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Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics

Hole, Kristin

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Coda

Our disposition towards the world – the mode in which we encounter it, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are within it, and how we share this world with others – shapes and is shaped by our affective attachments. It has been my aim to offer a generative set of thoughts by putting Denis, Levinas, Nancy and others into a conversation that I have argued offers one useful way to think about the ethical in relation to cinema. This is by no means the one ‘true’ path or the sole means to shift our sensibilities. I have made explicit the metaphysical imaginaries that inspire what I have termed a feminist cinematic ethics – part of which has been an ethics of sense and another part an aesthetic of alterity. These film-based ways of approaching the world both reflect and attune us to a shared vulnerability and responsibility.

The way in which affect shapes the encounter with a film or a philosophical text is central to what has been discussed. Shifts in thought or ways of perceiving often occur through an author’s rhetorical strategies or the affective resonances that a text carries for a given reader, or a film for a given viewer. The notion of ‘affective reorientation’ which I borrow from Christopher Janaway’s writing on Nietzsche is useful in this regard.¹ Through his reading of the German philosopher, Janaway emphasises the affective forces that shape our moral judgements, often unreflectively. The notion of affective reorientation further highlights our susceptibility and exposedness – to written texts and to films, both of which play a role in shaping the modes in which we encounter others. Denis, Levinas and Nancy all challenge our affective orientations in the attempt to ask us to think differently about the world.

Levinas’s hyperbolic, almost sadistic demand for infinite and unending responsibility may be alienating or compelling to the reader. The rhetorical style and difficulty of his texts challenge the Western reader who is perhaps used to thinking of ethics in terms of cultivating virtues or developing strategies for judging between competing claims. Levinas makes ethics feel much

riskier. Instead the reader is offered a traumatised and inadequate-to-the-task notion of a self always in debt to the other. The notion of affective reorientation helps us to see this as a strategy for radically challenging a deeply entrenched notion of the (rational and autonomous) self that can assimilate the other into a given representational framework and then decide how responsible one ought to be towards this other. Instead, Levinas's work forces us to ask what it might mean to start from a different sensibility.

Nancy, for his part, takes up many tenets associated with poststructuralism and postmodernity – the need to rethink community in the wake of its seeming loss, the deconstruction of the subject, and the rejection of grand narratives or foundational logics. Yet, perhaps contrary to the reader's expectations, these themes are not the cause of pessimism or a general cultural deflation. These challenges and opportunities are met with joy and creative openness in his writing. In this way he turns what would be the West's own funeral dirge into an affirmation of new opportunities to understand our being-together-in-the-world differently and more ethically. This is an affective reorientation of a different kind from Levinas's, but it is no less powerful in terms of its potential consequences for how we orient ourselves in the world.

To some extent, I have used both Levinas and Nancy as storytellers – creators of ethical imaginaries. I am not claiming the status of truth for either, but the stories they tell, like Denis's multisensory films, enable us to see the world in a particular way. This framework seems useful, generative and even hopeful to me at this particular historical moment, when, despite the supposed loss of metanarratives, political and social discourses seem nonetheless to lean affectively towards the reductive and categorical. The affective reorientation and ethical sensibility they ask of us may not offer a roadmap for politics but it may be the backdrop through which we can better ask questions of the political.

Finally, Denis's films, as I have argued throughout this project, work against our expectations for cinema. We learn to drift through her films, to allow the sensory and affective to take precedence over cognition or comprehension, and let others remain in their opacity. While for some viewers this could result in frustration, displeasure, boredom or confusion, I argue that her films offer an opportunity for an affective reorientation to cinema viewing and, through the film, to the world beyond the cinematic frame.

NOTE

1. Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).