Just Images

Just Images:
Ethics and the Cinematic

Edited by

Boaz Hagin, Sandra Meiri, Raz Yosef
and Anat Zanger

Associate Editor Gal Raz

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INTRODUCTION

JUST IMAGES: ETHICS AND THE CINEMATIC

BOAZ HAGIN, SANDRA MEIRI, RAZ YOSEF, AND ANAT ZANGER

> "[…] let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art."
> —Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946)

> "Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image."
> (It's not a just image, it's just an image)
> —Jean-Luc Godard

Beliefs about right and wrong behavior and about the care of the self and one's conduct with others have accompanied discussions about the making and use of images since Antiquity. The desire to regulate, set up ideals and norms, investigate guiding moral principles, and extol the virtuous and denounce the wicked, has certainly not been absent from writings on the cinema, specific films, their making, and their effects on viewers and society, since at least as early as the 1890s.

W. K. L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson argued in 1895 that no more powerful "factor for good" exists than the final development of the kinetographic stage.[1] They envisioned the kinetograph as promoting global equality, since its power of perfect reproduction would be able to bring any scene without undue expenditure or danger to those who were debarred from attendance, such as the "invalid" or the "isolated country recluse."[2] Its abilities to serve business, the advancement of science,

[1] William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kinetophonograph* (New York: Albert Bunn, 1895, rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1970), 50.
[2] Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph*, 51.

discovery, and education, they stated, "shall overflow to the nethermost portions of the earth" and "the great potentialities of life shall no longer be in the keeping of cloister and college, sword or money-bag[.]"[3] Moreover, when the latest doings on Mars, Saturn and Venus "are recorded by enterprising kinetographic reporters," they suggested, "sociable relations will be established between ourselves and the planetary system[.]"[4] Far less given to utopian reveries is Henry V. Hopwood, who in his 1899 *Living Pictures: Their History, Photo-Production, and Practical Working*, laments the ability of films to offer a private exhibition of an execution by guillotine, comments that "nothing more terrible could be desired by the most morbid mind" than a film showing a fatal disaster during the launching of a battleship less than two days after the event,[5] and calls for "discretion" in "Cinematography as well as in every other path in life," after explaining that "it may be doubted" that an accurate reproduction of the horrors of a battlefield would facilitate recruiting.[6]

By the first decade of the twentieth century, "guardians of public morality" were calling to control the "vice" of motion pictures,[7] and the ensuing century has witnessed countless efforts at censorship, ratings, warnings and recommendations for the faithful, and much concern for the wellbeing of those exposed to moving images, particularly children, the working class, immigrants, and the supposedly easily influenced foreign viewers. For many decades, films, novels, and journalistic reports in all media have offered scandalous exposés of the immoral excesses of Hollywood and the entertainment industry, and filmmakers apparently believe that viewers think the very worst of them, as they make an effort to attain the American Humane Association's trademarked tagline which puts our ethical minds at ease: no animals are harmed in the making of the motion pictures we patronize.

Ethical concerns – questions of right and wrong and social norms – are extremely common within the canon of film theory. Many theorists have asked how films can be used to reveal social realities or to stir up new and ethically desirable convictions within spectators' minds. Countless film scholars have worked to unmask the nefarious ideologies lurking beneath

[3] Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph*, 52.
[4] Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph*, 51.
[5] Henry V. Hopwood, *Living Pictures: Their History, Photo-Production and Practical Working* (London: The Optician & Photographic Trades Review, 1899, rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1970), 231.
[6] Hopwood, *Living Pictures*, 232.
[7] Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

the supposedly innocent entertainment of mainstream moving images, or to reveal how select audiovisual texts manage to resist dominant ideologies; in other words, they have engaged in the "critical activity" of showing the relations between different cinematic texts and ideology, such as the famous "categories" theorized by Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni.[8]

While this book is indebted to this lineage of ethically engaged film theory, recent decades have seen shifts in ethical thought within the humanities, filmmaking, and the scholarship of moving images. Diverse thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, Luc Boltanski, Jacques Rancière, and new interpretations of psychoanalysis and the work of Jacques Lacan, have reconsidered what the terms "ethics" and "morality" can mean, some of them specifically in reference to media and film.[9] Of particular note are the groundbreaking studies by scholars such as Vivian Sobchack, Bill Nichols, and Michael Renov on documentaries. These have raised crucial ethical questions about representation, intervention and political commitment in films; a possible implicit contract between filmmakers and viewers about the fidelity and authenticity of the image; and the ethically-charged relationships between the makers of documentary images and the films' participants, such as the possibilities and limits of informed consent, collaboration, and mutual or one-sided exploitation.[10]

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[8] Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12, no. 1 (1971): 27-36, esp. 34.

[9] Most recent is Downing and Saxton's book, which deals with questions of ethics and aesthetics in cinema, including the spectators' involvement in this relationship. See Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[10] See Vivian Sobchack, "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–257; Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001). See also, Noël Carroll, "Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism," *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 283–306; Calvin Pryluck, "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filming," *New Challenges for Documentary*, eds. Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, second edition (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 194–208; Jay Ruby, "The Ethics of Image Making; or, 'They're Going to Put Me in the Movies. They're Going to Make a Big Star Out of Me…'," *New Challenges for Documentary*, 209–219; Brain Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (London: British Film Institute,

In addition, memory studies and trauma theory have encouraged new explorations of the past and the roles of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses, as well as long-term, vicarious, and inherited suffering, guilt, and accountability. Within film studies, novel approaches to spatiality and geography, temporality, technology and medium specificity, the status of fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, and possible connections between moving images and historiography, philosophy, and autobiography, have been suggested. Moreover, as Israeli scholars, we are frequently confronted with pressing ethical questions, such as the political and social relevance and engagement of our work, our ability to represent and discuss representations of the Other, trauma, terrorism, the Holocaust, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All of these have prompted us to ask film and media scholars from three continents to give their views on the role that ethics should now play in the study of moving images. Although the various contributors offer different approaches to the issue, all of the authors in *Just Images: Ethics and the Cinematic* ultimately ask whether there are specific characteristics of the moving image, or of scholarship about the moving image, that relate to ethics.

This collection of essays is concerned with the engagement of film with present and past histories, politics, events, myth making, and with core aspects of human subjectivity. The collection relates to the European Union; Europe during World War II and after; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; early American history, as well as recent catastrophic events; and film genres. It combines new and original work that appears here for the first time with essays that have been published in the past. It has four parts, preceded by Thomas Elsaesser's essay, "Politics, Multiculturalism and the Ethical Turn: The Cinema of Fatih Akin," which opens the collection.

Elsaesser is concerned with the place of ethics within film studies as it relates to other theoretical fields, notably philosophy and cultural studies. He suggests that the turn to ethics is a recent shift, at the cusp of cultural studies, identity-politics, and radical politics, and has arisen as a result of the discontents of multiculturalism. He notes that many contemporary films, both mainstream and independent, pose ethical questions and wrestle with moral dilemmas, and asks whether Jacques Rancière's distinction between soft and hard ethics can be useful as a guide to understanding what is at stake in these diverse films, as chance, coincidence, and magic once more take their place alongside providence and personal decision in charting a path through life's difficult choices and

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2000); Patricia R. Zimmerman, *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

no-win situations, testing questions of guilt and atonement, redemption and sacrifice.

I

Part I, titled *Re-vision: Contested Pasts*, offers different views on the ways in which moving images can come to terms with traumatic pasts, allowing historical reflection, attesting to disavowed events from the past, or resisting the imperative to deal with such histories.

In "Between Essay and Midrash: *Description d'un combat* (Chris Marker, 1960)," Régine-Mihal Friedman engages with Chris Marker's film *Description of a Struggle*. Marker's unusual life journey as world-traveler, poet, photographer, editor, scriptwriter, designer, filmmaker and, more recently, multi-media/installation artist, also brought him to Israel half a century ago, in order to document, if not exactly the "birth of a nation," at the very least its coming of age. His film was very warmly received by both the public and the critics and was awarded the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival (1960). Surprisingly, however, it has not aroused the same scholarly interest as *La Jetée* or as Marker's subsequent experimental and political manifests such as *Sans Soleil* or *Level Five*. The film's title, *Description of a Struggle*, although obviously an allusion to the various battles Israel has had to wage for its very existence, was in fact inspired by Kafka's first published short story, *Description of a Struggle* (*Beschreibung eines Kampfes*, 1904-1905) – an enigmatic parable about a man struggling throughout the night, perhaps with an angel, perhaps with an alter-ego, and certainly with himself. For Marker, Israel's struggle is with itself, inside itself. To become a nation, says Marker in the film, implies a right to selfishness, blindness, conceit. But Israel's history cries out against power for its own sake. Its ethics – inherited from its own tragic past – must always remind its people that injustice in this land weighs heavier than elsewhere. Friedman argues that it is this demand, articulated by Marker's own parable, his *midrash*, the film, that has to be elaborated and worked through.

Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoni's "The Muddy Path Between *Lebanon* and *Khirbet Khizeh*: Trauma, Ethics, and Redemption in Israeli Film and Literature," focuses on the Israeli film *Khirbet Khizeh* (Ram Levi, 1978) which was the first Israeli film since the 1948 War of Independence to engage with the expulsion of the Arab residents of Palestine. The film was aired on Israeli public television in 1978, generating intense debates and turmoil, and it was almost banned. The essay reveals that while the expulsion of Arabs as described in the film *Khirbet Khizeh* does not recur

directly in Israeli cinema, it does reappear at other times and places, as faded traces beyond the context that generated it. Through its absence, it is paradoxically present with tremendous power. It is incessantly re-experienced by its being forgotten, and re-emerges constantly as the acting-out of no longer remembered events, as an unprocessed trauma of guilt and shame.

Lihi Nagler's "(T)error in Post-Wall German Cinema: Andreas Baader as the Last Action Hero of the '68 Generation," discusses the possible new role of Andreas Baader, as a constructed heroic figure of the autumnal 68' generation in Germany, a generation whose representatives today occupy central political and cultural positions in Germany and has set the tone of the public discourse on the subject. It addresses several recent fiction films, such as Christopher Roth's *Baader* (2002), Volker Schlöndorff's *Stille Nachdem Schuss* (*The Legend of Rita*) (2000), and Uli Edel's blockbuster *Der Baader-Meinhof Komplex* (*The Baader-Meinhof Complex*) (2008), which present Andreas Baader as the ultimate action hero or a rebel without a clue. Using the Jamesonian category of the "nostalgia film" in post-modernity, the essay demonstrates not only that Baader's images are becoming a type of pop product in twenty-first century capitalist Germany, but also how rare it is in this context to label him as a terrorist or to turn the gaze onto his victims.

Raz Yosef's "War Fantasies: Memory, Trauma, and Ethics in Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*" looks at films in contemporary Israeli cinema which deal with the First Lebanon War, and point to the need, as well as difficulty to remember and represent, one of the most traumatic wars in the history of the State of Israel. Films such as the documentary *Wasted* (Nurit Kedar, 2006), the narrative film *Beaufort* (Joseph Cedar, 2007) and the animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) critically confront the unspoken recollections of this war. They describe combatants for whom time has stopped, who are still haunted by the horrifying images of the battlefield. Their emphasis on the subjective dimension of war memories and experiences distances these films from the war's historical context – which, though present, is represented only partially and sometimes hazily – leading them into an atemporal zone, marked by symbols and private hallucinations. Drawn away from the continuities of national history, the films enter a mysterious world, signified by displacements and repetitions that characterize dreams and fantasies. The essay focuses on *Waltz with Bashir* and argues that the film exposes a traumatic rupture between history and private memory, pointing to a decline in the national collective memory in Israel. The director, Ari Folman, constructs the film as a kind of *lieu de mémoire* – a place (realm)

of memory – that preserves and houses repressed traumatic events that have been denied entry into the nation's historical narrative, and which he and the other soldiers feel duty-bound to remember. The film does not aspire to reveal the true details of the war. Rather it is concerned with memory and the very process of remembering, as well as with the ethical questions that they pose to both the film's characters and its viewers. These questions are reflected both in the film's narrative and in its unique aesthetics.

II

Part II, *Re-location, Dis-location*, looks at spaces in which the traveling camera incites us to take an ethical stand in relation to history, politics, and catastrophic events. Dealing with heterotopic, blocked, and exilic spaces, this part traces the ways in which cinematic spaces engage us with both past and recent politics and histories, urging us to reconsider our views.

Anton Kaes's "Requiem for a Lost Planet: Notes on Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana*," argues that Werner Herzog's trance-like documentary *Fata Morgana* (1968-69) uses expedition footage from Africa to meditate on the state of the natural world, on German history, and the status and function of filmmaking. Showing "ruined people in ruined places" (Herzog), the film is at first sight a dark commentary on the destructive force of technological civilization encroaching on unspoiled nature. By embedding the film in the historical moment in which it was made – the 1960s that in the wake of the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials witnessed an increased awareness of Germany's horrific past – another reading emerges: one that interprets Herzog's exploration of the seemingly timeless and unbounded African desert as an escape from the burden of German history. Oblique references to Germany's recent past, however, demonstrate that the film is nonetheless haunted by German history. Although *Fata Morgana* stands in the German tradition of sublime nature films (Leni Riefenstahl, Arnold Fanck) and previous Africa films (Bernhard Grzimek), it is most visibly indebted to American avant-garde filmmaking of the early 1960s – especially Stan Brakhage, who sought a film language to express the pre-symbolic realm. At the same time, *Fata Morgana*'s numerous sardonic and absurdist elements follow the spirit of Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, which Beckett himself directed in Berlin in 1967. Stylistically the film oscillates between pure cinema and critical ethnography, between expedition film and performance art, only to end with an affirmation of filmmaking as a utopian evocation of peace after war.

In "Between Scylla and Charybdis" Judd Ne'eman, one of Israel's foremost filmmakers and scholars, offers a unique personal essay. He discusses the emergence of a new Palestinian voice, not the voice of the victim, but the voice of the autonomous human being capable of designing a future and making it come into being. He turns to the documentary film *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* (2001) by Mai Masri, which deals with the plight of third-generation Palestinians after the *Naqba* (disaster) in two refugee camps. It unfolds the ambivalence those young people experience vis à vis their human condition as refugees. They vacillate between the demand to sacrifice their future for the sake of "Right of Return" on the one hand, and their urge to have a future for themselves, on the other. Gilles Deleuze notes that Nietzsche's concept of the "eternal return" is "not the return of the same, nor a return to the same; that it is not a simple natural assumption for the use of animals [biological survival] or a sad moral punishment for the use of man [melancholia]. […] The eternal return **is** repetition; but it is the repetition that selects, the repetition that saves. The prodigious secret of a repetition that is liberating and selecting." The drive of the young Palestinians to create a future for themselves becomes the "prodigious secret," the liberating contingent act subtly expressed in Mai Masri's film.

Janet Walker's "Documentaries of Return: 'Unhomed Geographies' and the Moving Image" discusses a proliferating mode of documentary film practice, termed the "documentary of return." In these films subjects and filmmakers journey together to a significant place from which the former have previously departed, fled, emigrated, or been pushed out, evacuated, deported, displaced, or exiled. Viewers also travel. Given Giuliana Bruno's characterization of the motion picture as "the very synthesis of seeing and going" and of cinema spectating as "site-seeing" across a "geopsychic landscape," it follows that the documentary of return, by its very premise, represents an overdetermined and crucial case of cinema's synthetic seeing/going. With reference to concepts drawn from critical human geography as well as cinema studies, Walker explores this mode of documentary as a distinct spatial practice of trans-habitation – be it temporary or permanent, smooth or troubled – with the potential to reimagine shared or contested territories and refigure the human rights' concept of "right of return." She asks: When, and for whom are rights of return to former homes and property taken for granted, and when and to whom are they denied? Adopting a relational approach to the ethics, aesthetics, and geographies of displacement and return, this essay jointly considers Holocaust documentaries, primarily *The Last Days* (1998) and *Hiding and Seeking* (2004), and "Katrina" documentaries, primarily *When*

the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006), in light of physical propinquity and the affective lure of home.

For Anat Zanger, "The ethical event," as Emmanuel Levinas observed, "is not something that I do (or choose to do), but something that I must do at the moment that the other touches me by his very presence – by means of his/her otherness." Her essay, "The Event and the Responsibility of the Image," focuses on the way the camera is used to produce public visibility of events that occur in the country's margins, particularly at Israeli/Palestinian sites of checkpoints and roadblocks. Its main part discusses the film *Checkpoints* by Yoav Shamir (2003), which documents instances of the daily encounters between Israelis and Palestinians at various roadblocks over a period of two years. The analysis of the relationships between the director, the camera, and the film characters – or its "social agents," as Bill Nichols puts it – reveals the dual function of the camera. On the one hand, it records the course of events, and on the other hand, it participates in them and offers an ethical stand.

III

Part III, *Archives of Pain*, *Shoah*, addresses ethical questions about the media and truth, and the rewriting of history.

Kristian Feigelson's "Cinematic Archives and the Rereading of European History in Forgács's Cinema: A Filmmaker of the Anonymous," deals with the challenge presented by Péter Forgács's work on European film archives, particularly in relation to the traumas of Nazism and Stalinism. Feigelson contends that the work of piecing together Hungarian history takes on visual forms thanks to the cinematic archives unearthed by Péter Forgács. Forgács's series *Private Hungary* explores different types of visual recordings of a past in Central Europe that seems to remain impossible to write down. His recent interactive multi-media project, *The Labyrinth*, including the film *Danube Exodus* (1998), puts into perspective a number of different visions involving history, memory, and accounts from the twentieth century. Exhibited in Europe and the United States, his project of rewriting history still arouses controversy among Hungarian society and towards the Jews of Eastern Europe. With regard to the tragic trauma caused successively by Nazism and Stalinism, Forgács seeks to call seriously into question certain culturally-accepted codes, which indirectly raises the issue of the distortion or the relation between "collective memory" and the "autobiographical status" in the project as a whole. Feigelson asks what contribution this kind of mechanism offers to a true re-writing of history.

In "The Ethics of 'Contra-Lying' in Narrative Holocaust Films," Odeya Kohen-Raz discusses several narrative Holocaust films, focusing on *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942), *La vita è bella* [*Life is Beautiful*] (Roberto Benigni, 1998), *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), and *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009). These films highlight the ways in which the Nazi language and actions abolished human subjectivity and the Symbolic through euphemism and disinformation. Kohen-Raz discusses a variety of rhetorical devices, such as lies, concession to forgery, simulations of unreal situations, excessive double meanings, and incorrect translations, and contends that their effect is the recuperation of the Symbolic. Some of the characters in the films discussed are aware, to a certain extent, of the true nature of the Nazis' murderous intentions. They do not believe the Nazi lies and must abandon their own set of values in order to save their lives, as well as the lives of others. Kohen-Raz refers to this phenomenon as "the ethics of contra-lying." "Contra-lying" has several aspects: it involves acknowledging reality; its intent is the saving of lives; and it is an act of reclaiming the victims' voices and subjectivity. *Inglourious Basterds* does so by changing history itself. The ethics of "contra-lying" creates an ironic distance, generating new judgments and reconsiderations regarding the relationship of cinema and history.

IV

Part IV, *Genre, Myth, Fantasy*, looks at different film genres – the western; a sub-genre of horror films; and documentaries – and examines, in disparate ways, how subjectivity manifests itself in these genres, respectively, and what role it may play in the realm of ethics and the cinematic.

Gertrud Koch's "A Law's Tale: John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*" engages with the different states of law-making and enforcement in the film. Koch contends that the film links its classical Western narrative with two sub-stories: the rise of mass democracy – the emergence of politics as profession; and the role of the print media in the making of public opinion. It presents a double lie: self-deception and a political legend disseminated by the press. She suggests that Ford further contributes to this doubt regarding political and historical representation with a doubly-unreliable flashback, acting out his skepticism toward the image and its relation to representation, deception, and lies. She concludes that Ford's film is an elegy, an obituary to a world in which he would have liked to live, but which he nevertheless knows is his own legend.

In "The (Po)Et(h)ics of Horror: The Transvestite Killer Revisited," Sandra Meiri discusses, in Lacanian terms, the nature of horror and monstrosity, and its configurations in four films: *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *In Dreams* (Neil Jordan, 1999). She argues that the transvestite serial killer embodies two vital aspects of subjectivity – the monster-like nature of the "maternal Thing" and the subject's relation to it; and the coveting of woman's *jouissance*, associated in the films not only with female sexuality, but also, and most importantly, with creation, the uniqueness of each work of art, and the viewer's experience of it. On the one hand, these films point to the subject's difficulty, despite the inevitability, to relinquish the fantasy of incest with the mother, which instills desire – desire being the core aspect of the ethics of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, the conflation of non-phallic *jouissance* and *signifiance* with woman (that which is coveted), rendered through the depiction of the transvestite serial killer and the nature of his killings, suggests that woman's *jouissance* is "the solid rock of interpretation and creation" – what Meiri terms "the (po)et(h)ics of horror." This may prove beneficial to both feminist and queer studies, which have deemed the conflation of monstrosity (in the films analyzed in this essay) with femininity and queerness as detrimental to both categories.

Bill Nichols's essay, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject" turns to documentary films and examines the function of fantasy in these works. Given that reenactments attempt to replicate aspects of the past that were presumably unique, Nichols addresses the following questions: What justifies this form of poetic license in the domain of documentary representation? What needs and purposes do reenactments fulfill? How do they return us to the early days of documentary, when its boundaries and conventions were much less rigidly set and imaginative representations of reality were the norm? How do they confound journalistic standards and legitimate narrative interventions? Into what categories can reenactments be classified? If reenactments align themselves with elements of fantasy, what forms of fantasy seem most apt in the efforts to represent reality?

It is our hope that this collection of essays will help shed some light on the intriguing questions regarding film and ethics, and will engender new debates on the role of the moving image in shaping, representing, and challenging the ways we think about history, ourselves, and the Other.

CHAPTER ONE

POLITICS, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE ETHICAL TURN: THE CINEMA OF FATIH AKIN

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Prelude

We come together every two years, and each time, we give ourselves a deep theme, which we explore as best we can. But often enough, underneath the different themes there lurks another purpose, which also brings us together: namely, to ask ourselves what is the place and function of "cinema," in the public arena of what used to be called "progressive politics." This has – since May 68 and then November 1989 – evolved into first, the seemingly impossible, but nonetheless always demanded "dialogue": dialogue with the ethnic, the religious or the national other, and secondly, the need to keep alive the core political issues of justice and rights, of entitlements and empowerments, of grief and grievances: in a world order that under the name of liberal democracy and free trade, cements old inequalities and creates new ones.

For many of us from Western Europe, the demand for dialogue expresses itself politically in the European Union's efforts to balance (personal, religious) self-determination and (regional, linguistic) autonomy, to "integrate" those from other backgrounds and beliefs, to promote shared values and equal rights, to harmonise legal frameworks, to maintain health and welfare provisions, to secularize gender-relations, especially with respect to the rights of women, and to set up common institutions that define civility and civic responsibility, and thus re-define citizenship for the post-Nation-State globalized world. For some outside Europe, it has manifested itself in transitional justice and Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commissions; for yet others the demand for dialogue articulates itself in the so-called identity-wars, and for many more it has remained at the stage

of confrontation: either in the form of low-intensity daily attrition, or as high-profile acts of violence and warfare.

The issue of "ethics" and the reason it is on our agenda, clearly has to do with the consequences of the crises in 20th-century politics I have just alluded to. For instance, philosophically, the "demand for dialogue," the question of "the other" and "alterity" as well as the focus on the potential conflict between rights, justice and the law have in the past two decades been expressed in the renewed uncertainty over one of the key legacies of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution: the universalism of certain rights, in the light of various claims for entitlements that cannot be assumed to be universal, but manifest themselves at the level of the particular: be it the uniqueness of an individual, the particular identity of a specific group, or the historical singularity of an event.

But the demand for dialogue is also present in the struggles concerning the interpretative authority over, and thus the discursive ownership of the past – the tensions between, for instance, "history" and "memory" – that is, of how to arbitrate among contested versions of national history as a result of war or political catastrophe (such as in the cases of the legacy of fascism in Italy, in Germany or Spain; or of Communism in Hungary, the Czech Republic or Poland) and of cultural memory of homelands (such as the many examples of expulsion, migration, exile), and of witnessing and testimony (as in the case of crimes against humanity, around genocide or in dealing with the consequences of civil wars and colonialism).

From "Culturalism" to "Ethics"

As the general outlines and specific instances of these debates are familiar, there is no need to elaborate further on the ongoing controversy between Enlightenment universalism and Romantic/post-modern cultural relativism, or between the Euro-centrism of certain political ideals, often perceived as essentialist, such as liberal democracy, human rights, the pursuit of (personal) happiness on the one hand, and on the other: social constructivism and "performativity," embodiment and "situatedness" as they underpin the various ideologies of the post-: post-nationalism, post-modernism, post-structuralism – ideologies that despite their differences seem to me broadly in line with the kind of consensus-politics that try to foster the ideals of multi-ethnic communities, such as they are pursued, for instance, by the European Union.

Another name for at least some of these tendencies and turns, is that of "culturalism," which is to say, the translation or re-positioning of political demands and conflicts into issues of culture, identity, representation.

Many of us working in the Humanities have, on the whole, become used to discussing and redefining our respective disciplines (literature, film and media-studies, art history) by giving priority to these questions of culture, often by inventorizing "identity," "difference," and making them play themselves out in the media-specific contests over "representation," especially as this term has come to be associated with a number of struggles over rights, over demands for recognition, over the re-casting and re-writing of "history," in order to make room for those not heard, or for those forcibly silenced, but also around questions of respect from and for the other, as well as one's own self-respect and "pride."

This, in a nutshell, is the context for cultural studies, and why it has made its way into the university curriculum over the past decades. Cultural Studies, it will be recalled, came to the fore on the back of political failure. When in the 1970s, after the aborted May 68 revolts and the defeat of the third world revolutionary movements, it became clear that socialism beyond social democracy and to the political Left of the welfare state, would not take hold in the West; that Marxist state socialism was not delivering equality or social justice; and that it was not even delivering goods and services to its people, let alone an equitable redistribution of these goods and services, cultural studies emerged as both a *critique* and a *continuation* of Western Marxism.

More specifically, cultural studies' initial raison d'être was to continue to address and keep alive the issue of social justice, but by shifting the terrain of action from representational politics to the politics of representation, from parliamentary democracy to the cultural representation of minorities. Cultural studies began by highlighting inequality and injustice in the ways minorities – at first women, blacks, other ethnic groups – found themselves "represented" on television and the media, in language and discourse, in advertising and consumer products, in literature and the cinema – in short: in culture. Cultural studies took on both high and popular culture, deconstructing in commercial art the claim to service people's needs and desires, and in the fine arts the claim that art-works should be granted the status of disinterested aesthetic objects.

But ideological critique was only one side of the cultural studies' coin. Taking over from "consciousness-raising" (a political imperative, and in its appeal to reason a direct inheritance from the Enlightenment), was the call for "empowerment." It signified that in the constructivist project of cultural studies, besides the emphasis put on the limiting (social, sexual) determinations of given individuals or groups, equal attention should be given to the spaces of positive appropriation, on "play" and especially on "performativity." In other words, rather than seeing human beings as

victims of the constraints imposed by externally constructed identities or representations, the fact that these identities were neither natural nor given, could just as well turn their constructedness into empowering factors. Furthermore, the new emphasis on "culture" – whether identified, as Raymond Williams had done, with "a whole way of life," or seen more as a call to self-fashioning – did distinguish identity politics quite sharply from both the liberal conception of "politics" as driven by individual self-interest, and the Marxist notion of "politics" driven by the class struggle. Political action came to be defined as action designed to advance the interests of members of a particular group sharing common goals or aspirations, or of people coming together merely on the basis of a perception that right, recognition and representation were being denied to them. From combating the sense of being subject to negative identity, i.e. stereotyping, and seeing it as both the result and the cause of discrimination, identity-politics expanded into pro-active attempts to forge alliances and to generate solidarity as well as gain political leverage in the public sphere, which became increasingly synonymous with the mass media, and especially television.

The primacy of self-promotion and self-fashioning, or more generally, the value given to the "care of the self" also meant that identity politics led to a proliferation of diverse forms of identity: race, ethnicity, gender, religion, caste, sexual orientation, physical disability or some other assigned or perceived trait became the basis of a set of claims, among them the status of victimhood, thus making "vulnerability," "trauma" and "precariousness" key terms of the decade of the 1990s.

It is in this context that ethics returns as a critical issue, arising at the juncture where the multiplicity of identities based on markers of difference defined as "cultural" (and thus including or subsuming nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender) no longer afford a common framework or an agreed basis on which competing claims can be arbitrated or negotiated other than by bureaucratic forms of redistribution (for instance: "quotas" or "affirmative action" in the US, financial grants to foster "regional autonomy" and expansion of the cultural industries and the administration of multi-culturalism in the EU). On the one hand, the term multiculturalism designates those very efforts to mitigate the consequences of Eurocentric essentialism, and to militate for a new tolerance, openness and recognition of the "other": a levelling of hierarchies and biases, a breaking open of prejudices. On the other hand, ethics as one of the names for this encounter with the other, is symptomatic also of the failure of multi-culturalism to specify the precise terms of such an encounter, so that "ethics" and what it implies as a discourse – understood as the justification

for action, as the principles that govern the good life, but etymologically also linked to tradition, custom, habit – now forms a kind of recto and verso with multi-culturalism, of which ethics is both the complement and the missing supplement. Sometimes also called post-ethics, this place-holder ethics has been described as *the demands that present themselves as necessarily to be fulfilled, but which are neither forced upon one by morality, nor are they enforceable by law* (to paraphrase Emmanuel Levinas).[1] Such a definition – around law and force, individual and community, necessity and choice – usefully indicates the close interdependence that exists between ethics, politics and culture – communicating vessels in a certain sense, but also in mutual competition with each other. This latter point is most explicit in the so-called "ethical turn" (associated with the names of Levinas and Jacques Derrida), where ethics signals both an uncoupling from the traditional idea of politics, and a setting up of a critical distance from any form of culturalism, insisting on a distinction between Law and Justice, but also refusing to pose the question of rights in the terms of identity-politics, i.e. either as a matter of distribution, or of the collective will. Instead, ethics introduces the question of violence, usually excluded from multi-cultural discourse, as well as re-introducing terms such as "obligation" or "demand" generally absent from culturalism, with the former terms addressed to the individual in all his/her singularity, while culturalism addresses itself to some kind of group or community.[2] At the same time, Marxist "politics" did not disappear altogether, but in light of the double defeat that 1968 and 1989 represented for socialism, it had to redefine itself, not only in opposition to capitalism and social democracy, its traditional enemies, but also in opposition to its friends – those of the cultural turn, whose version of empowerment was seen as a concession to consumerism and individual narcissism. Yet, although united in a distrust regarding culturalism – in my version the primary successor of "progressive politics" – the new ethics and the new politics stand in rather complex and contradictory relations to each other. For instance, there is the "ethical turn," in the form of a return to the "onto-theological" (as in Levinas, Derrida or in Giorgio Agamben:

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 158

[2] For a more thorough discussion of these issues around the "ethical turn," see the writings of Simon Critchley, a prominent disciple of Levinas and Derrida, and especially his *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

re-reading Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt)[3] and there is a new "political turn," standing in dialogue with, but also in opposition to the "ethical turn," and variously – but by no means consensually! – represented by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek (around issues of "contingency, hegemony, universality"),[4] while in France a new politics is promoted by Jacques Ranciere and Alain Badiou (both students of Louis Althusser, although divided as to the master's legacy).[5]

Once More: Double Occupancy and Mutual Interference

So much for a brief summary of how I see the logic of our topic – and the cinema – inscribe itself in the contemporary. But there are also more personal reasons why I am rehearsing this, no doubt by now all too familiar narrative. One is that in an earlier article I put forward a case regarding contemporary cinema, which also critiques concepts such as multiculturalism or diversity politics, for not signalling either the power-dynamics in play, or the imbrications of inside and out, self and other that make inter-ethnic communication and joint community action often so intractably difficult.[6] Yet if the cinema can do anything well, beyond documenting the consequences of racism or discrimination or violence, it is to make an audience experience how much self and other, inclusion and exclusion, are intertwined, and dependent on each other. This is why I made a case for what I called "double occupancy" and "mutual interference," meaning thereby to displace the discourse of identity as well as the self-other debate, and instead to argue, even on historical and geopolitical grounds, that the peoples of Europe, however they define themselves – as "white," "Christian" or "Judeo-Christian" (not forgetting that less than a hundred years, it would have been exclusively in terms of nationality) – have always been mixed, and are always already occupied, Diasporic and multiple.

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[3] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer - Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Giorgio Agamben on Hannah Arendt's "We Refugees," http://roundtable.kein.org/node/399 (last accessed 28 April 2010)

[4] J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000)

[5] I am primarily referring to Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004) and Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001).

[6] Thomas Elsaesser, "Space, Place and Identity in European Cinema of the 1990s," *Third Text*, 20 (2006): 647–58. The essay was first given as a paper at the Tel Aviv conference in 2004.

Taken together, my terms "double occupancy" and "mutual interference" designate a particular semantic field: one where such "soft" commands as the need for "dialogue" and for "trusting the other" are understood not so much as "taking place," either now or in the future, but merely as "holding open a place," or designating the conditions of possibility, for a much "harder" mandate, one that doesn't come for free, but at a cost: namely to "interfere" and to be "implicated"; in other words, the active part of "in-between-ness," of "entanglement" and of "hybridity" (to name some of the terms of the post-colonial discourse), and the dangerous part of "embodiment" and "situatedness" (to name two terms also much in use).

Thus, in a second move, I argued that besides the fact that "mutual interference in the internal affairs of the other" is a political doctrine by which the European Union wants to arrive at a new definition of sovereignty among its member-states, there is a use for the term in the sphere of inter-subjectivity, where it becomes relevant for the affective as well as cognitive dimension of cinematic space. The staple themes of European cinema since the 1990s are narratives that deal with dysfunctional families, with the impossibility of the couple, or they feature the modern metropolis as the site of multi-ethnic desire, violence and power (often symbolized by drugs, music, intense sensations, and out of body-experiences). In these films – by Scottish, French, German, Italian, Belgian, Swedish, or Finnish directors – the idea of mutual interference is challenging in its transgressiveness, because it revolves around spaces to be redistributed, and power-relations to be re-negotiated. Aside from its tragic dimensions, mutual interference also makes room for comedy and ideally, even holds out hope for taking responsibility for the other, while not forsaking self-interest.[7]

One of my prime examples of a film enacting "Double Occupancy" was Fatih Akin's *Gegen die Wand* (*Head on*, 2004), the story of German-Turkish man in his forties who nearly kills himself by driving his car into

[7] When thinking about "mutual interference" I may have remembered my father's version of the judgment of Solomon, when it came to sharing a cake. He would say to me: "you cut and she chooses," making thereby sure that I cut as equitably as possible, lest I am left with the smallest piece. It was an exercise in double constraints, which in later life I came to appreciate as part of mathematical game theory, for instance, in what are called "non-cooperative games," such as the famous prisoner's dilemma, or the "Nash equilibrium," as it is applied in other situations of conflict resolution, such as in diplomacy, or in labour relations/trade union bargaining, where the objective is to create win-win situations, while not only recognizing and accepting the existence of basic antagonisms, but working with them, from the inside, as it were.

a wall, and who in hospital meets a defiantly suicidal young Turkish German woman, who proposes marriage to him, not in order to live as husband and wife, but for her to escape her traditional family and live a life of bars, sex and drugs. He reluctantly accepts, since, he, too, does not want to be tied down, but eventually falls in love with her, leading to his accidentally killing one of his wife's casual lovers, and having to live with the consequences, which includes losing the woman he loves, but in the process discovering a kind of self-presence which is also self-loss, but one that goes beyond identity, either ethnic or personal.

For me, the film seemed symptomatic, insofar as at first glance it plays with all the clichés of multicultural and hyphenated filmmaking – Turkish weddings in Hamburg, tanbur-and-reed flute music on the shores of the Bosporus, arch-conservative patriarchal fathers, and male double standards when it comes to wives and sex even among the younger generation. But in fact, what drives the film is not at all the ethnic in-between-ness, the cross-cultural fusion of musical styles or inter-generational family feuds. The first half of the film is especially impressive, insofar as the two central characters seem to compete with each other as to who can be more abject, self-destructive and non-cooperative [scene where Sibel cuts herself]. In these moments, cultural differences or the multicultural "dialogue" between Germans and Turks play hardly any role at all, and instead it is their sense of freedom that comes from having nothing more to lose (to misquote Janice Joplin). Both characters meet when they are, in some sense, already dead, having tried to commit suicide and found no reason to live, ejected as they feel themselves to be from their respective social symbolic – a more radical ejection/abjection than either caused or cured by any re-assertions of ethnicity. The two do not fall in love, but on the contrary, they enter into a contract to sustain their respective fantasy-frames, his idea of "personal independence" and her idea of the "good life" (their "ethics," in other words), thus letting the spectator see what ethics beyond identity might look like: a dangerous, violent, but also potentially liberating state, which unravels when one takes the fantasy for a reality and the mutually sustaining fiction collapses.

The uncanny ethical power of the film comes from not only not marking any difference between "Turkish" and "German" culture (the two blend seamlessly) – and thus foregoing all the dramatic (tragic as well as comic) potential that hyphenated identities usually connote in the cinema (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Monsoon Wedding, Bride and Prejudice*) – but from showing how this non-marking of cultural difference and the non-marking of the fantasy-frame (here the "contract" that they do not love each other) are mutually interdependent: once each becomes aware of