an "interfilmic mode of viewing" that resists "the reflective mechanism that would refer one back to oneself or one's own world" [8, p. 8]. This excess escapes the filmmaker and the viewer, distancing them from the filmed subjects. When what we experience exceeds what we expect, the limitations of film-making, the inability of films to completely objectify and totalise the world, disturb us, dislodges us with an encounter of the face and skin of the other not as our own. Thus, as she writes at the end of *Selfless Cinema?*, in film "fully situated in relation to the filming/viewing I/eye, the ethical cuts through the certainties of the subject who sees, creating a selfless encounter through which we might begin to see differently both the cinematic space and beyond" [8, p. 93]. This focus on the relation between the specificity of the filmic *mise-en-scène* and its provocation toward something 'beyond' became a central concern for many of the critics working on film and ethics. In this light, arguments about film ethics have become arguments about filmic uncertainty, or filmic interruption of the status quo. Ethics here is not about openness, liberalisation, or plurality. It is not about being open but about being opened, wounded, dislodged. Ethics is not about accepting the other but about being challenged by the other, as when someone or something interrupts your train of thought, disrupts your self assuredness. In this, way, all these writers concerned with ethics are also concerned with excess, with the affect of excess. The filmic experience exceeds our desires.

Following the publication of the *Film-Philosophy* special issue in 2007, a number of authors began focusing on specific cinematic aspects and filmmakers who are particularly open to questions of film and ethics. Michele Aaron writes at the intersection of psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and reader-response theory to reconsider the history of spectator agency in the wider realm of a visual culture filled with pleasurable and unpleasurable images [1]. In 2008, Jane Stadler discusses the intersubjective experience of narrative film [22]. John Drabinski pursues the question of the relation between film and philosophy as he compares and contrasts the thought of Godard, Derrida, and Levinas [11]. Likewise, Catherine Wheately writes on the

ethics of the image in Michael Haneke's films while Joseph Mai's [16] book examines the ethics at work in the cinema of the Dardenne brothers [16, 23]. Finally, in their 2010 *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton consider a range of films and filmic elements in the light of the ethical discourses of Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan [10]. This substantial body of work provides close analyses and engaged discussions of a wide variety of films, across a spectrum of perspectives, all of which strive to encounter film and ethics without reducing film to ethics, ethics to film, or both to a third term.

6.3 Redeeming Cinema and Ethics

In his 2010 book, *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics, and the Feminine*, Sam B. Girgus carries forward Cooper's focus on *mise-en-scène* while looking back to questions of cinema and redemption. In particular, Girgus's work recalls Siegfried Kracauer's [13] *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* and responses to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) [12, 13]. While Girgus and Kracauer approach the question of cinema and redemption differently, putting the two in proximity shows how ethical questions of film experience might diverge from, and also return to, questions of ontology and epistemology. Girgus concentrates on a cinema which reveals redemption, Kracauer on a cinema which redeems. Girgus analyzes images of characters and character development within narrative; Kracauer examines the relation among world, camera, and spectator. Girgus looks at the determinate, designed elements of the film experience; Kracauer focuses on the indeterminate, contingent aspects. In comparing their competing regards for questions of cinematic redemption, we can sketch an interesting picture of the complexity of film and ethics. For both thinkers, again, the excessive aspect of film is crucial in that film reveals, but also reveals that it does not always reveal what we would like it to reveal. It reveals something excessive to our desires. This excess is a key for Girgus and Kracauer, even if they address it differently.

In the epilogue to *Theory of Film*, Kracauer asks: "What is the good of film experience?" [13, p. 285]. Moving from the ontological and epistemological questions of film's essence—What is cinema?—Kracauer asks after the experience of film, the lived, embodied reaction and response to cinema—What is the good of experiencing cinema? Here, in a question that might be read in more than one way, Kracauer asks what good is it and what is the good in it. In raising the question of film experience, Kracauer raises the issue of the connections between film experience and those of film ethics (founded in the cinematic encounter) even if he is not able to address all that these connections entail. In the modern world, Kracauer argues, the primacy of inner life—made up of "the beliefs, ideas, and values"—has been reduced by the "declining hold of common beliefs on the mind and the steadily increasing prestige of science" [13, p. 286]. These twin challenges on the primacy of inner life have resulted in a culture of 'abstraction' that removes us ever-further from the particularity of the physical reality around us and our

encounter with it. The good of film experience, though, is precisely its movement against this abstraction/thematisation, according to Kracauer. Film, precisely because of its link to photography, because its encounter with reality renders reality as it happens, especially its accidental or unintended, singular moments, redeems reality. *Mise-en-scène* is always constructed, but its very construction from photographic imagery allows for gaps and fissures that open the image to contingency, indeterminacy. This is Kracauer's argument regarding contingency. Despite all intentions, despite all attempts at rationalisation, thematisation, or totalisation, film, more than any other art form, precisely because of the dynamics between its recording and projecting capabilities, has the potential to let something slip through, interrupt its totalisation.

Film renders visible what we did not, or perhaps could not, see before its advent. It effectively assists us in discovering the material world with its psychological correspondences. We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera. And we are free to experience it because we are fragmented. The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life. [13, p. 300]

According to Kracauer, "In acquainting us with the world we live in, the cinema exhibits phenomena whose appearance in the witness stand is of particular consequence. It brings us face to face with the things we dread. And it often challenges us to confront the real-life events it shows with the ideas we commonly entertain about them" [13, pp. 304–305]. The good of the film experience is that it restages, with a difference, our encounter with the world we live in. And through this encounter (which restages another encounter) film's particular images of physical reality challenge our ideas, come from the outside to challenge the primacy of our inner life. Cinema redeems the physical world by confronting us with it, by reinserting the particular between us and our abstractions/thematisations/totalisations. It makes us encounter what we do not ordinarily experience, even what we do not want to experience. It is neither ambiguous nor ambivalent, but definitive in its rupture of self-control and self-assurance. In this way, Kracauer concludes, we can see the true nature of the cinema as a movement from surfaces to something beyond surfaces: "The cinema is materialistically minded; it proceeds from 'below' to 'above'" [13, p. 309]. The good of the film experience is that it leads from below to above, from physical reality to something higher. Kracauer suggests perhaps something spiritual that might reflect and endorse "the actual rapprochement between the peoples of the world" [13, p. 310]. Where that destination lies for certain, however, Kracauer asserts in the last line of his book, "is no longer a concern of the present inquiry" [13, p. 311].

The Grapes of Wrath is an important example for Kracauer. Early in *Theory of Film*, he cites it as an instance when the inanimate becomes active within a film. He points toward the "powerful presence of environmental influences in *Grapes of Wrath*," where the inanimate becomes a full-fledged actor; a fragment, a bit of matter, becomes an active witness to the world in the way he concludes in the epilogue

[13, p. 45]. Later in the book, he remarks that the film's overall composition, when linked to its story of social justice, makes it an especially powerful example of a successful adaptation. First, the style and substance of John Steinbeck's novel were cinematic enough to allow director John Ford to adapt it faithfully "without betraying the cinema" [13, p. 240]. Second, according to Kracauer, crowds and groups are especially cinematic in their visibility, and "through his very emphasis on collective misery, collective fears and hopes, Steinbeck meets the cinema more than halfway" [13, p. 240]. Finally, the novel's focus on the suffering of migrant workers and the abusive system that controls their lives meets a key potentiality of film to bear witness. As Kracauer posits, "In recording and exploring physical reality, the cinema virtually challenges us to confront that reality with the notions we commonly entertain about it— notions which keep us from perceiving it. Perhaps part of the medium's significance lies in its revealing power" yet it is the excess that revealing cannot contain that is crucial [13, pp. 240–241]. For Kracauer, film's witnessing of suffering, even suffering we seek to avoid, is the force of its staging of the ethical encounter. Its very witnessing calls us to witness and redeem reality, through what we experience—the intended and the debris that accompanies it.

Like Kracauer, Sam Girgus also pursues the question of redemption in relation to the good of the film experience. Like Kracauer, as well, Girgus argues that filmic discourse can signify otherwise than by signifying a theme. It can stage an encounter between the world and the filmgoer that does not return to abstraction/thematisation/totalisation. Like Kracauer, Girgus proceeds from below to above, from physical reality and the cinematic engagement with that reality to something higher—here the actions of redemption—such as self-sacrifice or paying retribution for one's debts. In *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption*, he does not discuss particular films as if they were *about* ethics, as if they simply revealed a moral point we might follow. Rather, he discusses how they enact or perform ethics, how within these films we encounter the ethical, how these films dramatise ethics through an engagement with a Levinasian *mise-en-scène* or what Sarah Cooper calls "the ethical mode." Like Kracauer, Girgus focuses on how films call us to witness their witnessing redemption. Throughout the study, Girgus's focus is on films in which, "the *mise-en-scène* of ethical transcendence does not displace the *mise-en-scène* of poverty, despair, inequality, and injustice" [12, p. 38]. His concern is for films that not only address the material and transform it but also connect the immanent to the transcendent, never leaving behind the materiality of the filmed world, but making visible the connection between these two realms.

When he turns to *The Grapes of Wrath*, Girgus highlights the filmic elements that work in combination to express this ethical *mise-en-scène*—constructed through the combination of narrative, characterisation, theme and symbolism, cinematography, and acting. The material of the filmed world—through this *mise-en-scène*—signifies a theme and beyond a theme. Again, the excess is crucial. The visual and verbal language of the scene dramatise the ethical through the combination of elements: film authorship, narrative, composition, and performance. And this dramatisation directs us toward something beyond this one event. We encounter the filmic specificity of the elements working together, of scenes related—immanent and

transcendent—in relation to redemption. This is not representation of a theme, however, as Girgus is careful to point out. The filmic specificity, in fact, highlights the inadequacy of the representational model, recalling Kracauer's emphasis on gaps and fissures: "Thus, the range of elements in film art of *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, editing, and narrative all work brilliantly to suggest their ultimate failure to portray the impossible. But the same elements succeed magnificently in suggesting the gap between the visual image and ultimate, absolute ethical responsibility for the other" [12, p. 88].

This failure that signifies a theme and beyond a theme is marked here by the scar near Tom's left eye. This scar marks Tom and reminds filmgoers of the ethical responsibility Tom bears and that we bear toward Tom, according to Girgus. And yet, the relation between film and ethics continues here beyond the make-up applied to an actor, in that, "Fascinatingly, throughout the scene Fonda projects an ethical vision that goes beyond his audience just as it goes past Ma and even exceeds Tom's own total comprehension. He speaks to the idea of the other. So Fonda suggests Tom's immersion into another kind of temporal realm of serious ethical commitment as he prepares to leave the family with a kiss on the forehead of his sleeping father and his memorable good-bye speech to Ma" [12, p. 88]. Most importantly, for Girgus, it is a matter of comparison of the scenes at play here. It is a matter, for example, of the relation between *visage* and the face on screen, of the gap between them. For Girgus, this scene is not simply an illustration of the ethics of Tom Joad. Henry Fonda is not Tom Joad, and it is in the gap between Fonda and Joad that we experience the ethical encounter. It is precisely in Fonda not being Tom Joad that the film dramatises the ethical. The gap between the face of the actor and the face of the character *compares* to the gap between the face and *visage*, according to Girgus.

The gap between Fonda's physical face and the face of the fictional Tom compares to the space between the face and the Levinasian *visage*. Fonda as Tom vivifies that tension into an ethical experience. Fonda shows that through a complex construction of the elements of film, the innocence, nudity, and vulnerability of the face can be made to suggest the Levinasian face of infinite ethical engagement. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, shot, image, and narrative—in conjunction with the documentary delineation of conditions and the development of all the characters—converge in the aura of Fonda's face. ... Fonda, in his portrayal of Tom, becomes the face of redemption. As Tom Joad, the face of Henry Fonda insists on an answer for the meaning of life and human relations that remains at once simple enough for a child to understand and yet so incomprehensible as to challenge ordinary knowing [12, p. 89].

This relation between elements remains comprehensible and yet incomprehensible precisely to mark the relation between the filmed world and beyond it. Through such an engagement with the filmic elements, Girgus approaches the ethical enactment rather than the thematic signification of the cinema. He strives to draw out the beyond-the-immanence of the cinema, that which signifies even before it means something. Faces, scenes, narrative arcs, camera angles, lighting, costuming, lighting signify thematically, but they also signify otherwise than thematically. They mean differently, and as Tom Joad says, "I'm not even sure what it means."

Like Sigfreid Kracauer's movement from below to above, then, Girgus's analysis of the cinema concerns a movement from surfaces to something beyond surfaces, from the materiality of the images and sounds and what lies behind them 'below' to what is before them 'above,' from the filmed world to something redemptive, if not spiritual. In this way, Kracauer and Girgus parallel each other, even as they disagree on specifics. The difference between the two and, the need for drawing from both thinkers lies in their emphases of the four locations where the ethical encounter plays out in film. As I stated at the start of this chapter, in the cinema, this encounter plays out (1) between filmmaker and subjects or characters, (2) between subjects or characters themselves, (3) between the subject or characters and the rest of the world, and (4) between the film and filmgoers. While, Girgus's discussion of film elements and the possibility of the cinema signifying otherwise than by signifying a theme addresses the first three locations, Kracauer's analysis focuses on the fourth location especially. In other terms, Girgus brings the first two gazes into the conversation and carefully examines the specificity of filmic elements that enact or dramatise the ethical encounter in the cinema. Simultaneously, Kracauer's emphasis on the third gaze connects those filmic elements to the filmgoers and the possible effects such an encounter may have on them. Both thinkers give us a way to consider the good of the film experience that moves from below to above.

6.4 Risking Redemption

As important as discussions of redemption are for film ethics, though, I want to end on a cautionary note regarding the excess involving the act of redemption itself. While redemption refers to elevation, deliverance, atonement or restoration, especially in a criminal, religious, spiritual manner, it also signifies a buying back, reverting, restoring, or ransoming. Invoking redemption risks invoking an economics of exchange or return, especially a return to a pre-ordained essence or understanding. Kracauer and Girgus consider the relation between film and ethics in terms of film's ontology and epistemology in order to break from grounding ethics in ontology or epistemology. By focusing on film experience and the film encounter, they move beyond debates over film's representational or formative essence. Through their phenomenological methodologies, they engage with a more complex, embodied spectatorship. The question remains as to the relation between redemption and restoration in their work. In discussing film and ethics through redemption, then, Kracauer and Girgus provide valuable sites for redeeming the excessiveness of cinema and the complexities of embodied cinematic encounters. They also provide a starting point for still more questions regarding ethics and cinema.

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