

10.5. The ethics of aesthetics

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A b s t r a c t

Some authors claim cinema missed the boat concerning the recasting of dialogue with its audiences, particularly with respect to violence. But we need to define our object of study, making a distinction between art and entertainment as well as fiction and documentary. Both have different content presentation attributes, according to the kinds of impact intended. Artistic cinema is wrongfully blamed for the sins of entertainment cinema. Real life themes addressed by documentary, demand a special care with certain topics. This paper claims that artistic and fictional film works should not be assessed according to ethics, for the latter is very flexible and not fit to judge a form of expression that should be free from such constraints. The two main clusters of problems arising from an ethic evaluation of an artistic piece of film work, are discussed here – form and content. At stake is the concept of freedom of expression.

Keywords: *Ethics, aesthetics, movies, content, form.*

DIY

1. Entertainment versus art

Cinema, as philosopher Carroll claims (2010) is a mass art form, intended to command large audiences, in order to make substantial profits (Carroll, 2010). But it seems to me that Carroll paints everything with the same brush, widening his definition to every kind of cinema, instead of narrowing it to the cinema industry, especially the North-American one. The so called European “auteur” cinema or even the American independent cinema, for instance, do not comply with some of these attributes – they not always have mass distribution and, for that reason, are not always destined to large audiences and, therefore, their main goal will not be to make substantial profits, but to offer the audience alternative and personal visions, as is common in any art form.

On the other hand, and because it is an art form that uses media to be broadcasted, cinema generates different kinds of audiences, or different kinds of expectations in its audiences. There are people who go to the movies to get entertained, to escape the reality of their daily (and monotonous) lives, to plunge for a couple of hours in a sort of virtual alternative reality. These people, who might also be perfectly capable of understanding and appreciating art in other circumstances, occasionally go to the movies not to see “the misery of everyday existence”, as Michael Haneke puts it (Haneke, 2010, p. 574), but precisely to escape it.

And because it is a mediatized art, cinema suffers from a kind of confusing “bipolarity” that leads to unjustified judgements, much more so than with what concerns other art forms, such as literature, for instance. It is relatively easy to distinguish an artistic literary piece from a so called “airport literature” novel. Even a less educated audience may recognize that J. K. Rowling belongs in a very different box than James Joyce or Fernando Pessoa, for example. These distinctions become harder when we are talking about cinema, precisely because “the eye- and ear-occupying intensity of the film medium, the monumental size of its images, the speed at which its images demand to be viewed”, as Haneke describes it (Haneke, 2010, p. 575-576), make the cinematographic experience so intense, that it becomes difficult to distinguish between pure entertainment and real art, and the viewer takes the former for the latter more often than vice versa.

Many of the criticism pointed towards cinema art is in reality criticism towards entertainment movies, part of an industry which has as its final purpose pure profit and is not concerned about its content or the form used to present it or, in other words, it is concerned in turning content appropriate to consumption and formatting it to the needs and desires of a demanding audience, just as a marketable product or service.

But that is not art, it's just entertainment. And there are a number of allegations which lose their meaning if we consider cinema in those terms, because in that case we will have to point our finger to media and not cinema. And if we do so, we will have to consider many more factors and actors involved in this issue – television, the general media, social network, mass performances, etc. But that discussion belongs to another scope entirely and this paper will only be concerned with cinema as art.

2. Fiction versus documentary

The distinction between fictional (and also fiction based on documented real facts) and documental works of cinematic art seems to be quite relevant,

in as much as it specifically concerns to the content, affecting in turn the form.

In fiction there are actors who represent people and unreal scenarios, imaginary “ifs”, possibilities, assumptions which the author can explore with absolute freedom, even disregarding tangible conventions, such as the laws of physics or temporal linearity. But in what concerns documentary, on the other hand, real people and situations are portrayed, and that forces us to deal with very practical restrictions: image rights, the exposure of real people and their real problems, respect for the memory and the family of deceased ones, coherence of facts and narrative, and so on.

Thus, a documental piece does not enjoy the same liberties as a fictional work of art, since it is designed as a combination of an informative and artistic piece. Unlike fiction, documentary is a depiction which does not intend to “delude” the viewer through a simulation of reality. It is a recorded document, for example, of the life of a real person. But because that document may be edited in numerous ways, it is possible that the viewer may not be able to distinguish the “small print” left in between the lines of this editing and plunges as he would when viewing a fictional piece. For that reason, I think that in the specific case of documentary, there should be extra care concerning the form of presentation of content and, in certain cases, even in the choice of content itself. Thus, the documentary genre will also not be considered for this paper and I will limit my analysis to exclusively fictional cinematic pieces of art.

3. *The ethics of aesthetics*

Of all the theories that examine the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, Radical Autonomism seems to me the one which makes more sense, by claiming that moral nature must be completely irrelevant to the intrinsic artistic value of a work of art (Schellekens, 2007). None the less, I go a little bit further by slightly rephrasing this definition, replacing the adjective “irrelevant” for a much more assertive claim – that ethics cannot and should not affect or impact in any way, shape or form our aesthetic judgement. Thus, in the previous claim presented, ethics becomes relevant for the only reason that it should be ruled out at all cost.

By principle, and despite there being no definitive definition of art, we can say that in general terms it is a form of expressing emotions, feelings, thoughts and perceptions of an artist’s personal view of the external world and/or his inner world. Unlike in other areas of human knowledge, such as science or technology, art is not required to follow protocols or rules to accomplish that expression, other than the ones directly related to the artistic genre, for instance. The latter are just tools designed to help confine the genre in certain categories with the purpose of distinguishing it from other genres and help the artist materialize that expression into means perceptible by the audience. Artistic “equations” are always, unlike scientific ones, unique and singular, adapted by each author. For the scientist, two plus two will always be four, but two poets using the same metric rules may produce two structurally pleasant poems regarding their rhythm, but each poem will be completely different from the other because it is the expression of the exclusive and unique individuality of each of the authors.

It follows that the elements used to judge a work of art will only make sense if their purpose is the structural evaluation, its skeleton, its constituent diagram. Beyond such skeleton lie content and form or, in other words, substance and

its presentation. I will illustrate with an example: “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon” will be judged fairly regarding its conceptional structure – the type of brush, the technique, the colour combination, the study of light. In contrast, there is no sense in judging the painting for the choice of its content, for the subject the author chose in order to display his technique – five prostitutes. In this example, judging the content would be an ethical judgement, if we would rather Picasso had chosen five nuns and we were criticizing the quality of the painting because of the ladies’ trade. As I will show, also if Picasso had used cubism form to motivate the approval of the painting’s subject, he himself would be formatting his own work in an ethical way, such as I believe Haneke does in “Funny Games”²⁵⁷ for example, in order to make the audience conscious of its own reaction to the violence it is witnessing.

What then is an ethical judgement? It is a kind of evaluation done to determine if something is good or bad, right or wrong, according to a set of established patterns. These patterns originate from two sources: internal and external, of which our internal patterns are very much influenced by the environment and culture that surround us. Some external patterns, in turn, were established since the beginning of mankind for practical and utilitarian reasons, so that groups of previous nomads could later live together in sedentary societies, stable enough to thrive and prosper. It is more productive to condemn murder in the midst of a fixed community of humans, for instance, than it is in a group constantly moving from one place to another. In the former case, killing may be extremely disruptive to the functioning of the group, breaking ties of trust and making each individual feel insecure, whereas in the latter, murder may help the survival of the entire group, by getting rid of a hostile individual who is jeopardizing the group with his reckless behaviour towards other rival groups, for example. Thus, moral patterns not always observed human natural features for practical reasons and even more so, were also very much shaped by rigid religious systems which helped to enhance that gap. In reality, morality has undergone evolution through time, just as our emotions, adapting itself to the changing environment. The Roman Empire cheered human carnage, nowadays we condemn even bullfighting. In Ancient Greece rich and prestigious lords established intimate relationships with young *protégés*, nowadays we call that behaviour paedophilia and punish it harshly. But the reverse also happens – in ancient times homosexuality was punishable by death, today it is perfectly tolerated and accepted in many parts of the world.

This means that ethics is not static, but flexible, moving forward or retreating according to societies’ changing environment. And if ethics is flexible, shifting even from individual to individual (or even within the same person), how can it determine the value of a work of art or the aesthetic choices of its author? Furthermore, if it is not part of the structural rules to judge the skeleton of a piece, how can it shape even the judgement of its content or form?

I will use some examples to illustrate this idea:

In 2001 we may be bothered with the short movie “September 11” directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, part of the collected work produced in 2002 about the 9/11 tragedy titled “11’09’01”. He used real images of people jumping from the World Trade Center towers in flames, after the planes hit them, stylizing these images by adding sound effects, slow motion and dark images (Iñárritu, 2002). But a few decades before, in the same city, men would line up near the Empire State Building construction site, waiting for workers to fall

257 A movie in which a family is made hostage and terrorized with acts of extreme violence by a couple of psychopaths.

so that they could take their place and escape unemployment and hunger (Andrew, 2011). What separates these two opposite reactions? In one case we are horrified with the mere presentation of images of an event that happened in another time and place. In the other case, similar human beings do not hesitate to watch a tragedy unfold before their eyes because they are worried about their own survival.

Another example is the outrageous objection of French cinematographic reviewer Serge Daney to the presentation of death in works that depict the Holocaust, which the author considers to be obscene, namely Gillo Pontecorvo's "Kapo" (1960) (Daney, 1992). The film recounts the hardships suffered by a group of women in a Nazi concentration camp and Daney focused particularly on a certain suicide scene. He criticized what he considered to be an exaggerated stylization and unnecessarily reinforced scene of the death of the young woman who throws herself against electrified barbed wire, with a tracking shot that plunges the camera over her dead body. If Daney was right when he pointed his finger to the stylization of motivation strategies for the purpose of awakening compassion and social aid (when he talked about the musical video "We Are The World"), he loses ground when he considered the stylization of fictional death an obscenity. If in the former case we are talking about stylization of ethics, in the latter the exact opposite happens and Daney moralizes an aesthetic issue. Furthermore, it seems to me that Daney's problem is not so much an ethical concern but more a political or religious one. If after the Holocaust poetry is not possible, as Adorno claimed, then what can we say of the overwhelming representation of Jesus Christ's crucifixion? If Daney was right, then we would be forced to condemn centuries of religious art whose main theme is the exploitation of the torturing and death of a man on a cross.

Ethics fluctuate over time, according to different needs and circumstances. How can we then consider such a volatile and flexible tool legitimate enough to judge an artistic work?

The dangers of ethical evaluations can be grouped in two major clusters:

3.1. The content problem

As Schellekens claims "one of the most fruitful things that a good artwork can do is to get us to assent (albeit temporarily and fictionally) to perspectives that we find morally reprehensible" (Schellekens, 2007, p. 67). The author gives the example of Vladimir Nabokov's "Lolita", considered a great novel precisely because it "introduces us to the manner in which the unquestionably culpable paedophile protagonist views his relationship with a 12-year-old girl" (Schellekens, 2007, p. 67). Schellekens continues claiming that

(...) what matters in relation to the appreciation and assessment of art is whether the moral perspective a work conveys is rendered intelligible or psychologically credible, and not whether the moral perspective of a work is what we take to be the right one. Rather, what is important is if the artist can get us to see, feel and respond to the world as represented as she intends us to and how, in doing so we come to fully understand and appreciate things we might not otherwise have done (Schellekens, 2007, p. 79).

This because “they enable us to increase our understanding of moral views that we do not personally endorse” (Schellekens, 2007, p. 85).

By condemning art as immoral we are engaging in a sort of counterproductive self-censorship for the reasons presented before. On the other hand, by presenting immoral content such as violence in a way that is consciously concerned about its moral effect on the audience, as Haneke tries to do in “Funny Games”, for example, the filmmaker is self-censoring his own content and censoring the point of view he wishes to provoke in his audience. But, worse still, he will be constraining his own work from a formal point of view, using ethics as a guideline, something he might not have done were it the case that the scene in which the character Paul plays a macabre game with Ann, were comical instead of dramatic, for instance. After talking to Ann, Paul looks directly to the camera and asks the viewer: “Do you think it’s enough? I mean, you want a real ending, right? With a plausible plot development. Don’t you?” Immediately afterwards, catching Paul off-guard, Ann grabs the psychopath’s rifle and shoots his partner Peter. At that moment, Paul starts searching frantically for the TV remote control and rewinds the entire scene, so that when Ann starts for the gun this time, he is prepared and stops her. We might guess that if the movie was a comedy instead of a horrific drama, Haneke would not have used this moral tool and would have worked with his other tools, without any concerns about the scene’s ethical point of view.

As in the above-mentioned example of Picasso, it would be as if the painter had chosen cubism exclusively because of the supposedly immoral presence of the prostitutes in his painting “Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)”. In “Kapo”’s case, on the other hand, Daney could be wrongly interpreting the intentions of the director Pontecorvo, whose purpose using the tracking shot could very well have been the enhancement of the tragedy of the character’s suicide, against the indifference/impotence of the rest of the female prisoners.

But there is also another issue which is important to mention. The effect of an extremely violent scene is as bad in a child, for example, as is the effect of the idea of “prince charming” explored by many movies, in the minds of millions of girls and even grown women around the world. Indeed, the formatting of certain character behaviours in largely distributed American movies is adapted to the way the American people live and feel, but it is not adjusted to the European mindset, for instance. The fact that we have been continuously fed for decades with another country’s cultural patterns which do not resemble in any way our own, leads to unrealistic expectations carried into real life and which then produce internal disparities and almost cartoonish conflicts in the way that we sometimes expect certain reactions in others, that can’t happen because they are not inscribed into the cultural codes of our fellow countryman. Furthermore, an even worse phenomenon occurs – the adoption of these behaviours by the younger generations but in an artificial, acquired way, only external, that doesn’t originate from the inner self and which thus results in shallow, unjustifiable, implausible attitudes.

3.2. The form problem

But if, as Haneke claims (2010), the problem is not content, but the way that content is presented (Haneke, 2010), in that case by judging form we are considering it solely in the light of the content it presents. If the content is troublesome, then form is automatically probed in a microscopic way. But if

content is not considered dangerous, then form goes completely unnoticed. Obviously, it seems to me that this type of analysis is dangerously partial, besides being subjectively selective. If content is violent, then we question form. But if content is a completely unrealistic love story, that seems not to worry Haneke at all, although the latter can be as dangerous as the former precisely because it works in much more subtle ways and therefore it can do much more harm, as I tried to show in the previous topic, concerning the example of the “charming prince”.

On the other hand, if we need to be careful with form, then the neutrality that Haneke supports, is lost in so much as by taking a conscious and specific attitude towards the way in which a content must be formatted to cause a set of desired behaviours and thoughts in the audience, we will be using the same kind of prefocusing mentioned by Carroll (2010) as used in the American cinema industry’s mainstream movies (Carroll, 2010), the ones which are not considered for this paper precisely because they are thought to belong in the entertainment category. That prefocusing is not only partial, as it leads the viewer in the direction desired by the author, with the intent of awakening him to an issue that matters to the author, but it is also patronising, for it considers itself a guideline to the supposedly correct way of watching the movie, automatically erasing the neutrality initially intended.

When neutrality really happens, as in the case described by Haneke (2010) of filmmaker Robert Bresson in the movie “Au hasard Balthazar” (Haneke, 2010), the audience feels difficulty in understanding, which leads us to another problem felt not only by cinema, but by art in general, and which is the widespread lack of artistic education amongst the general population. The issue should then be solved at the source and not at the endpoint. Much more dangerous than the anaesthetization of the audience, is its ignorance of the process of falling under its spell. And that problem cannot be dealt at the end of the process, inside a movie theater. Artistic education since childhood is where the problem might have some hope of resolution, not when those young people have already become adults full of bad habits hard to break. However, the cinematic features that help the almost full plunge of the viewer into what’s happening on the screen make me sceptic about the possibility of success even there. It might also be useful to understand why people prefer virtual realities (such as those which are increasingly happening in the social media) to reality itself and if that is a problem. If by any chance a new form of art would appear that simulated reality in a much better way than movies, cinema would most probably be thrown into the obsolete shelf, labelled as a past relic and would magically stop being considered a danger to fragile, uninformed young people. But in that case, we are again talking about mediatization.

The dangers of ethical evaluations lead me to the conclusion that cinema cannot be held liable or engaged either in the problem or the search for its solution. Because cinema is art, it is not news, or politics, or social security. And the main function of art is not to educate people but to make them feel and reflect about the world in ways different from what they are used to. Especially because, as Haneke himself claims: “even the morally conscious and responsible depiction of acts of violence is bound to move into controversy.” (Haneke, 2010, p. 576) Which means the problem does not reside on the content or its form, but on the idea, we build about those contents and forms and how we are taught to deal with them. Violence, as many other emotions and behaviours is an integral part of the human design, whether we like it

or not. When we create a work of art we cannot avoid talking about them or formatting its presentation in any way that has as its master brush ethics.

Going back to Schellekens (2007), she exemplifies with Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment", claiming that if the author had failed by arousing in the reader shame and disgust for the attitudes of the protagonist Raskolnikov towards the old lady he murders, in that case we could say his work presented an aesthetic and thus artistic failure, because those were the feelings he wanted to convey (Schellekens, 2007). I add that if instead, had the author wanted to convey sympathy and understanding for the protagonist and the reader condemned the novel for its immoral content, then it would not have been Dostoevsky's failure but our own, since we would be judging his work formally in accordance to its content.

Schellekens adds that

(...) there is an important distinction to be drawn between the claim that art can have a negative moral effect at times, and the idea that there is something intrinsic to art with a morally reprehensible character that necessarily leads it to have a negative effect on its audience (Schellekens, 2007, p. 88).

It doesn't seem to me that the independent directors (such as Scorsese or Tarantino, for instance) to which Haneke refers to when he describes those who "saw through and despised the rules of the game (...) found themselves forced to subscribe to them" (Haneke, 2010, p. 572), those who are in the border between the artistic and the entertaining, want to promote violence *per se*. These types of directors communicate to presupposed intelligent audiences, delegating moralistic concerns to the hubs of society where they should be addressed – schools, families, mass media content regulating agencies. And cinema, some cinema, artistic cinema, as I think is clear by now, is not a part of those mass media.

4. Conclusion

The reflection over the issue of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in movies cannot be initiated without first defining the object of study and its features in a clear and accurate way. It seems to me that the problems highlighted for cinema-art are in reality attributable to cinema-entertainment.

On the other hand, ethics is a human tool and thus flexible and volatile, varying according to the eras, geography, politics, social circumstances and even individuals. For that reason, we cannot depend on it when we judge a human form of expression who has as its main feature freedom and absence of constraints or restrictions – art. Two fundamental problems arise, if that happens: being totally constrained by content, which leads to a more serious issue, that of censorship; and judging or deciding form according to content, which eliminates the goal of neutrality that raised that concern in the beginning, creating a paradox.

Art can be an escape to institutionalized morality, for it is a kind of isolated box where all experiments are possible, because they are protected of their own consequences. Thus, instead of being considered negative, it can on the

contrary be a form of liberation, a safe playing box where people can glimpse brief sparkles of understanding about lifestyles, attitudes and behaviours to which they would normally not have access and about which they may wonder. Cinema allows us to establish contact with different realities and points of view, with distinct cultures, with opposing personalities in a much more intense and close way than other forms of art. As Aristotle claimed (talking about poetry), it can be a purge to emotions such as rage or fear which, if left untouched, will express themselves in a socially disruptive way. Instead of being considered a dangerous and disguised representation of reality, cinema may be viewed as a microscope of reality, focussing our attention in details we would normally miss amidst the big picture of our daily lives. Cinema aims its camera to details of life and of our own reactions, allowing us to get a detached perspective of situations in which most of the times we are too engrossed in to manage some kind of impartiality, or framing details of life to which we would be completely blind, lost in the inherent distraction of the hustle of our own lives. Filming death, for example, can make it less of a taboo, helping us to look it straight in the eyes.

The problem is not in enjoying this or that form or behaviour, but in knowing how to distinguish them. We may like romantic comedies produced by Hollywood's cinema industry and, at the same time, be able to understand in Bresson the omission of "happiness, because its depiction would desecrate suffering and pain.", as Haneke puts it (Haneke, 2010, p. 574). The problem begins when we don't know that romantic comedies belong in the entertainment basket and Bresson's films in the artistic basket, wrongly assuming that everything is grown out of the same tree. But the learning of such an ability will be accountable by other forums, not by cinema.

The danger of formatting content of any kind, even if for absolutely legitimate and noble reasons, is of bringing us closer to the censorship we so much condemn in other cultures.

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