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Ethics and film: from identification to moral education in film art

Introduction

Those who have visited the Church Sv. Marija na škrlinah (St. Mary on the Rocks) near Beram in central Istria, surely remember well-preserved frescoes that are put to credit of the workshop of Vincent of Kastav, Master who lived in the second half of the 15th century. Among usual motifs from the life of Christ, there is also »The Slaughter of Innocent Children« that is overseen by the figure of Herod, whose eyes were subsequently filled with binding mix. Wall paintings served as *Biblia pauperum* for the illiterate people of late Middle Ages, so those people, who obviously experienced the frescos rather lively, revenged on Herod by poking his eyes out.

And then, those who have seen the film *Shakespeare in Love* (USA; 1998; directed by John Madden),¹ remember well depicted atmosphere of the Elizabethan Theater in the early 17th century in London, in which the audience »participates« in all developments happening on scene, sighs with the actors and cries. In our cinemas such atmosphere could have been experienced immediately after the World War II, when eager moviegoers regularly warned the actors on screen of »dangers« that threat them. As late as in 1960s it was possible find in public libraries copies of nov-

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¹ Basic references for most films mentioned in this article can be found in Variety Portable Movie Guide – Updated Edition (New York: Berkley Boulevard Books, 2000) and S. J. Schneider, ed., 1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die (London: Cassell, 2007).

els such as *Love Story* by Erich Segal on whose back one could find list of names of those readers who cried because moved by the story and added their names.

Frescoes, theater, book – media that had been, each in its time, popular (plebeians of the 16th century London would give their last penny for plays) and consequently influential, obviously had the power to induce identification with their content.² Nowadays, it would be difficult to find anyone who would be susceptible to the medieval manner of interaction with the frescoes, as well as those who would admit to deep sympathies with the story of a play or a book. However, whereas detachment from identification has become possible when it comes to old media, identification has today become a characteristic feature of a newer medium, film. (Shall identification always remain related to film, it is difficult to say: even though it is possible that human neurobiology has found in film an optimum medium to communicate messages, it is not impossible to imagine holographic or other types of media which shall, in future, raise the threshold of identification.) The main thesis of this paper is that film, considering its enormous identification potential, should pay more attention to it, and even use it on purpose for the development of positive moral viewpoints and practices,³ and at the same time avoid the danger of conveying negative moral messages.

From identification to empathy

Apart from media animation (which depends, as already stated, on individual's education and time in history), identification includes another component – empathy (from Gk. *en* = in + *pathos* = pain, suffering, passion; *empathes* = passionate). This »passionness«⁴ is really a synonym for understanding and assuming another person's emotional state, i.e., when related to the media perception, feeling into the story (G. *Einfühlung*), identifying with its characters or concept. When speaking about

² Identification (lat. *idem* = the same) is sometimes colloquially used in the meaning of sympathy, compassion, empathy, which is often neither etimologically, terminologically nor historically correct

³ Compare similar reflections on the task of the film in: T. Vuković, »Film making is an ethical act: interview with a film director Branko Ištvančić« *Glas Koncila* 14, No. 1763 (2008): 1-3. Generally on the application of morality in relation to a work of art (plot moralism, presentation moralism, moral responsibility for the consequences of one's work, creational-expressional morality and professional morality) see in: H. Turković, *Swremeni film: djela i stvaratelji, trendovi i tradicije* (Zagreb: Znanje, 1999); R. Eldridge, »Art and morality,« in: Introduction to the Philosophy of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); N. Carroll, »Art, Narrative, and moral understanding« i »Moderate moralism«, in: *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); M. Kieran, »Art and morality,« in: The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics, edited by J. Levinson (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) et al.

⁴ Bratoljub Klaić, surprisingly, mentions only »impatience, wish, desire« and »intolerance, unbearableness, strains; ». B. Klaić, *Rječnik stranih riječi* (Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, 1986).

dimensions of empathy, Gallo⁵ differs cognitive from emotional dimension, whereby the first dimension would use rational arguments to bring another person's feeling closer to one's own.

As a term, empathy entered the English language in the early 20th century, owing to the psychologist Edward Titchener (1867-1927), whereas in German philosophical circles it had been present earlier than that, particularly among aestheticists. For example, Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) described empathy as a resonance of our perception and external objects (inner imitation): the perception of beautiful is, according to Lipps, caused by positive, while the perception of ugly is caused by negative empathy.

Apart from the aesthetics, empathy has been particularly studied within the field of social psychology, since it is believed that it facilitates development of pro-social attitudes and behaviors. And indeed, numerous studies of the empathy phenomenon conducted thus far have shown that mother's non-authoritative behavior correlates positively with child's development of empathy⁶, whereas threats and corporal punishment of children,⁷ as well as neglect or exposure to family violence,⁸ have a negative effect on the development of empathic potential. When it comes to educational methods whose objective is to increase empathic abilities, good results have been achieved by using tasks aimed at drawing children's attention to similarities between themselves and other persons, especially in cases where children (or adults) were asked to take the role of another – real or fictitious – person, imagine their feelings or act according to them.⁹ This procedure, known in Anglo-Saxon literature as *role-taking* or *role-playing*, is nothing but the identification with the characters in a story. In accordance with that are study findings that empathic potential can be increased by practicing perceiving other people's viewpoints and exposure to strong emotional stimuli (other person's ill-fortune, loss, uneasiness).¹⁰

⁵ D. Gallo, »Educating for empathy, reason, and imagination,« *Journal of Creative Behavior* 23, No. 2 (1989): 98-115.

⁶ N. Eisenberg and P. Mussen, »Empathy and moral development in adolescence,« *Developmental Psychology* 14, No. 2 (1978): 185-6.

⁷ P. Clarke, »What kind of discipline is most likely to lead to empathic behaviour in classrooms?« *History and Social Science Teacher* 19, No. 4 (1984): 240-1.

⁸ F. S. Hinchey and J. R. Gavelek, »Empathic responding in children of battered mothers,« *Child Abuse and Neglect* 6, No. 4 (1982): 395-401.

⁹ H. Black and S. Phillips, »An intervention program for the development of empathy in student teachers,« *Journal of Psychology* 112 (1982): 159-68.

¹⁰ M. A. Barnett, J. A. Howard, E. M. Melton and G. A. Dino, »Effect of inducing sadness about self or other on helping behavior in high- and low-empathic children,« *Child Development* 53, No. 2 (1982): 920-3.

Modern psychology finds it useful to differ reactional emotions according to whether they are oriented towards self or another.¹¹ *Emotional contagion* in children or mass would, therefore, be simply assuming the emotional state of one's environment, without understanding the cause. On the other hand, emotional empathy means true identification with other person's emotions, which does not necessarily mean that there are reasons for such emotions. Sympathy is compassion to somebody's negative emotion, and if another person's ill-fortune does not induce other reactions besides a dismal feeling (self-oriented), it is defined as a *personal distress*.¹²

Recently, neurophysiologic base for empathy has been discovered, primarily the discovery of so called *mirror neurons*.¹³ It has been shown that groups of nerve cells in premotor frontal cortex in monkeys react to observing motion in a way that they cognitively »repeat« the same motion. It was subsequently confirmed that similar pattern is also valid for recognition (and »repetition«) of others' emotions based on facial expressions. (It sounds intriguing that in the vicinity of the premotor cortex, in orbitofrontal cortex, a functional area related to internalizing moral views has been located: if this area is damaged, disorders such as *corpolalia*, inability to inhibit socially unacceptable behavior, enhanced impulsiveness, etc. appear.)

From empathy to morality

If we suppose that empathy, as a state of emotional reaching out to another person, encourages development of co-operation, altruism, non-provoking and/or easing the suffering of others, protection of others, generosity, tolerance for the different, then it is clear why McCollough has compared empathy with »moral imagination« that should be promoted through education and turned into a citizens' policy.¹⁴ Through a series of experiments, Batson proved that empathy encourages helping others in a manner motivated not by egoism but altruism.¹⁵ Hoffman sees in empa-

¹¹ K. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

¹² Compare also cognitive levels of empathy, which correspond to the stages of cognitive development (global empathy, egocentric empathy, empathy for the feelings of others, empathy for somebody's living conditions) Z. Raboteg-Šarić, »The role of empathy and moral reasoning in adolescents' prosocial behaviour,« *Društvena istraživanja* 6 (1997): 493-512; Cf. also Z. Raboteg-Šarić, »Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice,« *Contemporary Sociology* 30 (2001): 487-8.

¹³ G. Rizzolatti, L. Craighero and L. Fadiga, »The mirror system in humans,« in: *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language*, ed. A. Stamenov and V. Gallese (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2002), pp. 37-59.

¹⁴ T. E. McCollough, *Truth and Ethics in School System* (Washington, DC: Council for Educational Development and Research, 1992).

¹⁵ C. D. Batson, »Self-other merging and the empathy-altruism hypothesis: reply to Neuberg et al.,« *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73 (1997): 517-22.

thy a biological predisposition to altruistic behavior¹⁶ but, along with empathy, he also emphasizes the knowledge of abstract moral principles as a source of moral practice.¹⁷

If, as it seems, empathy is related to the development of »healthy« (acceptable) moral views and practices, the first question that arises is how to avoid the imposing of moral principles and encourage the development of empathy in a less imposing, even invisible manner? Research has shown that children internalize values better when teachers are models for such values than when they are just encouraged to behave in a particular manner.¹⁸ Gadamer¹⁹ correctly cautions that while reading Shakespeare or Plato, we are not primarily interested in what they have said, but what has been said by their texts. Hans Christian Andersen wrote stories whose obvious purpose is to shape public views, but his greatest success in creating moral views was achieved through a story which was most likely not »educational on purpose« at all.²⁰ It is said for *Croatian Tales of Long Ago* by Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić and *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi that they are the best examples of works in which »didacticism has not stifled the work of art.«²¹ In order to achieve better effect in forming desired moral views, those views must, therefore, not be **imposed** but indirectly **developed** through empathy. In order to do so, because of its growing identification potential and better acceptance (popularity of consummation) in this day and age, the most acceptable »vehicle« for conveying the story is a film medium.²²

A lot has been written on specific qualities of film as a medium of conveying the message. Burch,²³ for instance, emphasizes the »diegetic force« of the film, i.e. its ability to make a point through »impressive scenes«,²⁴ music, sound, acting and oth-

¹⁶ M. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ On the idea of explanation of morality as an evolutionary and biological category see in: M. Ruse, »Evolucijska etika: čemu nas prošlost može naučiti?«, in: *Evolucija društvenosti*, ed. J. Hrgović and D. Polšek (Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk, 2004), pp. 433-51.

¹⁸ A. Kohn, »Caring kids: the role of the schools,« *Phi Delta Kappan* 72, No. 7 (1991): 496-506. See also: S. Težak, *Metodika nastave filma* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2002), 60.

¹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989).

²⁰ Cf. A. Muzur, »Bajke kao (re)generatori morala: primjer *Djevojčice sa žigicama* H. Ch. Andersena,« in: *Ars speculandi: lektira kao izgovor za razmišljanje* (Rijeka: Izdavački centar Rijeka, 2004), pp. 57-85.

²¹ D. Težak and M. Čudina-Obradović, *Priče o dobru, priče o zlu: priručnik za razvijanje moralnog prosuđivanja u djece* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2005), 11.

²² On »cold voyeurism« of the new generation of directors and the trend of making films »detached from people«, »without the emotional statement« see: V. Simičević, »Films nowadays have no emotional statement« (interview with Rajko Grlić), *Novi list – Mediteran*, 27 July 2008.

²³ N. Burch, *Life to Those Shadows* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

²⁴ N. Gilić, *Uvod u teoriju filmske priče* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 2007), 114-5.

er kinds of qualities which may be analyzed from different points of view.²⁵ However, there is the question of the manner in which to structure a (film) story in order for it to encourage empathy and, finally, encourage the development of acceptable moral views.

Basing it on empirical psychological rules, Propp expresses, after fairytales analysis, his favor for using universal symbols and elements that can be transposed from one fairytale into another without modifications.²⁶ Moreover, according to him, analysis of fairytales has shown the importance of action (function) with few existing patterns, and not of protagonists and details (which may be very numerous within the framework of the same functional pattern).²⁷ The order of functions is always the same. Taking as example folk magic stories, Propp distinguishes the initial situation (introducing characters, families, heroes); leaving home; imposing ban on the hero; hero's resistance to the ban; etc.²⁸ Lévi-Strauss suggests that myth is the predecessor of fairytale content and that the repetition of elements (order) is necessary in order to show and emphasize the structure of the myth.²⁹

All this is, without a doubt, significant for studying structure,³⁰ but it is obviously not what we mean by the development of identification (emphatic) potential of the story in general, and where content's role is of primary importance.

From morality to ethical education through film

Even though documentaries and experimental films may provoke empathy as well,³¹ in general the best effect is achieved through feature films,³² not depending on type (short-film, feature-length, TV-series) or genre (western, horror, etc.).³³ We shall mention here several arbitrary examples in order to support the thesis on empathy induced by films and consequences to the moral views (and practice).

²⁵ On points of view and other elements of film analysis and analysis of a film plot, see in: F. Casetti and F. Di Chio, *Analisi del film*, 15th edition. (Milano: Bompiani, 2007), 228-33.

²⁶ V. J. Propp, *Morfologia della fiaba*, translated and edited by G. L. Bravo (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1966), 12.

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁹ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Antropologia strutturale*, translated by Paolo Caruso (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1992), 229 i 257.

³⁰ On the structure of the film story (space, length, etc.) see: Gilić, *Uvod u teoriju filmske priče*, 41-113.

³¹ On ethical aspects of the documentaries, see: K. Bakker, »Dobro, loše i dokumentarac,« translated by Diana Nenadić, *Zarez* 226 (2008): 5-6.

³² The intriguing question is which film elements, apart from the plot, can induce empathy. Compare: C. Plantiga, »Scene empatije i ljudsko lice na filmu,« translated by Dunja Krpanec, in: *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, edited by Carl Plantiga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 24-37.

³³ More details on genres in: N. Gilić, *Filmske vrste i rodovi* (Zagreb: AGM, 2007).

Dances with Wolves (USA/Great Britain; 1990; directed by Kevin Costner)

Story about a Union Army Officer who, with manners of knightly honor and honesty, discovers a Frontier and identifies with the Indians. Despite strong contrast in depicting good and evil and as a result of a faithful presentation (nature, Indian speech, etc.) and numerous exceptionally well defined supporting roles, this film provokes deep empathy.

Lilya 4-ever (Sweden; 2002; directed by Lukas Moodysson)

The main objection to this film is its great pretentiousness and »unnecessary burdening with the rhetoric of a bad didactic film«.³⁴ The film tells a story of a Russian teenager who, abandoned by everyone, becomes a prostitute and a victim of trafficking in human beings and the film is characterized by a naturalistic depiction of rape and a rapist, which provokes primarily anxiety in viewers.

Schindler's List (USA; 1993; directed by Steven Spielberg)

Based on a true story, the film depicts a transformation of a German industrialist from a callous businessman into a savior of the Jews from Nazi persecution. Intriguing, but not necessarily correct, is Žižek's psychoanalytical idea that »the secret motif that permeates all Spielberg's key films is re-discovery of a father, his authority« and that throughout the film Schindler re-discovers his fatherly duty towards the Jews and transforms into a »caring and responsible father«.³⁵ On the other hand, Rosenbaum³⁶ raises an objection to Spielberg stating that he had ignored several curiosities of true texture, aware, however, that, had it been differently, the film would have »lost some of its moral directness even if it gained moral complexity.« Nevertheless, superb acting, music and link to the past ensure a great level of empathy.

Titanic (USA; 1997; directed by James Cameron)

This film also combines historical basis of the tragic sinking of the »unsinkable« ship with a quality romantic union of lovers unequal in status as well as with the empathy for lower class passengers, which has successfully arose empathy potential. (There are also different views;

³⁴ D. Rubeša, »Izgubljeni anđeli«, *Vijenac* 265 (2004): 1.

³⁵ S. Žižek, *Pervrtitov vodič kroz film*, translated by S. Horvat et.al. (Zagreb: Antibarbarus/HDP, 2008), 11

³⁶ J. Ros(enbaum), »Schindler's List,« in: Schneider, ed., *1001 Movies You Must See*, 831.

Žižek, for instance, accuses Cameron for »superficial Hollywood Marxism« and over-sympathizing with lower classes along with overemphasizing the egoism of the rich.³⁷ And Berry,³⁸ places *Titanic* somewhere »half-way between *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Love Boat*.«

La vita è bella/Life is Beautiful (Italy; 1997; directed by Roberto Benigni)

According to Žižek, this film can be criticized for »supporting the ethical view of someone's illusion«, such as, for instance, film *Good bye, Lenin!* (Germany; 2003; directed by Ulrich Becker).³⁹ However, the real (empathic) value of this film lies in its unusual comic aspect (father presents his son their captivity in a concentration camp as a play) of the tragic and true underlying thread (holocaust).

Independence Day (USA; 1996; directed by Roland Emmerich)

Alien invasion on Earth is resisted by Americans and with their President as a leader, they win. This is an example of how uncritical, unlikable exaltation and glorification of patriotic pathos, emphasis of (moral) superiority, mediocre acting, despite good special effect, can leave the emphatic potential unfulfilled.

Rane/The Wounds (Serbia; 1998; directed by Srđan Dragojević) and *Bure barutal Cabaret Balcan* (Serbia; 1998; directed by Goran Paskaljević)

Belgrade underground with naturalistic depiction of violence, murders, drug use. It provokes great frustration and no hope of escape or betterment.

Fine mrtve djevojke/Fine Dead Girls (Croatia; 2002.; directed by Dalibor Matanić)

Story of a lesbian couple from Zagreb suburbs. Everything is primitive, dark, unfriendly and culminates with a fight and a rape. Strong anxiety without any space for empathy.⁴⁰

³⁷ Žižek, *Pervertitov vodič kroz film*, 13.

³⁸ J. B(erry), »Titanic«, in: Schneider, ed., *1001 Movies You Must See*, 880.

³⁹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁰ Speaking of his most recent film, *Kino Lika*, Matanić states that he is oriented towards »honesty« and »authenticity«, nearing his feature film to a documentary. V. Simičević, »Life is always stranger than fiction« (interview with Dalibor Matanić), *Novi list*, 31 August 2008.

Requiem for a Dream (USA; 2000; directed by Darren Aronofsky)

Superb acting leads viewers through suffering of several drug addicts, their crises, mental states and different destinies. This drama, because of its great plasticity, results in a horror anxiety rather than empathy.

Gegen die Wand/Head-On (Germany; 2004; directed by Fatih Akin)

Story of a Turk who is an alcoholic and alienates himself, becomes close to, marries and alienates from a woman abused by her family. »Social engagement« would be more appropriate for a documentary, story is void of perspective and resolution.

Conclusion

Given examples may be used to formulate several recommendations for the »film with moral and educational ambitions«:

Zero, moral views should not be imposed, use of empathy is a much better method of internalizing acceptable views and practices.

First, depicting suffering too plastically (violence,⁴¹ especially sexual violence, as a combination of force, humiliation, physical and mental pain), should be avoided and one should keep perhaps only allusions because in the contrary, the result is not empathy but the self-oriented anxiety.⁴²

Second, to encourage empathy does not necessarily mean to encourage socially engaged behavior, but only to contribute to maturing of moral views. That's why extreme depiction of a social situation does not have the desired effect, even if it gets close to the reality.

Third, happy ending may suppress empathy, but, should the story end happily after a great tension, the audience does not retain the feelings of bitterness, powerlessness and frustration so in these cases a happy ending is desirable and, as for encouraging empathy, useful.⁴³

⁴¹ There are different views on consequences of TV violence. The prevailing opinion, corroborated by experiments, is that fans of such scenes are more likely to commit such acts in everyday life, but there are also those who claim that watching violence on screen results in catharsis and helps fighting the violence in real life. Compare: Težak, *Metodika nastave filma*, 17.

⁴² Cf. Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy*, 24.

⁴³ Muzur, »Bajke kao (re)generatori morala,« 83.

Fourth, *chiaro-scuro* effect is not essential: creating of »positive« and »negative« characters can be complex, and still evoke a high level of empathy. Perfection and invincibility may even be unlikable and seriously diminish the feeling of empathy.⁴⁴

Fifth, for the purpose of greater identification effect it is useful to eliminate fantastic elements from the story: the closer the story is to reality (and/or truthfulness), the greater the level of identification.

Finally, it should be stated that, just as with watching a film, during the process of development of moral/ethical views, the element of set and setting is prominent, which can largely modify some of the listed »recommendations«. Unless we are followers of art for art's sake, there is a reasonable aspiration to »use« the specific film medium for a task more permanent than just a short-term shock or fun.

Translation/prijevod: Snježana Volarić

⁴⁴ On detachment of children from a film hero, see: Težak, *Metodika nastave filma*, 49.