# Cinema and the mind

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- Reading and viewing materials in Oxford Reading Lists Online: https://rl.talis.com/3/oxford/lists/D2247B79-ADF5-AED7-84B3-218D157FC54F.html
- Handouts on Canvas: https://canvas.ox.ac.uk/courses/77244/pages/cinema-and-the-mind-tt21-2

## Introduction

The assumption is often found in the study of film, and narrative art in general, that there is a passage running from the aesthetic to the epistemic to the ethical to the political. Films don't only have a power to induce aesthetic experiences; they can also give us knowledge. And this knowledge can be normative in nature. It can be knowledge about what is good, both ethically – in terms of how we treat our fellow creatures – and politically – of how we relate to the community. Much of the epistemic and normative power cinema is attributed stems from its aesthetic resources, which can be cashed out in terms of the medium's distinctive power to steer the phenomenology of the audience's perceptual – and thereby, affective, epistemic, and moral – experience.

In these lectures we will draw on recent work in both philosophy of film and fiction and philosophy of mind to attempt an exploration of cinema's power to engage the moral imagination by taking, as a guiding thread, a paradigmatic end of art: to acquaint audiences with the suffering of others. The lectures are conceived as a space of discussion rather than of information delivery. We will read and view material from academic and non-academic sources, written by philosophers, scientists and artists. Film scholars, philosophers, film buffs and everyone else welcome!

## Lecture 1. Art and the problem of other minds

A historical perspective will be helpful in introducing the subject. Much of the modern debate on the representation of the suffering of others arose in the wake of the Holocaust. Most famously, there was an opposition between an attitude like the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann's, according to whom no visual representation of the Holocaust's sufferings could do them justice, which meant they should be conveyed discursively (as he does in his legendary *Shoah*, 1985), and the attitudes of thinkers

such as Georges Didi-Huberman, who wrote that 'to know something, one must be able to picture it' (2001, p. 219), Giorgio Agamben, who thought that a 'true witness' of those sufferings would be the kind who, precisely, the experience has rendered speechless (1999, p. 150), and Hannah Arendt, who years before had written that '[t]he more authentic [verbal reports by survivors] are, the less they attempt to communicate things that evade human understanding and human experience – sufferings, that is, that transform men into "uncomplaining animals"' (1973, p. 439).

Extreme cinema has often – and rightly – been linked to the second set of intuitions (cf. Saxton 2008c, Gustafsson 2014). Yet the thought that the ability to feel what the other is feeling is the gold standard for the ethical life, and that hence artists should try to achieve this psychological state in their audiences via their representational skills, is itself a product of historical contingencies. With the advent of modernism in literature and the visual arts (of which extreme cinema can be seen a latter-day manifestation; Weigel's label for them is 'sadomodernists'), 'sympathy, once understood as the core of moral life, came to be widely understood as a "feeling for" that is inferior to empathic "feeling with"', the art historian Meghan Marie Hammond writes in *Empathy and the Psychology of Literary Modernism* (2014). 'Modernist narrative trained readers to believe that a more radical joining of subjectivities was possible'.

*Readings:*
Pérez, G. 2012. Bourgeois nightmares. *London Review of Books* 34
Weigel, M. 2013. Sadomodernism. *N Plus One Magazine* 16

*Viewings:*
*Barry Lyndon* (1975), directed by Stanley Kubrick
*Funny Games* (1997), directed by Michael Haneke
*Dancer in the dark* (2000), directed by Lars von Trier
*Irreversible* (2002), directed by Gaspar Noé


## Lecture 2. The ideal of true empathy

This lecture develops a negative argument. It draws on work by the philosopher of mind and cognitive science Laurie Paul (2014, 2015, 2018) and the philosopher of film Robert Sinnerbrink (2015) to suggest that what extreme – or 'sadomodernist' – filmmakers want to give their viewers is a transformative experience: an experience, that is, which will so affect them, so radically join their subjectivities with those of the suffering characters, as Hammond puts it, that their moral compass – often viewed as the core of the self – will be transformed, and hence, so will their very selves. This is, in effect, an explication of the logic of extreme cinema in terms of Paul's view of what constitutes transformative experience (and its effects on subjects' ability for action).

However, what extreme filmmakers aim at may not be achieved by the medium of cinema. This is, in short, because in visual perception of the kind characteristic of traditional film, the mind indexes the suffering it perceives to the character on-screen, whereas what is required by the extreme cinema's ends is that the mind index that suffering also to the perceiver's self. This would mean to be in the kind of mental state the philosopher Kendal Walton calls genuinely – as opposed to 'sort of' – empathizing with the other. Rather than learning that 'she – the sufferer – is like *that*', in which proposition there is a distance between one's self and the experience on-screen, true empathy consists in learning that 'he is as *I am* – like *this*', where the distance is breached. To appreciate why perceiving the on-screen character suffer won't give rise to the second kind of learning, we need to note that perceptual input interacts in different ways with our imaginative capacities. The imagination has been hypothesized to have two modes of operation: voluntary and involuntary (Williamson 2016). Accordingly, perception can either allow the imagination to operate (in the voluntary mode) or push it (in the involuntary mode). For example: a group of early humans might be instantly *pushed* to imagine the dangers of a forest when they perceive the sounds of wolves; a hiker might be *able* to assess, by an exercise of the imagination, whether she is able to jump a stream that blocks her way thanks to her perception of its width, the place from which she would have to launch herself, etc. Similarly, only a certain kind of perceptual experience that can allow a viewer to imagine herself experiencing the target suffering, and hence, to feel the moral urgency that is supposed, consequently, to participate in extreme filmmakers' ultimate ambition: that the public's newly gained acquaintance with the suffering of others 'lead to social and political change' (as phrased by Michael Haneke, quoted in Weigel op cit., p. 142).

*Readings:*
Paul, L.A. 2015. Précis of Transformative Experience. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91(3), doi: 10.1111/phpr.12249
Walton, K. 2015. Empathy, Imagination, and Phenomenal Concepts. In *Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
Williamson, T. 2016. Knowing by Imagining. In Kind, A. and Kung, P. (eds.). *Knowledge Through Imagination*. Oxford: OUP


## Lecture 3. The dawn of a new medium

This lecture develops a positive argument. It draws on the philosophy of perception and imagination to argue that thanks to its technical features, Virtual Reality could turn out to be just the representational medium extreme filmmakers (and perhaps modernist artists at large) have, for over a century, been looking for. Indeed, the ultimate piece of extreme cinema may have just been produced. It is a six-minute short made by the Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu, *Carne y Arena*, in which the viewer is put through the virtual experience of a Latin American

immigrant trying to cross the Mexico-US border, then being found by the border patrol, and abused by them. Critics' reviews bear witness to the power of the experience. Key to its impact is the installation's ability to track the viewer's eye level, which allows the experience, including, importantly, the officers' violent confrontation, to be centred around the viewer. A survey of audiovisual techniques and features – from the Point Of View shot in 2D film to various kinds of 3D, to various kinds of VR – will serve to illustrate the spectrum of immersiveness the advancement of technology – and filmmakers' mastery of it – has made possible. Evidence from experimental – rather than artistic – settings where the most immersive media of the spectrum is employed to put a viewer through an experience of violence for similar moral ends is presented, too. (Originally, subjects are domestic abusers that end up reformed, but other kinds of subjects have also been employed in other studies.) An explanation of this phenomenon, common to both the artistic and experimental settings, is offered in terms of the framework set out before: in terms, that is, of the connection between perception, the imagination and the action-enabling properties of self-centred experience. The lecture ends with the suggestion that there might be a historical irony in all this. In the introduction to his essay on Haneke's cinema, the film theorist Gilbero Pérez (2012) calls Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) 'the epitome of cinema's potential to do violence to its audience'. Thus, if mainstream film theory is right that the 'sadomodernist' tradition is essentially European (e.g. Weigel op cit., Horeck and Kendall 2011), then the fact that the filmmaker who's come closest to achieving extreme cinema's ends is Mexican hints at the possibility that either extreme cinema is, as a European tradition, effectively dead, or that it simply had to go back to its roots to be self-fulfilled. Buñuel is Spanish-Mexican.

*Readings:*
Mackenzie, C. and Scully, J. L. 2007. Moral Imagination, Disability and
        Embodiment. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 24 (4), pp. 334-351
Ordóñez Angulo, E. 2017. Transformative suffering. *Los Angeles Review of Books*
Sanchez-Vives, M. 2018. The Transformational Power of VR. *TEDxIESEBarcelona*.
        Accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUbXS_5aaLE

*Viewings:*
*Carne y Arena* trailer (2017), directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu,
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF-focK30WE
Testimony of the *Carne y Arena* experience by Silvestre López Portillo (in Spanish),
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hPraQ8q3eRw

## Lecture 4. Sympathy vs. empathy

One upshot of framing the sadomodernist project in its art-historical context is that it allows us to assess it accordingly. Hammond (op cit.) writes: '[c]oined in 1909 to

combine English "sympathy" and German "Einfühlung," "empathy" is a specifically twentieth-century concept of fellow feeling'. To the sadomodernists' credit, the coiner of 'fellow feeling' himself, Adam Smith (1759/1976), seemed to concede that visual access was key in taking an ethical stance towards the suffering of others: 'if [someone] was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night; but, provided he never *saw* them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren' (Smith op cit., p. 152, my italics).

Yet it's not clear we should read Smith as intending such visual emphasis. A contemporary – and friend – of Smith, David Hume (1739/2000), thought of sympathy as the psychological mechanism which causes the feelings of pleasure or uneasiness that constitute moral approval or disapproval, respectively, and that this mechanism didn't need to be triggered by undergoing the phenomenon one is approving or disapproving *oneself*. Instead, both observing our fellow humans and communicating with them by non-perceptual means can trigger it. This is pretty much what we understand by 'sympathy' today, feeling *for* rather than *with,* which has been argued to be the superior ethical exercise in recent philosophical literature. Discussing the epistemic obstacles of the imagination as manifested in the difficulty of empathizing with subjects whose embodied experience is are radically unlike our own (e.g. able-bodied subjects attempting to empathize with disabled ones), Catriona Mackenzie and Jackie Leach Scully write: 'imagining oneself in the other's shoes is not morally engaging with the other; rather, it is projecting one's own perspective onto the other' (2007, p. 345). Hence, they think, the role of the moral imagination 'should be conceptualised not as a matter of enabling us […] to understand the other 'from the inside' [but rather] to expand the scope of our moral sympathies', that is, to foster 'the recognition of the other as a person, with a distinctive point of view shaped by that person's history, social situation, life experiences and relationships with others' (p. 346). On a similar vein, Edgar Ramirez (2018) has pointed out that VR environments that 'claim to give subjects the ability to experience what it is like to be a cow at a slaughterhouse' for ethical purposes are flawed because the empathizer's virtual experience is simply too different from the target subject's on account on the different ways humans and cows are embodied. (This has a concrete consequence: subjects turn vegetarian only for a limited time after the experience.)

The view that empathy-driven ethical strategies – artistic or not – is wrongheaded has an intuitive pull. The right ethical stance towards the other should not depend on our ability to reduce the distance between us – to eliminate their otherness – by imagining ourselves into their shoes (or hooves). The original Smith/Hume notion of sympathy did not, in any case, require inter-self-consciousness of the kind involved in Walton's view of 'true empathy'. There are, in addition, aesthetic concerns about works that attempt to *push* the viewer to undergo an experience rather than just *inviting* her to do so, as traditional film – and of course written media – typically do. There is a complexity in the latter kind of work that the former needs to dispense with to be effective. Contrast the (deliberate) crudeness of González Iñárritu's piece with Alfonso Cuarón's skill, in *Roma* (2018),

to invite the viewer to understand the contradictory attitudes of a middle-class family that both love and participate in the oppression of their indigenous maid.

This lecture discusses the problems and merits of works along these dimensions: works that aim to *push* the viewer to *empathize* with some subject's experience, and works that *invite* her to *sympathize* with it instead.

*Readings:*
Davis, E. 2018. On epistemic appropriation. *Ethics* 128(4)
Serpell, N. 2019. The Banality of Empathy. *New York Review of Books*
Smith, Z. 2019. Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction. *New York Review of Books*

*Viewings:*
*Rosetta* (1999), directed by Luc Dardenne and Jean-Pierre Dardenne
*Roma* (2018), directed by Alfonso Cuarón