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Srdjan Mićić

International Balkan University, Faculty of Art and Design, Skopje, N. Macedonia

Email: s.mikik@ibu.edu.mk

https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8672-9371

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Arts, Movies and Moral Reflections

Srdjan Mićić

Abstract

This paper reflects on the intricate relationship between visual art, moving pictures, and moral reflection. It considers how art, especially cinema, functions not only as an aesthetic or cultural product, but as a space for ethical encounter and moral engagement. Through a multidisciplinary lens that bridges philosophy, ethics, and visual studies, the text examines the capacity of artistic practices to challenge, shape, and awaken moral awareness in both the creator and the observer. Drawing on the case of 12 Angry Men by Sidney Lumet, the paper explores how cinematic narrative, when rooted in empathy and ethical intent, can provoke deep introspection about justice, prejudice, and personal responsibility. Art is presented here not merely as an object of contemplation, but as a living dialogue between the individual and the collective, between aesthetic form and ethical substance. The study invites us to recognize the subtle yet potent ways in which visual culture contributes to the shaping of ethical consciousness in a media-saturated world.

Keywords: visual art, ethics, moral reflection, cinema, responsibility, empathy, cultural influence.

Introduction to Arts and Ethics

Despite living in an era of visual communications, we are often unaware of the surrounding influences these visual messages have on us. Beyond museums and private collections, art, through its applied forms—such as the buildings, parks, streets, the streetlamp, the park bench, the bus stop across the park, posters, lighted advertisements, billboards, books, television, computers, the internet, social media, virtual reality, contributes to shaping us as social entities and reflects the time in which we live in. Contemporary culture surrounds us with aesthetically crafted images designed to influence us through various media sources. Many of these images carry implicit moral messages, and the quality of their presentation persuades us to take them seriously (Macneill, 2014, p. 254). Daily scrolling through content on our "phones", which we barely stop to examine, affects us in ways we would not consent to if we were aware of them. Influence that shapes our actions in the world, our relationship with ourselves, and our relationship with others. Trillions of pieces of information gradually undermine our already fragile moral values. A lazy relativist existence in which the audio-visual experience is not subjected to serious ethical consideration or moral judgment. The world is a self-generating concept of scientific production and construction within a media-determined space. In it, everything happens within the visualization of the world. I see, therefore I exist (Paikj, 2013, p. 25). Art is a term that can refer to everything, and its influence encompasses the entire educational, social, and societal system. Given the direction of this research, its multidisciplinarity, and its attempt to integrate philosophical and artistic activities, it is necessary to first define the key concepts in order to establish their interconnections and potential interdependence. We must specify: What is ethics, morality, and visual art? What is the connection and role they play in relation to the human being and their social integration as an autonomous and conscious individual who can distinguish between good and evil?

Ethics (from the Greek ethos, habit, character) is the science of morality, moral principles and norms, and their role in the social and individual life of a person. Ethics deals with matters relating to ourselves, our relations to others, and ways of communication and social involvement. Ethics is a philosophical science whose subject of inquiry is morality. Ethics is theoretically summoned to solve the practical problems that arise before a person in life (how one should act, what should be considered good and evil, etc.

Morality (from Latin mos – custom, mores – behaviour, moralis – morality, moral conduct) is the active human shaping and evaluation of oneself and others as

good or bad. Morality is defined as a way of regulating interpersonal relations, as a system of social norms, rules, and principles for behaviour in society (Donev, 2019, pp. 16–18). Morality is an individual, internal sense of judgment about good and evil by which we guide ourselves in life. The task of ethics is to critically explain moral practice, its essence, origin, and to establish new norms and directions for moral behaviour. Morality, across different historical instances and in various cultural, religious, and social discourses, has been shaped by the beliefs and conditions in which people have lived. Nevertheless, the fundamental concepts of good–bad, just–unjust, useful–useless are part of everyday social existence and coexistence with others. Humans have always known that if they do evil to someone, that evil may return to them. "He who digs a grave for another, falls into it himself" is an old proverb that speaks to the basic moral principles by which our ancestors lived and taught their children. "He who does good, receives good in return." Or: "You wouldn't want that injustice done to you, so don't do injustice to others", a common reproach used by mothers when raising their children after they have wronged others. This rebuke contains a question that leads to a lesson in improving one's morality and moral behavior. That primal fear of retribution and putting oneself "in another man's shoes" was later packaged by religions as sin and took on a new authoritative form such as the fear of the unknown. Religious dogmas, which have their own ethics and codes of conduct, define morality within specific religious boundaries. Christianity, for example, teaches that goodness is not of this world but of the next, and that if we are virtuous and obedient, we will be rewarded. Atheists, on the other hand, argue that religious dogmas are unnecessary for distinguishing right from wrong, and that humans are fully capable of making correct judgments through reason alone. Both perspectives hold validity in the process of synchronizing the general and individual needs of the individual. Not everything that is wrong is truly bad, nor should it necessarily be punishable by law. The subtlety of our communication far exceeds a binary division of black and white. The complexity of human totality must be adjusted to the instinctive need for support and coexistence with others, and guided by that need and knowledge, to shape one's worldview. Moral values and ethical norms in an ideal society would be prescribed by the laws of that society. This refers to those values that are generally accepted as moral norms and rules by which the individual, as a member of society, is guided.

The fear of human and divine punishment, the desire for peaceful coexistence with others, and the creation of offspring as fundamental human ideals and aspirations justify the assumption that ethics and morality are perhaps the oldest attempts at

standardized "civilized" social behavior. When the "primal" artist drew something on the wall of a cave, he displayed it for others to see, because alongside his amazement, the reason for creating that image was also communication itself. For any communication and coexistence with other/s to be established, there must be a degree of trust. And for this to occur, a basic understanding of the rules of the game is necessary, to define what is good and what is bad, what is allowed and what is not. A kind of predictable behavior by which the individual can be guided in relation to others and to themselves.

Art is a specific human activity that contains elements of sensitivity and involves creativity, a created work, and its experience. Every ability for aesthetic expression, that is, the shaping of a creation through aesthetic evocation of certain feelings, thoughts, experiences, and imagination by means of speech, writing, instruments, voice, color, mimicry, line, form, etc. Aristotle believed that art is an imitation of nature, and he distinguished two primary reasons for this: imitation as a means of learning and imitation for the pleasure of others. The imitation used by the artist, he argued, does not reproduce random appearances and facts, but rather possibilities—what could be—and more broadly, the very possibility of changing reality and facts. Plato used the same argument when he stated that art is harmful to society and has no place in an ideal order where facts should not be changed or interpreted. From Aristotle's two reasons for imitation, we can see that he defines art both as an activity that serves humanity and as a means for improving reality. In The Analytic of the Beautiful, Kant divides the aesthetic experience of art into that which has no other interest but pleasure, and the pleasure of the agreeable and the good, which are tied to interest. The agreeable and the good relate to the faculty of desires and contain: first, pathological conditioning, and second, practical pleasure determined by our representation of the object and the assumed connection of the subject to the existence of the object. We do not only like the object, but its very existence as well (Kant, 1966, p. 210).

Y. Borev speaks of the poly-functionality of the goals of art and the ways in which it influences the transformation of reality. The first way is through ideological-aesthetic influence, where the type of artistic cognition, artistic ideals, and the type of personality are interrelated. The second way is through engaging the person in a value-oriented activity. In this way, art awakens sensitivity to society, stimulates social activity, and guides it toward change depending on the ideal. He emphasizes the compensatory role of art, in which it has a comforting-compensatory function and restores harmony and balance in the sphere of the spiritual—elements often

lacking in reality. This role of art is observable in the medical humanities, where art is used as a practical tool in practices related to mental health care. In this medical context, art is used for a better understanding of patients, sharpening cognitive abilities, and therapeutic self-expression.

Art is a fundamental human capacity and probably a basic human need, as it offers a unique potential for learning, connection and communication, and significantly contributes to both individual and communal well-being (Hooker, 2014, p. 215). While the very act of creating an image or form as a therapeutic tool in medicine is different from the process of the professional artist, the self-reflective and meditative-therapeutic nature of art is always present in creative expression—whether practiced by professional artists or used merely as a tool in medicine. In art, moral values may be observed in the artist's intention or the message they seek to convey, or in the intention of professional medical staff who organize therapeutic workshops. Furthermore, the process of creating an artwork, if accepted as a process of self-reflection and visual presentation of a contemplated experience driven by the idea of the good, may be assumed to have a positive impact on the other. Every reflection within the individual-community correlation contains ethical dilemmas, and therefore, ethics and moral values must be an inseparable part of the consideration of art and artistic processes. In artistic practices, as in all other fields, developed metacognition and self-criticism are necessary components of an artist's training or education and essential disciplines for further professional development. This practice of self-distancing as a principle for seeing things from a "fresh perspective" allows for the objectivity necessary to create a subjective artwork that, through its newly acquired "objectification," gains universality and the ability to communicate with the other. This principle serves as a kind of guarantee for a developed ethical awareness in the artist and often stands—beyond questions of taste and intention—as visible evidence of intellectual and thus moral values.

Art restores the wholeness of a world analytically fragmented by science; it is the keeper of the integrity of the person, culture, and human life experience (Borev, 2008, p. 174).

Artefacts and arts in general are audio and visual emotional and i/rational ideas, and their aesthetic consideration is justified, but when we turn to ethics and moral values, our attention is directed toward ourselves and our relationship with the other, thus transforming the impact of the artwork into an ethical and moral proposal. This, of course, assumes that the work is visually clear and concise enough to convey its message. If it lacks the necessary illustrative clarity, then the work may

instead serve as a medium to provoke a specific subjective narrative and aesthetic experience. The idea behind every artwork depends on the artist's will and intention. This reflects the artist's essence as a conscious and social being, a creator and responsible actor whose outlook determines the nature of the work and its further impact on others. Reflecting subjective perceptions of reality within certain historical-sociological frameworks, artistic practice represents a striving to shape and model the environment according to one's own will and needs. This means that if the artist has developed moral values that serve as an imperative in communication with others, we may assume that the artworks they create reflect those ethical and moral values and, as such, their influence on the other will be ethically and morally justified. This presumes that the artist is the one who decides the nature of their creation and, most importantly, their relationship with the art they produce. Is the focus on profit, with the works being created based on presumed success, or is the artist's aim to create works addressed to a broader public, intended to pass on an ethical and aesthetic message to future generations? Do artworks have the capacity for ethics and morality?

Truthfully, we must face the fact that art in itself is a-ethical—it is, at its core, a form of knowledge or skill, and as such, it takes no side—positive or negative—regardless of how we perceive these concepts. Osho has an interesting analogy for knowledge: he says knowledge is like a river—you can drink from it, cross it, flow with it, or go against it. It is up to the person what to do with that knowledge—whether to use it for good, for ill, or not use it at all. Knowledge in itself has no ethical or moral value, and the same applies to art. Ethics is the science of moral behaviour and values only in correlation with the human subject and their actions in the world and in relation to others.

The relationship between morality and the visual arts can be analysed through the influence of the artwork, its content, and visual impact. This influence can be positive, reminding or aligning with moral values, or it can challenge moral values and provoke ethical stances in others. For Kant, aesthetic experience holds a central place; he claims that the beautiful is a symbol of morality, while Schiller argues that aesthetic experience is essential for individual and moral development. "Only aesthetic communication can unify society, as it alone relates to things common to all people. Both tie morality to art as an essential part and thereby recognize the potent influence art can have on others. The artwork, as an artefact or object, does not possess the capacity for philosophy, ethical reasoning, or morality in itself. Its role lies more in passively provoking and instructing. If we consider

morality and ethics as intrinsic elements of the aesthetic value of art, then moral education through works of art finds its logical justification. The influence that artworks have on others moves beyond mere aesthetic experience and integrates art with philosophy, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and, broadly, with the humanities and social sciences. Art thus becomes a social and "hybrid" activity that actively contributes to the well-being of humanity through its communicative artefacts, existing beyond the boundaries of time and material space. Plato's end point of aesthetic education is moral virtue. For this, a broader understanding of the individual and their relationship with the other is necessary. The information contained in the artwork must stem from highly developed moral values, as only then can it exert an influence that is both positive for the other and beneficial to society.

Ethical dilemmas are not uncommon in the art world and often arise from the perception and interpretation of an artwork's content and message. The insistence that art must be shocking, vulnerable, and destabilizing—or that its ethical achievements are only realized in this way—is unsatisfactory. Such aesthetic norms risk distancing people from their ethical project and its target aims (Hooker, 2014, p. 221). Provocative themes like spirituality, sexuality, and politics can be interpreted in many ways and spark debate over their moral value. Experiencing art is subjective—both in terms of taste and interpretation. What is unethical or immoral to one may be, to another, an ethical norm aligned with their own values. Moreover, the artwork is judged not by who created it and their values, but by the values it provokes in the other. If the artist's moral values align with those of the majority, the artwork stands a good chance of reflecting those values and successfully conveying the intended moral message. The likelihood of artworks being read and experienced identically by different individuals is slim, almost improbable, and usually applies only to illustrative works in which visual narration, despite being open to interpretation, still allows for a directed "reading of the image." As this illustrative clarity fades, visual narration diminishes as well, and the possibility of "reading" the work becomes a two-way communication between the work and the viewer. In this dialogue, the artist's idea is not always significant, and its influence is limited by the subjectivity of the visual message. The subjective viewing of non-illustrative and "non-textual" artworks is essential for abstract art and emotional experience, and likely one of the few aspects the artist can consider if they aim to plan their impact.

Moving Pictures and Morality

When we watch a movie, we try to interpret and understand its content. In doing so, we rely on our ideas about the real world, our attitudes, and concepts—including our morality. This is because the cognitive process we use to interpret the film draws references from the real world in which we live and gain our social experience. Most popular films depict virtuous and corrupt characters, good and evil, placing them in a narratively "real" context where their expressed traits become accessible for moral reflection and ethical evaluation by the viewer. Furthermore, Noël Carroll emphasizes that once the interpretation of the film is complete, the cinematic experience may influence the viewer in ways that enrich and deepen their concepts of virtue and vice. Through the interpretation of the cinematography content, we can improve our cognitive, perceptual, and moral skills, the moving picture possesses a suggestive power and influence over others unlike any other art form from the past.

Should this mass art form, based on photographic and technical reproduction of reality, be subject to ethical norms? And if so, how might those norms affect the integrity of the artist as the visionary behind the work?

How does our ethical critique of film influence our evaluation of film as an artwork?

Noël Carroll gives the example of Triumph of the Will by Leni Riefenstahl—a film that propagates and celebrates Nazi ideology while simultaneously being regarded as a masterpiece of cinematography. Would the moving picture be considered a masterpiece if it were not subject to ethical and moral condemnation? That is, if it had celebrated virtue and human understanding instead? Films that openly glorify violence, vice, and immorality are subject to ethical critique, and therefore, often to censorship. Additionally, certain films are labelled as inappropriate for specific age groups due to the potential for misinterpreting their content. Other films considered "moral" in their country of origin may be seen as offensive or immoral in another culture with different moral values. Sometimes, the author deliberately aims to provoke moral awareness in the viewer by recreating immorality and violence in their films. In many cases, popular films present vice and immoral behavior as a counterweight to a positive character or idea of good. In this way, by exaggerating good and evil, the film enters an ethical dimension, and through interpretation and experience, it presents the viewer with a moral challenge.

Unlike visual arts, film is subject to moral judgment and ethical responsibility to a far greater extent. It may be the only medium, alongside literature, with the

narrative capacity to create artworks that, regardless of the filmmaker's intention, inevitably influence others and touch their moral values, or at the very least, position them for self-identification with the other. The impact of film is undoubtedly a subject for ethical consideration and responsibility. Just as rhetoric can be dangerous when accompanied by visual and artistic support, it can become a dangerous tool for social destabilization, likely the main argument behind film censorship. The subjectivity involved in predicting others' reactions, even in the face of an artwork's seemingly obvious negative potential, is always debatable and not subject to positivist evaluation or scientific assessment.

From the very beginning of film's development as a medium of artistic vision and expression, filmmakers have focused on the ethical complexity of reality and the intricate relationship between the individual and both the self and the other. Film and cinematography represent the culmination of audio-visual mediums, unified within the visual art. Film is one of the richest sources for cultural historians, offering insight into modes of speech, fashion, and landscape from a given era—and, most importantly, into the atmosphere and dominant ideology of the time (Miller, 2013). Moral and ethical dilemmas observed in visual art through illustrative graphic and painterly compositions can also be applied to film as a culminating visual art form. Due to its executional and final complexity, film enters numerous fields of diverse human activities.

By its nature, film is a synthetic art form: the film image is composed of organic elements, literature (script, texts, songs), painting (animation, set design, and especially compositional and other experiences from visual art), and theatre (acting). Sound has enriched the film image with speech and music, which is no longer merely an accompaniment to the visuals, but a means of creating a unique audio-visual representation (Borev, 2008, p. 232). Film is a medium through which the artist (director), within a social context and regardless of their intent, provokes moral conflict in the viewer. The most common themes addressed in the film industry include family, war, crime, law, justice, and work. Whether presented within a fantastic or realistic genre, the social context of these themes makes ethics and morality inseparable contextual elements of film art. Film and cinematography, as the most influential artistic medium for illustrative narration, represent a powerful tool for ethical influence. Despite the valid argument of art's amorality, its ethical impact is undeniable, and film is its most effective medium. The visual story told in such a way that it reminds, perhaps enlightens, or even teaches the viewer about new or long-forgotten moral values and ethical dilemmas.

David Frampton proposes three theories of reception that have wide applicability.

The first model is pretending, which is based on works that generate convincing emotions—such as fear when watching a horror film.

The second model is empathy, based on prior emotional experience from the other.

The third model is that the viewer may be emotionally affected without accepting the literal truth of what is portrayed, recognizing the absence of reality in the artwork while appreciating its moral significance or aesthetic qualities.

Films that emerge from Frampton's second model are those with the greatest impact on the moral values of the viewer. By identifying with the main character, we in some way relive our own experience, or at the very least, put ourselves in "the shoes" of the other, which in itself is an essential condition for moral awareness. For the purpose of this paper we will continue with a review and short analyse of the movie created by Sidney Lumet.

12 Angry Men" by Sidney Lumet

"12 Angry Men" is a classic film from 1957 directed by Sidney Lumet. The film's narrative unfolds through various ethical principles and engages with the cultural and moral dilemmas of the modern individual. It centres on 12 jurors who are called to make a decision for a court case in which an 18-year-old boy is accused of murdering his father. At trial, there is evidence suggesting that the boy, in a moment of rage, killed his father, along with witnesses and supposed eyewitnesses who confirm his guilt. After the court proceedings and the presentation of arguments and evidence, it is the duty of the 12 jurors to retreat and reach a unanimous decision about the fate of the accused. The plot begins as the jurors are locked in the designated deliberation room at the courthouse and begin their preliminary vote. The majority are already convinced of the boy's guilt and assume the decision will be swift. However, one juror votes "not guilty." His argument is not that he is certain of the boy's innocence, but that the others are too quick to decide the fate of a young man. He then proceeds to articulate his reasoning, appealing to the morality and logic of the other jurors, eventually leading them all to unanimously agree on the boy's innocence.

At the core of this story lie the court and the prejudices based on stereotypes and assumptions stemming from socioeconomic and racial background. The film develops an ethical narrative of justice and fair treatment for all, regardless of background.

It does so through the moral and ethical responsibility of the juror who is dedicated to the truth despite pressure and condemnation from the majority. "12 Angry Men" challenges the moral and ethical principles of the viewer by introducing them to the concepts of truth, fair play, prejudice, personal responsibility, and especially the importance of personal integrity in moments of critical decision-making. The initiator of the ethical and moral narrative in this social film narrative, Juror No. 8, is a character with developed moral and ethical awareness. His behavior can be taken as an illustrative example of the four-step model based on the work of James Rest, where the individual transitions from moral awareness to moral action. Juror No. 8 follows the entire trial closely and clearly perceives the imbalance in the defense of the accused compared to his accusers. He attempts to understand the accused boy, paying attention to his background and daily life, and sympathizes with him. He stands against the majority, asking for their opinions and initiating a discussion about his doubts concerning the injustice done to the young man.

The second step is moral judgment. Juror No. 8 states that a life-and-death decision cannot be made in five minutes without any discussion, especially when it concerns an 18-year-old child. He supports his dissenting opinion by saying that he does not know whether the accused is guilty or innocent, but that the only thing he wants is for the boy to be given a chance, one he didn't receive during the trial. The third step is moral intention. The juror calls on the others to take responsibility for their decision to condemn the boy. He asks questions that prompt them to reflect on their awareness in this life-altering moment. The final step is moral action. Juror No. 8 remains consistent in his convictions and gradually manages to "awaken" the other jurors, helping them to see the accused in a new light, patiently removing all racial, economic, and social prejudices and their indifference toward the life of the Other. They come to realize that the case involves a frightened child who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and who, through no fault of his own, was born into the wrong ethnic, racial, and social background.

Lumet's film clearly reflects societal prejudices, as well as the hypocrisy of justice institutions. Through this moral tale, he applies the classical cinematic approach of communication, or the connection between character and viewer. In this way, the viewer, identifying with the main character, is compelled to re-examine their own ethical values and moral awareness.

Conclusion

The influence of visual art is deeply integrated into all aspects of our existence. Art not only inspires but also challenges us to reconsider our ethical views and moral values. Though we may not always be aware of it, the influence of art, especially through media, is profound and direct, affecting our actions and relationships, as well as our entire educational system and social structure. Visual art is not only a cultural heritage but also our challenge for awareness of morality and ethics. Painting and film should be media through which the ideas of goodness, harmony, and moderation are promoted, as well as the idea of humanity. They should serve as instruments for progress rather than for its manipulation and moral decline. The ethical value of an artwork is as strong as the moral awareness of its spectator, yet the true value of the artwork lies in its success in evoking that moral awareness. The intersection of the film, art, and moral reflection reveals a profound influence on the ethical formation of individuals and societies. As this paper demonstrates, visual culture and particularly film as a dominant medium, transcends its aesthetic function and enters the domain of ethical discourse. Art, although inherently a-ethical in its ontological structure, becomes a powerful conduit for moral engagement when viewed through the lens of its reception and social function. Visual art, especially in the form of cinema, has the potential to awaken moral awareness, question ethical standards, and challenge ingrained prejudices. Through its narrative and visual mechanisms, film does not merely represent reality but reconfigures it, inviting spectators to reflect on their own values, biases, and responsibilities. This dialogic relationship between the viewer and the work of art, mediated by empathy, emotional identification, and interpretative activity, enables art to operate as a subtle yet potent tool of ethical education.

The analysis of 12 Angry Men demonstrates how cinematic storytelling can serve as a moral catalyst, inspiring critical self-examination and illuminating the complexities of justice, prejudice, and integrity. The juror's ethical journey in the film epitomizes the transition from moral perception to moral action, showing how individual responsibility and conscience can confront collective indifference and systemic bias. More broadly, the ethical implications of art depend not only on the creator's intentions but also on the moral sensitivity of the audience. Art that challenges, provokes, or comforts does so by entering into an open-ended communication with the viewer, whose interpretation and emotional response complete the meaning of the work. This underlines the importance of cultivating ethical literacy alongside aesthetic appreciation in both artistic practice and reception. Ultimately,

the ethical value of a work of art lies in its capacity to foster reflection, empathy, and dialogue. It is not simply a mirror of society, but a medium through which society can be reimagined, re-evaluated, and possibly transformed. In an age where visual messages saturate our everyday lives, the responsibility of the artist, and of the spectator, is to engage with art not only as a source of pleasure but as a site of moral inquiry and human solidarity.

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