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Cinempathy: Phenomenology, Cognitivism, and Moving Images

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Cinempathy: Phenomenology, Cognitivism, and Moving Images

Robert Sinnerbrink

Abstract^[1]

Some of the most innovative philosophical engagement with cinema and ethics in recent years has come from phenomenological and cognitivist perspectives. This trend reflects a welcome re-engagement with cinema as a medium with the potential for ethical transformation, that is, with the idea of cinema as a medium of ethical experience. This paper explores the phenomenological turn in film theory, emphasizing the ethical implications of phenomenological approaches to affect and empathy, emotion, and evaluation. I argue that the oft-criticized subjectivism of phenomenological theories can be supplemented by cognitivist approaches that highlight the complex forms of affective response, emotional engagement, and moral allegiance at work in our experience of movies. An empathic ethics or "cinempathy" is at work in many films, I suggest, such as Ashgar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011), which offers a striking case study in cinematic ethics.

Key Words

cinematic ethics, emotion, empathy, ethics, film aesthetics, film philosophy

1. Introduction

Film theory has traditionally been wary of cinema's ethical potential, treating it as a fascinating yet deceptive medium requiring theoretical analysis and ethico-political critique. Familiar to many are how theoretical claims about the ideological power of the "apparatus," and its pernicious capacity for the manipulation of audiences through visual identification and narrative pleasure, fueled the development of a research paradigm that has only recently begun to wane.^[2] Although philosophers of film have begun to explore the question of ethics and cinema, there is surprisingly little consensus on what this means. How do movies express ethical ideas? How can they reveal the complexities of a moral or political situation? What kind of ethical experience can cinema evoke? I will explore these questions, outlining some of the theoretical approaches evident in recent work on this topic, and examining some of the methodological issues raised by the growing philosophical interest in the relationship between cinema and ethics.

2. Cinematic ethics: mapping an encounter

We can describe ethical approaches to cinema as tending to focus on one of three aspects of the relationships among film, spectator, and context: 1) ethics *in* cinema, focusing on narrative content, including dramatic scenarios involving morally charged situations, conflicts, or actions; 2) the ethics *of* cinematic representation, focusing on the ethical issues

raised by elements of film production and/or audience reception, for example, the ongoing debates over the effects of depictions of screen violence; and 3) the ethics of cinema as a cultural medium expressing moral beliefs, social values, or ideology, such as feminist film analysis of gender or Marxist analyses of ideology in popular film. Each of these three aspects of the film-spectator-context relationship has spawned a distinctive approach to the question of cinema and ethics, though few theorists have attempted to articulate the relationships between these aspects with a view toward their ethical implications.

A common approach in much recent philosophy of film is to focus on ethics *within* cinematic representation, that is, morally relevant themes, problems, and scenarios within the narrative or approaching film as a moral "thought experiment." Think of Stanley Cavell's "moral perfectionist" reading of the melodrama *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1937) according to which brassy Stella comes to a greater understanding of herself and makes an ethical decision to give her daughter Laurel a chance at marital and social happiness by deliberately withdrawing herself from her daughter's life. Another example is the Dardenne Brothers' film, *The Promise* (*La promesse*) (1996), where teenage Igor (Jérémie Renier) decides to defy his father and assist illegal immigrant widow Assita in escaping exploitation and deportation, honoring his promise to the woman's dying husband that he will look after Assita and her baby son. Or consider Alejandro Amenábar's *The Sea Within* (*Mar adentro*) (2004), based on the true story of Ramon Sampredo (Javier Bardem), who became a quadriplegic at age 28 and campaigned for the rest of his life in support of euthanasia and the right to die with dignity. This is a film noted for its innovative use of point of view to provide a powerful ethical experience for the viewer and understood as a kind of cinematic argument for assisted euthanasia.

Film theorists have often focused on the ethics *of* cinematic representation, whether from the filmmaker's perspective (production) or from the spectator's perspective (reception). Consider, for example, debates over objectivity and truth in documentary representation and whether a filmmaker can use elements of fiction in the presentation of what purports to be fact. An example is Michael Moore's creative reorganization of dates and events in his documentary *Roger and Me* (1989). Or we might ponder the ethics of how a filmmaker treats cast and crew, such as in Werner Herzog's filming of the epic *Fitzcarraldo*, during which a number of indigenous crewmembers were injured. Or we might be drawn to debates over how spectators respond to images of sex and violence, such as depictions of rape in "new French extremity" cinema, for example, or the use of non-simulated sex scenes in von Trier's *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*.^[3] The ethics of cinematic spectatorship is clearly one of the central concerns in recent film theory, an approach that has probably garnered the most attention in research on the relationship between cinema and ethics.

Film theory, however, has also been long concerned with the broader social, cultural, and political implications of cinema. Since the 1970s it has emphasized the ethics of cinema as a medium symptomatic of broader cultural-historical or

ideological perspectives, such as feminist analyses of gender and Marxist analyses of ideology. Consider Kathryn Bigelow's two films on the Iraq war, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Both films were celebrated for their cinematic accomplishment as powerful and suspenseful action-war movies, but also criticized for offering ideologically slanted depictions of American soldiers fighting an irrational enemy in Iraq. *Zero Dark Thirty*, for example, even implies that the heightened interrogation techniques deployed by the CIA ultimately led to the capture of Osama bin Laden. It thus offered a dubious utilitarian moral justification (the "ticking bomb" scenario) for the use of torture in prosecuting the so-called War on Terror. At the same time, Bigelow's focalizing the narrative through female CIA operative Maya (Jessica Chastain), who doggedly pursues bin Laden when her male peers and superiors have given up, lends this film an interesting feminist slant.

It is clear that all three aspects of the cinema-ethics relationship are important, but the challenge is to think them together in their mutually overlapping relationships. As I hope to show, the idea of cinema as a medium of ethical experience offers a way of bringing these three dimensions together, linking style and content, creation and reception, and context and interpretation in ways that enable us to explore cinema's ethical potential as a transformative medium, one with the power to transform our ways of seeing, experiencing, and thinking. This is not to deny the important critical work done in theorizing cinema and its moral-political or ideological effects. My aim, rather, is to redress the one-sidedness of prevailing approaches in film theory and to offer a new perspective on the manner in which film can contribute to philosophy, that is, cinema as a medium of ethical experience.

3. Key approaches to cinematic ethics

What are the dominant approaches to cinematic ethics evident in film philosophy theory today? I would identify the following currents of thought: 1) Cavellian (cinema as exploring scepticism, the everyday, and moral perfectionism); 2) Deleuzian (cinema as exploring time, thought, and the body; expressing immanent "modes of existence" or giving us "reasons to believe in this world"); 3) phenomenological and post-phenomenological (diverse phenomenological-style analyses of affect, perception, emotion, and embodiment and how these relate to moral-ethical experience; the Levinasian ethics of responsibility towards the "Other" as applied to film); and 4) cognitivist approaches (theories of affective and emotional response to film, which account for moral allegiance with characters and broader ethical evaluation in narrative cinema). All of these approaches offer valuable theoretical insights for understanding cinema and ethics. Here, however, I will focus on the third and fourth, exploring the intersection between phenomenological and cognitivist approaches to theorizing emotional engagement, in particular the interplay between empathy and sympathy, or what I call "cinempathy."

Some of the most innovative philosophical engagement with cinema and ethics in recent years has come from phenomenological and cognitivist perspectives in film theory. This trend reflects a welcome re-engagement with cinema as

a medium with the potential for ethical transformation, that is, with the idea of cinema as a medium of ethical experience. Such an approach challenges the familiar critical view in film theory, according to which cinema's power of affective and emotional engagement contributes to the construction of dominant "subject positions," and thereby reproduces ideology through the manipulation of spectator subjectivity. Recent phenomenological and cognitivist approaches to empathy and sympathy, however, offer new ways of understanding and explaining our emotional and ethical engagement with moving images. The oft-criticized subjectivism of phenomenological theories can be supplemented by cognitivist approaches that analyze the complex forms of affective response, emotional engagement, and moral allegiance at work in our experience of movies. I will explore this phenomenological and cognitivist approach to empathy and sympathy, or "cinempathy," as intimately related dynamic processes involved in emotional engagement and ethical responsiveness. My claim is that such a cinempathy can be found at work in films such as Ashgar Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011), which offers a striking case study in cinematic ethics.

4. The affective turn in film theory

The power of movies, as Sergei Eisenstein, along with Noël Carroll and David Bordwell, have remarked, resides in their capacity to elicit emotional engagement.^[4] Yet until the recent affective turn in film theory since the late 1990s, topics such as emotion, emotional engagement, and affect, not to mention empathy and sympathy, were largely ignored by the then-dominant semiotic, Marxist, and feminist forms of psychoanalytic film theory. The affective turn across the humanities, however, has put emotion, "the body," and subjectivity at the center of theoretical inquiry, while also opening up new forms of ethico-political reflection. As Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey remarked, the ethical turn in film theory "stresses the particular affective nature of film spectatorship" such that "perceptual and sensorial engagement with film is considered ethical in and of itself."^[5] Emotion and affect are again central issues in film theory, which has been rejuvenated by contributions from philosophy, empirical psychology, cognitive theory, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. Philosophy of film, in both continental and analytic-cognitivist guises, has thus developed new ways of thinking about affect, emotion, and the ethico-aesthetic experience of cinema as an aesthetic encounter that opens up varieties of ethically significant experience.

These two currents of thought, phenomenological and cognitivist, can be identified as defining recent work on affect and emotion in cinema. The broad sweep of phenomenological approaches in film studies, from Vivian Sobchack's work to various forms of affect theory, offer concrete and focused explorations of embodied subjective experience. Indeed, the turn to phenomenological theories focusing on affective experience, both from the spectator perspective and in relation to cinematic expression, has become so influential that we may talk of an "affective turn" in film philosophy. Phenomenological approaches, foregrounding the experiential aspects of cinema, put the human subject back into the picture, albeit a subject defined by its affects, its corporeality,

and its embodied difference. Such theories are generally eclectic, deriving in part from classical and post-war phenomenology (see Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger), as well as drawing on feminist, culturalist, European continental as well as cognitivist sources.^[6] All of them tend to affirm the centrality of first-person experiential perspectives that can be applied not only to the theorization of spectator response but sometimes attributing subjective traits, like embodiment or intentionality, to the film itself.^[7] Crossover theorization drawing, for example, on phenomenological and cognitivist or Deleuzian and neuroscientific approaches is becoming more common.^[8] These hybrid approaches provide a rich interdisciplinary theoretical matrix for exploring the complexities of affect and emotion, including empathy and sympathy, in our aesthetic and ethical experience of cinema.

Cognitivism is the other most developed alternative approach to the superseded paradigm of semiotic-psychoanalytic film theory. In broad terms, we can describe cognitivism as an empirically-grounded, naturalistic approach that rejects speculative film theory in favor of a piecemeal theory of film experience that uses the tools of cognitive psychology and cognitivist theories of mind. Although early forms of cognitive theory indeed modeled the brain as operating computationally (using the algorithmic processes of the computer as an analogy for how our brains process information), more recent forms of cognitive theory have moved on towards modular, network, and, even more recently, embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive conceptions of mind—the “4e model of cognition.”

The standard challenge facing phenomenology is how to avoid the charge of subjectivism: to articulate and account for the relationship between first-person phenomenological description and more general theoretical explanation. How do we connect the first-person, experientially rich *description* of a phenomenon, like affect, to the empirically grounded, *explanatory* theory of the causal mechanisms (physiological and neurological) underlying subjective phenomena? As for cognitivism, many critics acknowledge that it offers powerful explanatory theories of the underlying causal processes involved in our experience of cinema, but this does not mean that it provides a hermeneutic framework for film interpretation or aesthetic evaluation.^[9] Even if we have a general explanatory theory of the evolutionary usefulness or neurological basis of cinematic experience, this may not be especially enlightening when applied to particular film examples or offer sufficient resources to evaluate film from an aesthetic perspective. The danger of reductionism looms large for such critics, who accuse cognitivism of downplaying important aesthetic, hermeneutic, and ethico-political dimensions of cinema.

The most productive path between these alternatives, I suggest, is an interdisciplinary one, drawing on the subjective perspective of phenomenology as a descriptive approach to cinematic experience, and the objective orientation of cognitivism that aims to develop explanatory theories concerning central features of our experience of movies. Recent hybrid forms of film theory attempt this kind of synthesizing approach, supplementing the subjectivism of

phenomenology with the objectivism of cognitivism, but also striving to remain true to the complexity of the phenomena under consideration. In this pluralist spirit, I turn to consider affective and emotional engagement in film in order to explore how narrative cinema can evoke ethical experience.

5. Affect and emotion

The first challenge is to describe the phenomena in a manner that is accurate without being unwieldy. Most theorists agree that emotions include a *physiological* aspect (changes in autonomous physiological processes); a *psychological* aspect, an *affective* or *'feeling'* aspect, a *sensory-motor* or *action-oriented* aspect; and an *evaluative* or *cognitive* aspect. When I am angry I experience physiological changes in my body (accelerated heartbeat, muscle tension, adrenaline flow), my psychological state (increased aggression or a desire to "act out"), and my affective state (feeling tense, a sense of agitated arousal), linked with a rapid cognitive appraisal of my situation (a belief that I have been wronged, a construal of the other's behaviour as a threat). My anger has an object, which serves as the reason for my getting angry (a reckless driver swerving in front of me), and it enables me to evaluate my situation and act accordingly (to take evasive action). Emotions condense these affective, bodily, and cognitive responses in a manner that enables the rapid evaluation of my situation and the taking of appropriate action in response to my situation.

Analyzing emotions from phenomenological and cognitivist perspectives reveals a number of constitutive elements. To list the most salient, first, emotions are *temporal and episodic*, in that they unfold in time, have a definite duration, and are transient phenomena. Second, they arise and develop according to *feedback from our bodies and from our environment*. Our emotional life, as Carl Plantinga observes, "occurs in streams that continuously evolve in response to everchanging construals, actions and action tendencies, bodily states, and feelings," any of which can serve as feedback to modify our subsequent emotional responses.^[10] Third, emotions are *intimately related to narratives*, that is, they can be triggered by acquired paradigm scenarios or emotional scripts, and my emotional state is shaped by the kind of narrative meaning through which I make sense of my identity and describe my emotions to others. Fourth, emotions *vary in duration and intensity*, waxing and waning over time, or varying in affective amplitude. Fifth, emotions are often *mixed or ambiguous*. Primary emotions, such as anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise, are often discrete, yet emotions usually occur in complex affective "clusters" that can be difficult to define. Sixth, emotions are distinct from moods, which are more global, encompassing, diffuse, and "world-disclosing" (Heidegger). To be more precise, emotions have *intentional objects* (fear of a speeding car, of losing one's job, of getting cancer), whereas moods lack an intentional object, so can be free-floating or oriented towards our being-in-the-world, in general. From a hermeneutic point of view, emotions can be understood in terms of *reasons* (I was angry with you because of what you said to me), whereas moods have more dispersed *causes* (physical fatigue, environmental factors, physiological changes, the aesthetic qualities of my

surroundings, existential feelings, and so on). Seventh, emotions can be further primed or cued according to discrete environmental factors, background mood, mental outlook, and ongoing emotional dynamics. And finally, eighth, we can have propensities towards certain emotional responses (character traits) that make up an *emotional disposition* (prone to anger, habitually cheerful, or consistently calm and measured) as opposed to emotions as occurrent states (a flash of anger, a sense of joy). These general features of emotions are essential to our aesthetic experience of cinema, which, in Ed Tan's phrase, is an "emotion machine" possessing the power to engage us emotionally through audiovisual means.

Definitions of emotion are legion. Following Robert C. Roberts, Carl Plantinga defines emotional responses as *concern-based construals* that are at once cognitive, relational, intentional, and embodied.^[11] Robert Solomon defines them as *cognitive judgments* that work through feeling more than reasoning.^[12] Peter Goldie describes the intentionality of emotions as a phenomenological "*feeling towards*" that expresses both a concern and a potential for action, without being "intellectual" or "cognitive," in the narrower sense of these terms.^[13] Affective responses (bodily feelings, sensations, corporeal states) often occur in ways that are involuntary, or below the threshold of conscious intention, yet they orient and qualify emotional responses and prime our bodies to take appropriate action depending on our emotional-cognitive appraisal of a situation. Emotions thus provide a powerful sensory-motor and rapid cognitive-evaluative way of responding to social situations within our culturally complex life-worlds.

6. Empathy and sympathy, or "cinempathy"

Of particular interest in recent years, not only in aesthetics but in moral psychology and ethics, are the affective-imaginative phenomena of empathy and sympathy. These phenomena, however, are notoriously contested, with ongoing arguments over their meaning, purpose, and value. Indeed, a brief glance at the literature reveals a complicated situation. There are disputes over the definition of these terms, whether they designate two discrete emotional capacities, whether the distinction between them is confused, whether they are better used as synonyms, whether they name imaginative operations, whether they work through the simulation of another's emotional response, whether empathy means that I share *the same* emotional state as another, or a *congruent emotional state* (Plantinga), or merely imagine myself experiencing someone's emotional state, and so on.

When it comes to film theory, the complexities continue to proliferate. Empathy is often identified with "identification" (with characters and their emotional states), which is itself a contested term. Some theorists identify empathy with pre-conscious involuntary responses, such as *affective mimicry* or *emotional contagion* (the tendency to unconsciously mimic the affective states and expressions of others or to "catch" their emotional state through the mirroring of facial expression and bodily gesture). Others, such as Amy Coplan, argue that empathy should *not* be identified with affective mimicry or emotional contagion, since these are non-voluntary affective

responses, whereas empathy—as the capacity to imagine and respond emotionally to another, while maintaining a discernible self-other distinction—requires a complex imaginative construal of the other’s situation, along with a cognitive-emotional evaluation of their expressions, intentions, and actions.[14] Some theorists, moreover, go on to identify empathy (and sympathy) as key to our capacity for moral perception (the ability to discern, recognize, or be attentive to the moral predicament or sufferings of others). Martha Nussbaum and Stanley Cavell, for example, suggest that literature and film can be regarded as artistic means of exercising and thus cultivating moral imagination, which opens up the possibility of enhancing our capacity for moral understanding and promoting the exercise of ethical conduct.[15]

Instead of working through this tangled web, however, I shall focus on the distinction between empathy and sympathy, arguing that it remains important for film philosophy, even though the phenomena in question tend to coalesce. I am referring to empathy and sympathy here as imaginative capacities to respond emotionally to the situation of others, rather than as an expression of emotional solidarity or moral support. One of the most useful ways of distinguishing these, as Alex Neill observes, is to describe sympathy as *feeling for* someone while empathy is *feeling with* him or her.[16] I feel sympathy for my friend who has just lost her father, without myself experiencing a state of grief, yet at his funeral I might feel empathy for her and find myself grieving and crying along with her family. Here one could say that sympathy spills over into empathy, and empathy over into sympathy, intensified by affective mimicry and emotional priming due to the particular features of the social situation (a funeral), with its relevant paradigm scenarios. From a phenomenological perspective, empathy and sympathy can be described as perspectival poles between which we are perceptually and affectively moved, poles marking two distinct yet related kinds of subjective perspective-taking having different but related emotional dynamics and evaluative valences. As I shall elaborate, this is crucial for understanding how cinema engages us empathically and sympathetically in a dynamic manner unfolding in time.

The case of empathy and sympathy as they relate to fictional characters is also intriguing. They do not exist as real people, yet I can have a sympathetic engagement or empathetic response while being aware that such characters are fictional. To resolve any potential paradox (Radford’s “paradox of fiction”), theorists have pointed to the “pretend” (Walton) or to the “simulated” (Currie) character of these emotions, or else to the *imaginative* character of empathy (and sympathy), namely the capacity to imaginatively adopt the other’s perspective, either from a first-person point of view (empathy) or from an observer or witness perspective (sympathy). I imagine the others’ grief and can either experience it myself, or experience “congruent emotional states” (Plantinga), like sorrow or sadness, or else imagine the emotional response that the other might be experiencing, without actually having that same emotion myself. Murray Smith, for example, drawing on Richard Wollheim, describes this as *central* versus *acentral* imagining.

In central imagining (empathy), I imagine the other's emotional state from his or her point of view, while in acentral or *peripheral* imagining,[\[17\]](#) I imagine it from an observer or third-person perspective, without feeling the emotion itself. In watching a mother struck by grief over the death of her son (Mrs. O'Brien (Jessica Chastain) in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*), I can imaginatively participate in her emotional experience despite knowing she is fictional, and despite being neither a mother nor having experienced this kind of devastating loss. I am also moved, both emotionally and audio-visually, so that I adopt, depending on the mode of cinematic presentation, now a central, now a peripheral perspective on her experience of grief at learning of her son's death. Empathic and sympathetic responses are elicited here as part of an unfolding temporal, affective, and emotional dynamic involving the complex interplay of point of view, expressive gesture, emotional contagion, and imaginative-cognitive evaluation of the characters we are seeing on screen. All of these processes come into play in the empathic and sympathetic emotional engagement with characters in a given fictional situation, with its relevant paradigm scenarios or learned emotional "scripts."

Part of cinema's power, in short, is to elicit the kind of affective mimicry or emotional contagion responses that prime us for empathy and sympathy. In order to experience these responses, however, we also need to have formed certain views of the characters, evaluated their situation, imagined—or for some theorists, simulated—their subjective experience or emotional responses to what befalls them, moving effortlessly from first person to third person or from central to peripheral perspectives, thanks to the aesthetic devices of cinematic composition involving mood setting, emotional cueing, point of view, shot selection, audio effects and musical accompaniment, color, lighting, *mise-en-scene*, performance and gesture, shot duration, alterations in visual perspective, movement within the frame, visual focus on faces or emphasis on expressive bodily gestures, and so on.

Within what Plantinga calls "scenes of empathy"—cinematic scenes designed to elicit empathic responses—we usually find a number of features that correspond to the elements of emotional response.[\[18\]](#) These include the use of close-ups and long takes focused on the facial expressions and bodily gestures of characters, that magnify the expression of affect and emotion but also ensure sufficient duration for an emotional dynamic to be established. There is the selective use of visual and aural cues, such as lighting, shadow, color, music, vocalization, sound effects, but also stasis and movement, such as stasis of the camera to allow duration and expression to be perceived, and movement of the camera to express and generate kinetic resonance and affective excitation. As Murray Smith, Carl Plantinga, and Jane Stadler have noted, it is not simply point-of-view shots showing the visual perspective of a character that suggest empathic involvement; rather, it is more often reaction shots showing either the object of the character's attention or the character's own emotional responses that generate the effective forms of empathy and sympathy.[\[19\]](#) Long takes on their own, however, will not suffice; rather, they must be combined with alternating different points of view in order to create an

intensive, dynamic, space within which emotional expression and the elicitation of empathy and/or sympathy become manifest.

Instead of discrete forms of emotional engagement that remain independent of each other, cinema can render the dynamic movement between poles of empathy and sympathy, moving smoothly between central and peripheral imagining, thus enabling spectators to both emotionally engage with and ethically evaluate the fictional characters within a plausible cinematic world. This movement between poles of empathy and sympathy reflects better, I suggest, the phenomenological experience of emotional-cognitive engagement that other theorists have described using concepts such as moral perception, sympathy, or compassion, *Einfühlung* or empathy. We could therefore describe this dynamic movement between perspectival poles of empathy and sympathy as a "cinempathy:" a cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience. This more dynamic conception of empathic-sympathetic involvement is a better way of conceptually articulating cinematic empathy than the rather static, punctual model of theorizing empathy and sympathy that still prevails in contemporary film theory.

7. Cinempathy in *A Separation*

To consider this movement between empathic and sympathetic perspectives, let us turn to Ashgar Farhání's familial drama *A Separation* (2011). To give some narrative background, the three protagonists, Nader (Peyman Moaadi), Simin (Leila Hatami), and their daughter Termeh (Sarina Farhadi) are shown at a crucial juncture in the ongoing domestic drama of a marital separation and custody dispute that is tearing apart this ordinary Iranian family. The father, Nader, who is committed to staying in Iran to look after his ailing father, is fighting with the mother Simin, who wants to remove their daughter Termeh from being raised and educated in a country undergoing a conservative-religious turn. In the scene that I wish to discuss (1:41:02 to 1:47:52), Simin has returned from negotiating with their housekeeper Razieh and her husband Hojjat, managing to secure their tentative agreement to accept a reduced amount of "blood money" as compensation for an accident involving Razieh and her subsequent miscarriage for which Nader is being held responsible. The housekeeper's husband Hojjat initially refuses but is persuaded by his family to accept the offer, since they desperately need the money. Simin now has to persuade Nader to agree to this compromise deal, principally for the sake of their daughter's well-being, but also to save what is left of their disintegrating marriage.

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This powerful sequence is noteworthy for its skillful evocation of a variety of sympathetic and empathic responses. It is also striking for the manner in which it defocalizes the narrative away from privileging one particular protagonist and repeatedly shifts the viewer's attention, including his or her emotional engagement and moral allegiance, between Simin and Nader, offering equal weight to their perspectives, and

thus situating their actions within a shifting emotional dynamic that reveals the complexities of their social situation. Although the argument that unfolds between them is sharply focused, intense, and realistic, the film avoids privileging one character's position over any other. Rather, the camera alternates between shots and reverse shots focusing on both characters, establishing affective alignment and emotional allegiance but alternating these so as to capture and convey the conflicted quality of their heated exchange. The camera initially presents Simin from a frontal perspective and Nader in profile, turning away, but then changes perspective to show Nader more frontally and Simin now in profile or turning away. Simin and Termeh are initially shown embracing, their faces concealed from our view, then later as struggling and fighting, their faces again removed from sight as we hear their conflict unfold off-screen. The movements of the characters alternate from seated (and heated) conversations at the kitchen table, faces openly revealed or turning away, then standing up, moving away, turning around, leaving the kitchen, crossing doorways, struggling across spatial thresholds, and communicating across windows and other barriers. The camera then takes up a new perspective for the fight between Simin and Termeh by the doorway, and another perspective again on Termeh and her father, whose final ultimatum leaves her at a loss, concluding with a lingering shot of Nader's pensive face, their future unresolved.

Throughout this sequence, long-take close-ups of facial expressions—typical “scenes of empathy”—alternate with passages of rapidly edited shots; these establish a kinetic rhythm that effectively conveys the increasingly antagonistic nature of their argument. The effect is to move the viewer visually and affectively between these conflicting perspectives without privileging one over the other or offering one protagonist as the focalizing character from whose perspective the fight might ordinarily have been shown, for example, following and foregrounding Simin's perspective as she tries to persuade Nader to relent and agree to the compensation. Instead, the perspective shifts from Simin to Nader, then to Termeh and Simin, and then to Termeh and Nader, before concluding with Nader watching Termeh and Simin driving away. The concluding long shot of Nader also invites us to ponder what will become of the conflicted family and how their separation, at multiple levels, might be overcome.

This dynamic movement across different perspectives, alternating perspective-taking across both characters, thus preventing hasty moralizing judgment while inviting a deeper critical reflection on the context and dynamics of their conflict, is a fine example of cinempathy: the kinetic-cinematic practice of alternating perspective-taking in a manner both sympathetic and empathic, an alternating of perspectives that opens up a deeper *intersubjective* understanding of the characters' situation. It puts the spectator simultaneously in the position of sympathetic witness and empathic protagonist, shifting between these perspectives in relation to individual characters, across different character perspectives, and between the particular character relationships during the course of their escalating conflict. It offers an alternation of perspective-taking that distributes the affective dynamic across different characters and invites complex, multi-

perspectival understanding in response to the dynamic complexities of social interaction. Such a cinematic-empathic approach thus provides an experientially "thick" description revealing the complexity of their emotional responses, the clashing reasons for their conflict, and the risks of accepting hasty moral or moralizing judgments that are too readily abstracted from the ethical and moral complexities of their shared social situation. It offers a striking instance of cinematic ethics in the flesh.

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Endnotes

[1] This paper is based on material that appears in revised form in my book, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (Routledge, 2016). I am grateful to the publisher for permission to reproduce parts of this discussion as part of these conference proceedings.

[2] See *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

[3] See *The New Extremism: From France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); and Mattias Frey, "The Ethics of Extreme Cinema," in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 145-162.

[4] See Noël Carroll, "The Power of Movies," *Daedalus*, 114, 4 (1985), 79-103; and David Bordwell, "A Case for Cognitivism," *Iris* 9 (Spring 1989), 11-40.

[5] Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, "Introduction," in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 1.

[6] See Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Allan Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology: Towards a Realist Theory of Cinematic Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Tarja Laine, *Feeling Cinema: Emotional Dynamics in*

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