REVIEW ARTICLE

Redeeming Levinas


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In Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics, and the Feminine, Sam B Girgus develops an ethical analytic for cinema by recovering the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas, which he argues is dramatized in a multinational canon of films that he terms 'the cinema of redemption'. These films enact and promulgate a Levinasian ethic through their approach to time, ethics and the feminine. Girgus recovers an aesthetics of film from Levinas’s thought by rethinking the tension between transcendence and immanence in the context of the sexual difference and the feminine body and demonstrates that films are capable of representing the core truth of Levinas’s ethical theory at twenty-four frames a second.

What has Paris to do with Jerusalem? Can Godard’s cinematic truth at ‘twenty-four times a second’ be reconciled with the ethical truth of Emmanuel Levinas that resists the idolatry of representation? This question can be understood as governing all of the recent attempts to bring Levinasian ethical theory into dialogue with film theory. At best, these attempts have been oversimplifications, and at worst gross misreadings of both film theory and Levinas. However, Sam B Girgus has recently fostered a new dialogue between Paris and Jerusalem that takes seriously both the strengths and weaknesses of Levinasian ethical theory and the capacity of film to explicate its ethical core.

In his newest book *Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption: Time, Ethics, and the Feminine*, Girgus brings his passion for American cultural expression and his keen cinematic sensibilities into a fresh dialogue with philosophical film analysis. Although Girgus is a relative
newcomer to philosophy he is clearly at home in the discipline. He navigates effortlessly through the Continental tradition bringing its difficult concepts and penetrating insights into dialogue with literary, historical, cultural, religious, and political thinkers. This interdisciplinary approach has been a hallmark of Girgus’ work on film (see his *Hollywood Renaissance: The Cinema of Democracy in the Era of Ford, Capra and Kazan* (1998); or *The Films of Woody Allen* (2002) and provides an illuminating reconsideration of the relationship between Levinas and film.

Levinas’s repudiation of art and consequent silence on the subject of cinema is well known. In his anti-ocular and iconoclastic essay ‘Reality and It's Shadow’, Levinas denied art a revelatory character and described images as a ‘shadow of being’, and a ‘disincarnation of reality’ (Levinas 2000, pp. 118, 120). For Levinas there was an ontological gulf between images and reality which could not be bridged. This perspective would seem to be an insurmountable obstacle to any fruitful dialogue between Levinas and the philosophy of film. Indeed, as Sarah Cooper has noted, ‘There is no easy bond to be forged between this philosopher and film’ (Cooper 2007, p. i). Robert Eaglestone has echoed this sentiment in his *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* where he noted the frequent oversimplification of Levinas work in its application to artistic representation and aesthetics (Eaglestone 1997, p. 98). There would seem to be a philosophical lacuna between Levinas and film that would occlude any critical attempts at redemption.

Girgus has taken an Abrahamic journey into this lacuna and developed an ethical analytic for cinema through his recovery of Levinas’s notions of diachronic temporality and ethical responsibility embedded and narrativized in a multinational canon of films which he calls ‘the cinema of redemption’. Additionally, taking note of Levinas’s ethical blindness to the significance of sexual difference and the body, Girgus rethinks the feminine in light of Levinasian ethical theory and through the medium of cinematic representation. For Girgus, films are capable of representing the core truth of Levinas’s ethical theory at twenty-four frames a second.

To explicate this new ethical theory of film Girgus applies an interdisciplinary approach to three themes drawn from the work of Levinas: time, ethics and the feminine. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze, Sarah Cooper, Simon Critchley, Tina Chanter, David Wood, and Luce Irigaray, Girgus negotiates between and among Levinas’s interpreters and critics in order to redeem a Levinasian ethical analytic for film theory.

In the introduction Girgus begins by developing a temporal framework within which he rethinks the relationship of ethics to aesthetics, politics, and the feminine by employing Levinas’s notion of a ruptured and disordered temporality that serves as the condition for the possibility of ethical transcendence. This allows him to define ethics
as a self-abnegating journey towards the other which unfolds as a transition from being (ontological identity) to being-for (ethical subjectivity). Girgus argues that this ethical journey is dramatized within ‘the cinema of redemption’. In films such as Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), John Ford’s The Grapes of Wrath (1940), or Robert Rossen’s Body and Soul (1947) protagonists undergo moral transformations that lead to acts of ethical responsibility for others. By maintaining a double commitment to a Levinasian conceptual apparatus and feminist ethical theory throughout the book, Girgus is able to recover Levinasian thought for a new application to film analysis.

In the first three chapters Girgus introduces readers to the American version of the cinema of redemption by examining the historical, cultural, philosophical, and theological foundations of the American cinema of redemption; and through an extended analysis of films such as Michael Curtiz’s Casablanca (1942), Robert Rossen’s Body and Soul (1947), Frank Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life (1946) and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), John Ford’s The Grapes of Wrath (1940), John Huston’s The Misfits (1961), and Edward Zwick’s Glory (1989). In the final three chapters he explores the European cinema of redemption through an extended analysis of sexual ethics in Philip Kaufman’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1988), the failure and frustration of redemption in Federico Fellini’s La dolce vita (1960), and the triumph of the feminine through ethical transcendence and embodied sexual love in Michelangelo Antonioni’s L’Avventura (1960).

In the first chapter Girgus locates the American cinema of redemption within the trinity of Levinasian ethics, Puritan theology, and Transcendentalist metaphysics. Girgus points to these strange bedfellows as the foundations of an interpretative model for the ethical analysis of classic American films. The connection between these seemingly disparate traditions rests upon the shared concepts of the ultimate transcendence of God, personal conversion, the call of ethical responsibility, the primacy of revelation, and the ethical importance of face-to-face encounters. Girgus argues that all of these concepts resonate with Levinasian ethical theory and create an archive of spiritual, intellectual and moral values born of Puritanism and Transcendentalism that shaped American culture and resonate with the ethical project of Levinas. The integration of these values within the archive of the American cinema of redemption creates a complex moral vision that links individual and national redemption. These films are religiously non-sectarian and reflect the American values that emerged from the experiences of the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the cold war.

In the second chapter Girgus examines Frank Capra’s films as examples of the American cinema of redemption and excavates their Levinasian themes. Girgus sees Capra’s cinema as an answer to Levinas’s question of ‘whether we are not duped by morality’ in Totality and Infinity (Levinas 1969, p. 21). Capra’s films, he suggests,
highlight the unavoidable consequences of circumventing morality. Girgus provides an extended analysis of Capra's films *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life* in order to demonstrate how narrative, movement, space, and time interrelate to dramatize the experience of alterity and transcendence. Change and infinitude become the temporal mechanisms that drive the ethical drama and shape the ethical ideology of Capra's films. Capra's ethical cinema, Girgus argues, illuminated cultural disparities and ambiguities in America that informed and shaped the national moral consciousness. Characters like George Bailey embodied the 'Greatest Generation' who emerged from World War II and the Great Depression and became champions of global democracy throughout the cold war. Capra's films *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *It's a Wonderful Life* prioritize sacrifice over self, and responsibility for the other over personal gain in order to answer Levinas's ethical query by claiming 'there is no real life without morality' (Girgus 2010, p. 76).

In the third chapter Girgus puts a face on the American cinema of redemption by examining the performances of Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits*, Paul Newman in *The Hustler*, and Denzel Washington in *Glory*. In this chapter, Girgus addresses head-on what he calls the 'crisis of representation' which must be resolved for any dialogue between Levinas and film to occur (Girgus 2010, p. 77). In film, the problem is framing the face in an aesthetically communicative way while avoiding caricature; while in Levinasian ethics, the problem involves preserving ethical responsibility for the other while avoiding idolatry. By placing Levinas's notion of the face at the center of his analysis of these films Girgus creates a co-informative nexus of aesthetics and ethics in which the ethical challenge of responsibility for the other can be visually articulated. The faces of Fonda, Monroe, Newman, and Washington serve as cultural icons through which the archive of American values is communicated. These faces become images of ethical challenge that are suggestive of ethical responsibility and transcendence.

One of the key challenges for Girgus in this chapter is negotiating the philosophical gap between the phenomenological face represented in the cinematic close-up and the transcendental visage of Levinas's ethical theory. Synthesizing the work of Sarah Cooper, Gilberto Perez and Walter Benjamin, Girgus suggests that the star quality of actors can be understood as the aura of their cinematic images, and can function as icons which point to an ethical transcendence that lies within the 'space of responsibility' between the phenomenological face and the transcendental visage. The cinematic image can therefore provide a medium for the paradoxical project of representing the unrepresentable. In the American cinema of redemption this paradoxical project emerges through a plurality of faces that are conversant with a surplus of meaning that flows from the archive of American values. Each face, through its open vulnerability and its appeal through exteriorization of an intersubjective space, exceeds its
representation and becomes an icon of ethical transcendence. The image becomes a portal to ethical transcendence.

In the fourth chapter Girgus begins examining the European version of the cinema of redemption which confronts the nihilism and despair of modernity through a search for redemption that is often marked by ambiguity. Unlike the American cinema of redemption, the European search for redemption unfolds in isolation from national concerns and other characters. Girgus proffers Philip Kaufman’s film *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as a cinematic example of a journey to achieve an ethical subjectivity that is beyond thought, ego, and being. This journey is explicitly modern and confronts meaninglessness and despair through the suggestion that ethical transcendence is possible, even if it is only a remote possibility. It is also an embodied journey that takes shape through Tomas’s sexual odyssey in which his body becomes an ethical threshold leading from self-absorbed immanence (interiority) to ethical transcendence (exteriority). Girgus locates this sexual odyssey between two conflicting poles of Freudian Oedipal conflict and Levinasian ethical transcendence. These two poles are represented through his highly sexualized relationships with Sabina and Tereza, for whom embodied sexuality is central, as well. Each woman finds an artistic means of remapping and reclaiming the female body from patriarchal obsession and control.

In the fifth chapter Girgus examines Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita* as an example of a frustrated attempt to understand the feminine within the European search for redemption. Girgus describes *La dolce vita* as Federico Fellini’s search for a redeemer and a plan of redemption within the corruption of modern culture. This search leads the morally crippled Marcello Rubino on an existential quest for redemption that ultimately fails. Girgus argues that Fellini’s blending of art and documentary in scenes like the statue of Jesus flying over and casting its shadows on Italian architecture, is suggestive of a slouching toward redemption under the weight of Italian moral corruption. Throughout *La dolce vita* new understandings of time, ethics and the feminine other are consistently rejected which prevent the characters from achieving ethical subjectivity. However, Italy is not without a savior—finally comes, Antonioni.

In the final chapter, Girgus applies his fully formed ethical analytic to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*, a film in which the feminine plays a central role in the ethical journey towards transcendence. Girgus depicts Antonioni as a cinematic physician attempting to heal a society afflicted with an erotic obsession that exploits the sexuality of women by objectifying them and reducing them to objects of desire. For Antonioni, Eros was sick and this sickness emerged between the psychic tensions of individual desires and the social controls that tried to repress it. Antonioni turns his camera upon this illness to expose it, exorcise it, and document it in the lives of others. In this film the feminine expression of embodied sexuality becomes the catalyst for redemption. Drawing on feminist interpreters of Levinas such as Tina
Chanter, Luce Irigaray, Ewa Ziarek, and Kelly Oliver, Girgus is able to redeem the feminine as a bridge between Paris and Jerusalem. Girgus points to Antonioni’s style of ethical articulation that frames the feminine in the space between transcendence and immanence, ontology and metaphysics, the visible and the invisible. He takes the ethical blindness of Levinas to the ethical significance of the feminine as his starting point for redeeming Levinasian ethical theory. It is precisely because of Levinas’s insistence on radical alterity, Girgus argues, that rethinking the feminine becomes possible. The Levinasian prohibition against idolatrous totalization goes all the way down and applies to sexual difference, as well. As Girgus points out, Antonioni’s aesthetic intuition seized upon this possibility in L’Avventura by using the cinematic image of Claudia as an icon of embodied feminine sexuality which becomes a portal to ethical transcendence.

Levinas and the Cinema of Redemption is clearly a breakthrough in the philosophic impasse between Paris and Jerusalem and will serve as a benchmark for all future discussion regarding the relationship of Levinas and film. As such, the book lends itself to the classroom as an introduction to the basic concepts of Levinas’s thought through the medium of film and as a textbook for postmodern aesthetics.

While Girgus is aware that his application of Levinasian thought to film goes well beyond what Levinas intended, it is precisely this ‘going beyond’ that allows him to achieve a Levinasian ethical analytic of film—a redemption of Levinas for aesthetics. Feminist interpreters of Levinas have made similar moves beyond his notorious (and unintended) sexism in order to recover the core of his thought for feminist philosophical thought. Girgus has clearly taken his lead from them in his new approach to aesthetics. Through the sensuous elements of ethical relations, i.e., the body, sexuality, Girgus is able to construct an aesthetics of film that makes the feminine its starting point and redeems Levinas from his sexism and anti-ocular stance on art.

While the book makes a significant contribution to the relationship between Levinas and film, it lacks a substantive engagement with the scholarship that has been critical of attempts to forge this relationship, such as the work of Robert Eaglestone. Additionally, a treatment of Levinas’s notion of conscience/consciousness and its potential relationship with film is left unexplored. Girgus also assumes Levinas’s commitment to orthodox Judaism and leaves it unquestioned in spite of the criticisms of Samuel Moyn who argued in Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics (2005) that Levinas’s Judaism was less than Orthodox. Girgus also seems unaware of Jean-Luc Marion’s concepts of the idol and icon in God without Being (1991) in his discussion of the aura of the face, although he comes very close to articulating the same idea. Aside from these shortcomings, the book constitutes a watershed in ethical film analysis. Girgus has crossed the Rubicon between Paris
and Jerusalem and there is no going back. He has achieved what few before him have been capable of: a legitimate Levinasian film aesthetic—a thoroughfare between Paris and Jerusalem.

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