

## EXPLORING ETHICAL DIMENSION IN CINEMATIC NARRATIVES: A CINEPHILE'S JOURNEY

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### ■ ABSTRACT

Ethical issues emerge not only in philosophical treatises, but also within the realm of popular culture, dominated by audiovisual media. For many people, ethical dilemmas in films become a kind of teacher of ethics: for this reason, film as locus ethicus should be of interest in (bio)ethical reflection.

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Ethical reflection arises from encounters with reality, from the need to name good and evil, to work out the norms of human conduct. Aristotle stated *Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu*, but this sentence referred to a communicative situation radically different from ours. In the ancient world, people experienced the world in person, or through a relationship with another person. However, a shift was already occurring at that time: this new world of borrowed experience was first analyzed by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus*. Plato, the first critic of the media, observed that letters – written texts, detached from human beings, were beginning to exist independently (Ong 2002). The development of literature made it possible to share experiences in an unprecedented way, to remember them despite the passing of successive generations. Among these texts were also those that inspired ethical reflection.

The emergence of cinema at the end of the 19th century introduced a new medium. Cinema, the first audiovisual medium, gradually became a new space for reflection addressing ethical issues: responsibility for another human being (e.g. Chaplin's films – *The Kid*, 1921) or for social issues (*Intolerance*, dir. David Wark Griffith, 1916). Currently thousands of films explore a broad spectrum of (bio)ethical issues. While few people formally study ethics, billions reflect on ethical questions presented on the screens. I count myself among them—cinema has been one of my ethics teachers!

I propose a preliminary typology of ethical films:

- film as a portrayal of a subject to ethical evaluation,
- film as an ethical treatise,
- film as an ethical problem.

The first group could include films that express disagreement with what is happening in the world: wars, terrorism, the exploitation of weaker, defenceless people or children, AI or transhumanism. The list of ethically relevant phenomena is far more extensive (Dalla Torre 2010).

The second group comprises films whose creators present personal reflections on man and the world of his values. The Polish filmmakers Krzysztof Zanussi and Krzysztof Kieślowski, the American Paul Schrader or the Iranian Asghar Farhadi have explored such themes.

The third category, film as an ethical problem, represents the intersection of ethical and cinematic issues; these include, for example, films that employ transgression: they function as expressions of ethical or unethical behaviour, often provocatively, and consequently become subjects of ethical evaluation (Vogel 1974).

As a theologian with a background in media studies and film studies, I have paid particular attention to films in the first and second categories, resulting in publications where film has become the starting point for an analysis of ethical attitudes. In several publications I explored, for example, bioethical issues in

cinema, such as suicide, violence, and its impact on the viewer (Lis 2013a).

However, I would like to highlight the multidimensionality of film as a mode of narration using the example of two Polish filmmakers whose work is particularly relevant to this discussion. Kieślowski's widely known Decalogue (1988) series was created with the author's implicit ethical intention: the observation of characters losing a sense of life and basic values served the director as a basis for recalling the fundamental ethical foundations found in the biblical Decalogue. The film originated from the director's sense of ethical responsibility (Stok 1993, 143). The issues of marital fidelity, family relations, abortion (the story of the pregnant Dorota unfolds in the 2nd, 5th and 8th films, and is concluded with the statement „the life of the child is the most important thing”), murder or the death penalty, theft and betrayal were presented by Kieślowski from an ethical perspective, yet ethical values were derived from the precepts of the Decalogue and the Gospel (Lis 2013b).

The same is true of Krzysztof Zanussi's films: his films explore the ethical dilemmas faced

by their protagonists. Many connoisseurs regard Zanussi as a cinema ethicist who describes the human attitude towards problems and dilemmas, but a careful analysis reveals deeper motives for the behavior of the film protagonists and their ethical choices: a hidden theological background present in films (The Constant Factor, 1980) that are not overtly religious in nature (Lis 2015).

Theologians as early as in the 16th century began to use the concept of locus theologicus, which opens the way to a theological analysis not only of the Scriptures and explicitly religious texts, but also, for example, of works of art, fiction and now films. Perhaps an analogous term, locus ethicus, could be used to describe films that undertake or inspire ethical reflection? Can film function as a teacher, raising ethical questions for its audience? I argue that it can. Thus cinema could become an educational tool, a source of examples and material to discussion, even when it tries to provoke or deconstruct these values: the Hungarian film *A torinói ló* (2011, dir. Tarr Béla) reverses the biblical narrative of creation of the world and moves towards silence and darkness.

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