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# Subject Formation and Morality in Film

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## Abstract

In this paper, I approach the concept of subject formation through the lens of the movie screen. The way in which we interact with the social imaginary created by the cinema is fascinating in that it not only presents us as being an active participant—we experience ourselves in their shoes, our eyes mimic their actions, and we feel their feelings—but also establishes us as agents that determine the legitimacy of the reality that we're being presented. In this sense, we are not only posited as gatekeepers of the political, ethical, and moral actions of the characters produced, but the reality constructed correlates in some manner (despite how abstract) to our everyday lives. I aim to argue that film creates a symbolic exchange between the spectator and the movie, and that relationship implicates us as moral agents. As a form of pedagogy, film has the ability to inform the self in the context of the world around us by creating impetus to engage or avoid certain actions. In this paper, we will take into account the film *M* as exemplary of this theory of subject formation, and attempt to articulate whether or not a project that contextualizes the self in terms of cinema creates a more active engagement with the world around us. Filtering our discussion through the concepts of the self as derived from David Hume, Jacques Derrida, as well as others, we will be able to discuss how the subject is created in the first place, and the way in which the cinema is able to augment, implicate, and inform those varying practices and ideas that constitute us as social beings. By the end of this paper, I wish to convey the multiplicity of meaning that can be found within film, and the various ways in which those can be understood as vehicles for moralistic intent.

Much of moral philosophy is concerned with two main questions: how we are able to ascertain what is moral, and by extension, how we can become more moral subjects. This paper will be concerned with the later. My project will be to prove that films have a unique status as a vehicle for ethics in people, in that we are able to become more ethical individuals by reading and interpreting movies in the correct manner. There is a social imaginary that is manufactured on the silver screen, and we are able to inject our own subjectivity into those characters—that roleplaying itself provides us a novel way

of understanding the world and the phenomena around us, and by extension that social imaginary impacts us as subjects.

Before we are able to endeavor to prove that film can make us more moral subjects, we must first isolate what makes a subject in the first place. For Alasdair MacIntyre, it is impossible to separate the subject from the very narratives that we establish in the first place. As Wax explains, “Humanity is a storytelling animal; to identify and understand what someone else is doing, we must place a particular episode into the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individuals concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer. Because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives we live out, the narrative form is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.” (Wax, p. 347) As human beings, our lives and all of the ethical considerations and calculations that we make play out in the same exact way as an actor would recite their lines on stage. In this context, it makes sense that we would understand the subject as an actor, one that is constantly taking the phenomena around them, and using that to construct a narrative that only makes sense given context.

Morality then, is an exercise in attempting to interpret and extract the meaning of every person’s actions as part of a broader social narrative, a narrative that would coherently fall into the story that we wish to tell about an ethical human subject. This narrational discussion becomes clearer when we filter it through Hume’s discussion of perception and the self, in which Hume speaks of the way in which impressions are able to create ideas in our minds. “It can’t begin with ideas, because every idea comes after a corresponding impression; so it must start with impressions— there must be some impressions that turn up in the soul without having been heralded by any preceding perception.” (Hume, p. 147) Impressions are able to dictate and drive the way in which our very self is constituted, and are co-constitutive of our desires and obligations, and control the actions we take in the first place. For Hume, “the causes of these impressions of sensation are natural objects and events out there in the world,” and as such the events and phenomena that occur around us have the potential to become impressions that have a definitive impact on the way in which we conceive of morality and shape our understandings of abstract concepts like ethics. (Hume, p. 147) If we start to think of the self as something that is in part created by the way in which we interpret and apply the world around us, then it becomes less counter-intuitive that we could derive some sort of moral worth from things like film in the first place. There appears to be no real difference at all between the impression that we get from burning our hand on a hot stove, and the impression that a fantastic movie might leave upon us—both are ways in which the body is able to communicate to the mind that there is something substantive and formative to be processed and interpolated. If we come to learn not to place our hands on the stove while it is hot from our life experiences, it is that out of the ordinary that we might learn to abhor violence when we are presented with grotesque depictions of ultra-violence in something like *A Clockwork Orange*

(1973)? If we come to think of impressions as something that is able to in some way produce a part of the amalgamation of drives, desires, and interactions that compose the self, then there doesn't appear to be a delineation from our lived experiences (the hot stove), and the experiences we have vicariously through the simulation that appears on the silver screen.

This picture of the self as something that just processes the world around us is insufficient for us to understand the moral project that we are striving to prove, however. Even if film is one of the things that we use to form the ever-changing narrative of the self, how do we know that film actually has an impact on the way we write that narrative in the first place? To answer this question, we have to be able to prove that there is some sort of substantive merit that occurs within film that we would want to strive to create ourselves in its image, or we must prove that even the smallest of things are important to our subject formation. It is my belief that both of the above statements are true.

Film, according to David Carr, has the potential to be a unique site for transformative moral relationships, much in the same way that the classics were an important cornerstone in the development of ethics. (Carr, p. 3) In a very similar way to Homer or Shakespeare, in a society where the everyday individual is fixated on the movie screen, there is a certain unique manner in which those individuals can leave the theater, or their living room, and become more ethical people in consequence. How does that occur? The individual starts to force himself into the narrative that they are viewing on the screen, and that action of roleplaying, despite its best attempts, seems to be unable to discriminate between both the narrative on the screen and the narrative that occurs within the self. As we stand up from our seats in the movie theater, and begin to ruminate on the phenomena that were just projected for us, we are simultaneously self-reflexively carrying that film with us, however unintentional it might be.

There is no functional difference in the context of our impressions from watching the gritty, realistic depictions of Normandy in World War II that we see in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and the actual confrontation that one might have viewing a war-torn piece of territory in the Middle East, if the end goal is to come to the impression that "war is hell." And when these impressions come to form our ethical considerations and obligations, there is still no real distinction between the two scenarios above if we come to the conclusion that we will take a moral stance against war. Hume explains "Bodily pains and pleasures are the source of many passions, both 'immediately' when they are felt by the mind and 'through the mediation of ideas' when they are considered by it; but they themselves arise originally in the soul (or in the body, call it what you will) without any preceding thought or perception." (Hume, p. 147) If one walks into a showing of *Schindler's List* (1993), and leaves the theater with their stomach in knots, and a crushing sense of grief and sadness at the sheer evil displayed on the screen, those

feelings are originally filtered through the mind, and then later mediated through our ideas proper, based upon how our soul comes to interpret those phenomena. The mental state that is created, and the feelings that you begin to feel as you walk out of the cinema, are ways in which your faculties are interpreting what you viewed, and that drives your passions to take a definitive stance against the mechanized slaughter of an entire population of people. That in and of itself, is a definitive proof that there is a significance that comes with watching a film, and that there is an intrinsic merit to the film itself, in that it is able to drive you to begin to formulate moral categories and delineate what is and isn't ethical.

It is perhaps the case that every single thing we encounter in this world has meaning, and that would necessarily also mean that film has an inherent meaning associated with it as well. For hundreds of years, the context of the subject has been one that is imprinted with culture, context, and history, but that might in fact be too limiting to our understanding of the self. Jacques Derrida attempts to push beyond these limits and articulate a new form of understanding the subject, as Peters argues, through the "concept of *différance*." (Peters, p. 319) This *différance* can be understood as the relationship that exists between the self and the Other, or more specifically, what constitutes us as ethical actors, and every other thing that we come to interact with that isn't explicitly ourselves. While this appears to be very high theory, it is rather easy to understand in the context of explanation of meaning in film. If the way in which we come to understand the self is through our encounters with things that are *not us*, and the manner in which we construct the self is via a self-referential narrative, then having confrontations and interactions with the narratives projected on the silver screen seems to very much inform the processes that create us as moral subjects. This form of meaning-making can occur with any worldly phenomena that we have brushes with in our everyday lives, as every object, being, and place that we come to engage with is uniquely different from us as subjects. Every person we meet has a unique meaning and formative impact upon our minds, so it shouldn't be considered a stretch that the roleplaying that occurs when we watch a film is a unique experience with *différance* that ascribes a certain meaning onto our very self. In this sense, there not only is an inherent meaning to everything we interact with in our lives, but film also allows us a unique avenue for encounters with *différance* that creates us as moral subjects.

Now that we have established that there is a method of understanding film that allows it to be a vehicle for ethics and subject formation, we must now prove that films actually are these sites for moral development in the first place. The example that we will use is the Fritz Lang classic *M* (1931), in which Peter Lorre infamously plays a child murderer named Beckert in city of Berlin. As outrage over the murdering of the children begins to grow, the police begin to crackdown on the criminal underground of the city, which in response causes the crime bosses (*Der Schränker*—The Safecracker in German) to call a meeting where they decide to track down the murderer to alleviate

the pressure being placed on them by the authorities. After speaking to a blind vendor who is able to identify the murderer from a previous purchase of a balloon for one of the victims, they are able to mark Lorre's character with a chalk M (for Mörder—murderer in German) and track him to a building where Beckert is hiding out. Der Schränker is called to the building, where they break in, torture a watchman, and search the building in its entirety until they are able to apprehend the child murderer, shortly before the police arrive.

Der Schränker then takes Beckert to an abandoned Schnapps factory, where they put him on “trial” in front of a kangaroo court, where he is told that “justice” will be served in a way that won't allow him impunity through claiming insanity in the German courts. After Lorre makes a plea to be taken before a proper court and jury (which is laughed off by the crowd), he proclaims that he is unable to control his desires to kill, and that they creep up on him like a shadow, and he can't ever remember what happens after the fact. The jury states that this proves that he is incapable of controlling himself, and as such must be made harmless through his execution. It is at this point that the lawyer provided to Beckert stands up and makes a defense on the grounds that no one should be terminated for a thing they can't be held responsible for, in this case the urges that creep up upon Lorre's character. He insists that he should be taken before the law, and given to a doctor, not an executioner, because he is a very mentally ill individual. The jury states that they will not allow him to get free or commit more murders. The lawyer points out that the head of the jury is wanted for three homicides, and no one has the right to take a life, especially not a group of outlaws. The crowd demands Beckert be eliminated, and rush to kill him. At that point, the police walk in, and take Beckert into custody. There is a jump cut to a row of German judges who are ruling on the Beckert case, and one of the parents of the children who were murdered says “this won't bring our children back to life. People should take better care of their children. All of you.” So what do we make of this tale of child murder and mob rule? I would argue that this is paradigmatic of the way in which we can practically apply the theory we've espoused about films being vehicles of morality. *M* is very clearly a cautionary tale about justice, rule of law, and care for the youth all wrapped up into a rather intriguing drama. Given the shots of the crowd, the maneuvering of the lens of the camera, it really does feel as though we are placed on the jury to decide this man's fate. And as such, it creates an imaginary reality that our own subjectivity is filtered through, and allows us to be arbiters of what we feel is right. We act as judge, jury and executioner all wrapped up through the privileged perspective offered to us by viewing the movie, all without ever having to have those experiences in our lives. But that simulated reality is *real enough* to our hearts and minds, and the feelings that we take from these films creates impressions that augment the very fabric of how our mind constitutes reality, epistemology, and morality. We are able to extract from this film a code of conduct and framework for interaction that allows us to understand a myriad of

issues—in the context of *M* it enables us to value rule of law, treatment of mentally ill individuals, and safety of children.

There is an important performance that is occurring when one watches a film, as we are also mentally performing the actions that the actor or actress performs in front of us. This dual performance, between the audience and the actor, is crucial to explaining how the spectator is able to be transformed into a more moral subject after a movie viewing. It does not matter which part of the film we identify with, or which character our subjectivity attaches to or associates with, because every single character allows us to make some sort of moral judgment upon them, and that allows us to sub-consciously formulate ourselves in response to that. The people of Germany were able to excavate multiple informative ethical stances that were supplied to them by Lang's masterpiece, and it created within an entire generation of audience members more moral political subjects of civil society.

So what are we to make of movies that appear to be devoid of any moralistic intent, or a perceived “feel good” ending at its conclusion? Would those films not contradict the very premise of movies shaping our moral direction, if not making us immoral subjects altogether? Take for example the movie *The Godfather*, in which there is no coherent classical hero, but rather a bunch of characters that are embroiled in a world of corruption, brutality, and illegality that forces them to become immoral subjects as a result of their experiences, and necessity. This very clearly is not the rosy world that we might want to point to as an example of films as a vehicle for moral value, but yet there is still a rather coherent ethical discussion going on in the mire of its conflicts. At the film's conclusion, we are able to see that criminality is something that should not be encouraged or incentivized, and that people are always able to be corrupted given enough incentive to do so. This seems to fall very much in-line with the moral lesson we imparted from *M*, where we were told to always be wary of the breakdown of the rule of law, as it allows for violence to run rampant. It seems a bit ironic, but in a film that is perhaps defined by its immoral nature and lack of any semblance of a morally good hero, we are still able to extract a substantive moral lesson from that movie, and the manner in which we role-play as those individuals allows us to engage in their ethically bankrupt activities, and then condemn them when we walk away from the theater. Even in a film that on surface appears to be completely devoid of any moral implication—perhaps any of the *Saw* franchise movies—we can still find something of value within them. In the context of the *Saw* movies, which are slasher exploit films that push the term “torture porn” to a whole new level, we are still given a critique of the way in which our society consumes ultra-violence in a manner that is unhealthy and damaging to us as people. There is always something of import and weight that can be gleaned from a film, it is just a matter of us reading and interpreting the film correctly. One could watch the film *M* and see it as a glorification of murdering children, but that would be an incorrect and false interpretation of that film's meaning. In the same way,

it is possible to read false meaning into a film, as we might have done for the *Saw* movies, but that does not make that meaning irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, it indicates that there is a unique way in which we must view films to be able to excavate their ethical intent, which is something that can be glossed over or missed if viewed improperly.

The self is constructed through interpreting all the various phenomena around us, and a lack of those phenomena is also an important encounter to how we come to shape ourselves. A confrontation with a person who is a criminal is just as important as a pleasant conversation with a priest, and both have the exact same importance to how we construct ourselves. Thus, a film that is devoid of everything listed above could still be important, because if nothing else it could be indicative of a desire for an ethical meaning when one watches a film. Clearly not all film is created equally, and it would be laughable to assume that the *Saw* movies, *M*, and *The Birth of a Nation* (1912), and *Star Wars* (1973) are all at an equal level of moralistic and ethical intent. But there are pieces of ethical import that can be gleaned from all of these films in one way or another—it is just a question of how we come to interpret and understand these films in the first place.

We are to understand the self as a fiction that is going through a constant process of editing, revision, and additions, and every single interaction we have in our lives plays a part with how we come to write that narrative in the first place, either implicitly or explicitly. In the context of watching films, this interaction is one that is very explicit, allowing us to experience something that is radically different from our everyday lives, in a way that allows us to come away with impressions of what we viewed and experienced that come to formatively describe our ethical and moral relations in the world, and to the world around us. I think this theory is made evident via the analysis of the film *M*, but is also true of film in general, as it creates the conditions for a transformative moral relationship through our spectatorship. If one actively watches a movie, and attempts to excavate its meaning, one will surely find something that is worth taking away from the cinema itself, and it thus becomes the ethical touchstone that the theater of old played for people, and is able to deliver the same moral education that novels have in the past. There is something unique about the cinema, in that we are not only watching a film, and actively roleplaying as a character or multiple characters, but we are also able to be self-reflexive in that comprehension in a way that is only possible through the form and content of the moving picture. There is no formative or functional distinction between the narratives that are projected for us on the silver screen which we partake in, and the narratives that we are constantly writing through the very act of living every day, that narrative being one that makes sense in the social context of moral subjects. We are each writing our own story in life, and that story is ascribed by our subjectivity—our subjectivities just happen to be formally impacted by the impressions that are established through our confrontations with things that are



radically different from us, and by the ethical messages that we glean from the movies we watched. In this paper, I have argued that movies are a crucial vehicle for creating individuals as more moral subjects, and that the social imaginary that we create at the theater is crucial to this formulation of ourselves. I believe through the theories of Hume and Derrida, I have proved that this form of subject formation is valuable and worthy of consideration, and through our film analysis we have been able to definitively point to instances of films importing ethical and moral considerations into the viewer in a way that is substantively impactful. In this sense, film can and should be understood as a post literate mechanism for the aggregation and establishment of ethical and moral virtues, as it only requires a proper interpretation and reading to be able to excavate or construct an intrinsically valuable message in any viewing of a movie. To philosophize in a contemporary sense might then not be to learn how to die as it was in years past, but rather it might revolve around learning how to watch movies.

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Carr, David. "Moral Education at the Movies: On the Cinematic Treatment of Morally Significant Story and Narrative." *Journal of Moral Education* 35.3 (2006): 319-33. EBSCO. Web. 2 Dec. 2014.

The Carr article is one that falls lock and step with the thesis of my presentation—a discussion of the efficacy of films as a conveyor of morals and ethics, as juxtaposed against the classics. This gives us a robust discussion of the manner in which film can be the same sort of vehicle for ethics that Shakespeare used to be, but for a generation that is post literate and looks to movies to learn right from wrong. With multiple counter-arguments discussed, this article is crucial to the foundations of my theorizing about film and morality, and underpins much of the discussion of how the spectator plays a unique role when watching a film, in that their spectatorship is one that is self-reflexive and also projects one into the movie itself. This opens the door for a fruitful discussion of how films are actually able to produce that moral value, rather than how we come to interpret it.

Hume, David. "Book Two: The Passions." *Treatise of Human Nature*. 2010 ed. Jonathan Bennett, 2004. 147-174. Print.

Hume's discussion of personal identity is very useful for understanding how we come to conceptualize and understand the self. The manner in which the passions are shaped by impressions allows us some insight into the way in which film would come to be understood as an impression. If our feelings are ultimately filtered through the mediation of ideas, the very thoughts that are

brought about by our experiences at the cinema are important, as they come to write the narrative of the self that describes ourselves, and our ethical and political attachments and proclivities. Hume in this sense is effective in providing a conceptual framework for how we should be interpreting and understanding phenomena, and the way in which they come to influence us via the impressions that our mind interprets and the way that drives our decisions.

Peters, Michael A. "Derrida, Pedagogy and the Calculation of the Subject." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 35.2 (2003): 313-32. EBSCO. Web. 2 Dec. 2014.

Derrida's discussion of *différance* gives us a unique perspective into how film might constitute a moral interaction that we have frequently. For Derrida, encounters with things that are radically different from our traditional modes of thinking allow us to think outside of our subjective limits, and conceptualize theories of ethics in a way that does not fall victim to attempts to systematize and suppress them. Derrida is helpful in the context of this paper as it provides a backdrop for our discussion of the way in which film could change our moral structures by being radical encounters with *différance*, which allow us to change our ethical trajectories. This is effective in discussing the way in which our experiences come to mapped upon our ethical considerations.

Wax, Murray L., and Alasdair MacIntyre. "After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory." *Contemporary Sociology* 11.3 (1982): 346. JSTOR. Web. 2 Dec. 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2067167>>.

Wax's review of Alasdair MacIntyre's theory of narratives and meaning-making is a fantastic condensation of the way in which MacIntyre conceives of humanity as an animal that excels as telling stories. This is in part because our existence is not so different from any of the subjects of the stories we tell—our lives are nothing more than a big performance where we are no different than the actors we see on the screen in the first place. This gives a lot of merit to our discussion of subjectivity and the self being narrational, in that is a process of constantly writing one's self, much in the way one would tell a story. This has obvious parallels to the narratives that we watch upon the silver screen, and as such is the perfect theory for actualizing the moral implications of the cinema.