

Direct Address, Ethical Imagination, and Errol Morris's Interrotron

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Most of us have grown up with faces on television that look back at us, talk to us, even when we ignore them. They smile at us, and seem to address us personally. But they cannot see or hear us, and we may or may not know who they are. Increasingly, in societies where screens are prevalent (e.g. TV, cinema, computers), our encounters with fellow human beings are mediated in ways such as this. Has the ubiquitous intervention of screens in our lives thus made it harder to understand and communicate directly with one another? Or, have screens extended our capacity to empathise and 'socialise', bringing us face-to-face with people and points of view that we otherwise would never have encountered? In this essay, I examine the idea that cinematic perception enables us to see the social world from a radically different perspective, and that an experience of this perspective may in itself be ethical. I focus on the use of 'direct address', and discuss two documentaries by Errol Morris where the technique of direct address is used in ways that complicate ideas of mediation and empathy: *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* (1999) and *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003). I also draw on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, particularly his work on ethics and the face, to analyse the effects of Morris's techniques. The essay highlights the importance of responsibility in human

communication, and maintains that by reflecting on the viewing situation we are better positioned to empathise with Morris's controversial subjects.

The technique of direct address—when a character looks in the direction of the audience—is an example of how the film camera brings a social dimension into its perception, so that it not only faces a social world but is also literally faced by it. Society is reflected and implicated in its perceptions rather than simply displayed objectively before them. Later in this essay, I examine two films by Errol Morris that illustrate this relation between direct address and socialised cinematic perception. Morris's documentaries sometimes employ an interview technique that allows the speaker to face the camera, the viewer, and the interviewer at the same time. The Interrotron, an apparatus designed especially for this purpose, is 'essentially a series of modified teleprompters...[which] bounces a live image of Morris onto a glass plate in front of the interviewee'; the interviewee 'respond[s] to an image of Morris that floats directly in line with the camera' (Rosenheim 1996, 221). Among the technique's effects are an increased sense of intimacy and confrontation—the topics discussed in the interviews are at times quite confrontational—but also a feeling of ambiguous address or misrecognition. The Interrotron 'intensifies each interview: larger-than-life...faces stare from the [screen] with an unnerving intimacy, warily focused on the roving camera's lens' (221). The device complicates the face-to-face relation, providing an opportunity to interrogate the place of ethics in cinematic images from a Levinasian perspective.

Direct address, which characterises Morris's interview technique, is a facing position not used frequently in films. Michael Renov notes that 'in fictional cinematic discourse [it] is rare indeed, except in instances of comedy' (2004, 30). Frontal orientation, or frontality, produces a face-to-face encounter between character and screen (and viewer); it not only denotes the character's position but is also part of the film's perception, the way in which the film positions itself. According to Paul Schrader, the technique of frontality may be considered 'an aspect of transcendental style', and he cites as examples its prominence in the films of Yasujiro Ozu, as well as its broader use in religious painting and sculpture (1972, 53). The frontal facing position, he suggests, is often used to 'inspire an I-Thou devotional attitude between the viewer and the work of art' (53). It has the potential, in other words, to facilitate a relation with transcendence or infinity as expressed by—or alluded to in—the work itself, which can be understood as an ethical relation. Morris's

application of frontality may not have any obviously religious intentions or connotations, nor do his films meet Schrader's criteria for transcendental style.¹ However, in constructing a face-to-face encounter between interview subject and viewer, Morris establishes the potential for an ethical relation.

The question arises: how does the screen change our response to faces, and our sense of responsibility towards people? Jill Robbins writes that according to Levinas:

to have an image of the face, *to image* a face, is to turn it into a caricature, frozen, petrified, a mask. The whole possibility, indeed, the very temptation, of violence is inscribed in the face's presentation as form or image....There is no *ethical* image of the face; there is no ethical image. (1999, 84)

This suggests that the realm of images in no way gives us access to ethical experience.² I would argue, on the contrary, that cinematic images can and do carry an ethical dimension. I agree, for example, with Jane Stadler who claims that films offer spectators 'the practical experience of perceiving from different perspectives and subject positions, and temporary immersion or participation in someone else's value system or ethical orientation' (2000, 51). In other words, seeing the world from a different social perspective can itself be an ethical experience. Stadler goes on to say that a phenomenological approach to film analysis 'involves thinking of acts of perception as evaluative acts, and thinking of the film as articulating its own ethical consciousness as it expresses perception' (78). Thus, in addition to spectators being able to experience cinematic images in an ethical way, we can also consider the manner in which films articulate perception as ethical and socialised.³

¹ For Schrader (1972), transcendental style in cinema is exemplified by Ozu, Robert Bresson, and to a lesser extent Carl Dreyer. He defines it with regard to three main elements or steps: representation of the banality of everyday life (39); a disparity or crack appearing on the surface of the everyday, causing intense emotions (42); and stasis, a confrontation with 'the ineffable' leading to an 'expression of the Transcendent' (49).

² Compare this with Susan Sontag's view on the moral significance of photographic images: 'The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge....The omnipresence of photographs has an incalculable effect on our ethical sensibility. By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is' (1977, 23-24).

³ Although Stadler does not use Levinas in her analysis of cinematic narrative and ethics, she does draw on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, among others. 'Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological point that perception is *embodied*', she argues, 'is also of ethical significance because it suggests that "ethical insight" is a felt experience, rather than something that can be grasped on a purely conceptual level' (2000, 78).

Levinas's philosophy, in particular his work on the face, allows us to examine questions of ethics in relation to cinema, where faces are among the most widely seen images. For Levinas, ethical experience occurs when we encounter a being or phenomenon which cannot be reduced to presence (immediacy) or contained within a field of pure knowledge. Levinas calls this phenomenon the 'face', referring to the human visage, being that object in the world which expresses the existence of another consciousness. The face is an ambiguous site of presence, calling upon us to be responsible for and to an intentional life other than our own. For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter is a potentially ethical meeting between human subjects. When we face another subject, we are faced with the expression of an intentional life that is not ours. This is the essence of the social relation, of human society, which differs from relations between intentional subjects and objects. Society, according to Levinas, puts us in the 'proximity of the unknown' (2002a, 535). The face expresses something that cannot be known in ways that other objects can. That is, it is not present in the same way; the presence of the face is 'incomprehensible', 'infinite', 'overflowing' (Levinas 1991, 195). In this sense, the face does not actually give us the being of the other subject in an intention or a perception (202). Rather, it can only express his or her otherness, alterity, and ungraspable subjectivity.

At once based in phenomenology and an attempt to move beyond its structures, Levinas's philosophy centres on the meaning of the human face and how it establishes social and ethical relations between people.⁴ The face is understood to express an irreducible quality that alerts us to the other person's inner life without actually giving or presenting it to us fully. As such, the face issues a silent command: to respect the Other, the subject who partakes of and enjoys the same world as we do but whose inner life is not a mere object for our use, which does not fall within our capacity for experience via intentional consciousness or ordinary phenomenological description. The face is the inauguration of society and the commandment against murder, yet it also carries the temptation to kill and the threat of death.⁵

⁴ Levinas maintains that his work on the face is not traditional phenomenology, 'since phenomenology describes what appears' (1985, 85). Although the face certainly does appear in his analysis, and in human experience, he does not describe its surface or features in any real detail. Of greater importance for Levinas is that which cannot appear, because this non-appearing is the basis of ethics.

⁵ It is perhaps not surprising that an image of the face in close-up is so often used in films just before—or while—a murder is committed.

Levinas describes the face as being 'present in its refusal to be contained' (2002b, 515). This indicates that it resists being viewed purely as an object or essence. But in cinema (and other media), the human face is highly visible, frequently caught and framed by the screen in ways that can seem objectifying or fetishistic. We can think here, for example, of Roland Barthes's comment on the face of Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian, 1933): 'It is indeed an admirable face-object' (1999, 253). Arguably, the importance of the face in Levinas's thought, as an expression of the (unrepresentable) subjectivity of the other person, is matched by its prominence and 'appeal' on the cinema screen. The close-up of the face has long been one of the commonest and most recognisable images in cinema. 'Film theory,' according to Bernadette Wegenstein, 'takes the instance of the facial close-up as the moment of utmost identification for the viewer—that is, the moment when the film protagonist 'convincingly' the viewer of his or her presence within the medium' (2002, 231). In other words, the close-up of the face in cinema is sometimes understood to draw viewers into a film by appealing to our need to recognise aspects of ourselves on screen. This supposedly allows us to enter more easily into the film's narrative, into the social world it depicts, and become caught up in the action ourselves.

In Levinas's view, images of the face are not ethical because they make the face into an object: 'a statue, an immobile instant, an idol' (Robbins 1999, 132). But surely the moving images of cinema constitute an exception? Images, for Levinas, are the impoverished copies of reality—caricatures of the 'face' of the real (1989, 136-137). Reality has an ethical dimension because it has a face, but images do not. Yet, what if, instead of merely being the 'shadow' of reality, the images of art constitute a reverse side of the face of the real? And what if the cinema screen—its 'face'— leads us potentially to ethical experience by way of having two sides, facing the social world from opposite directions? Films, moreover, generally do not freeze or petrify the human faces they depict; rather they preserve their animation and changing expressions.⁶ No doubt they transform the face in certain ways (e.g. by flattening its dimensions); yet it is not the form taken by the face that is most important in the ethical relation. What is most important is

⁶ In "Reality and its Shadow", however, Levinas writes of the 'quasi-eternal duration' of art, which locks beings into their fate and commits them to 'the infinite repetition of the same acts'. Even the temporality of non-plastic arts such as cinema, he suggests, 'does not shatter the fixity of images' (1989, 138-139).

to be able to orient oneself before the face in such a way as to 'see' or think beyond its form.

Film perception, and indeed the viewer's own perception, plays a significant part in this orientation before the face. Frontality is a strategy or technique of cinematic perception, and one of its effects can be to create multiple subjects of address. *Medium Cool* (Wexler, 1969), for example, which Renov describes in *The Subject of Documentary* as 'a collision of history with fiction' (2004, 23), uses the technique to create a 'sudden confluence of...three registers of spectatorship', namely a fictional interviewer, the filmmaker, and the audience (30). The face-to-face here includes fictional characters, a 'real' director/cameraman, viewers, and the screen. It is as if the subject of perception is split amongst us all and therefore its identity put into doubt.⁷ This can be understood in Levinas's terms as 'the Other [facing] me and [putting] me in question' (1991b, 207)—who actually is being addressed? The face, claims Levinas, 'tears consciousness up from its center, submitting it to the Other' (207). For Robbins, Levinas's ethics is characterised by 'a radical putting into question of the self in the presence of the face of the other' (1999, 75). Consciousness—in other words, intentionality—becomes decentralised because of obligation or ethical thinking.

Put differently, this means a decentralisation of the ego or a diffusion of the transcendental (Husserlian) subject. Responsibility for the Other and alterity take over from accountability for the self and presence. The face on screen, positioned frontally, invites our response—our responsiveness. By reaching out from the diegesis of the film, it implores us to listen and look beyond the narrative.⁸ Describing the direct address given by a black militant in *Medium Cool*, Renov writes that 'the thrusting forefinger of the

⁷ Sarah Ruth Kozloff makes a similar point regarding frontality or direct address in television, although not in terms of the viewer's responsibility. 'Direct address', she writes, 'refers to the situation when someone on TV—a news anchor, a talk show host, a master of ceremonies, a reporter—faces the camera lens and appears to speak directly to the audience at home. In this situation what we seem to have is a precipitous collapse of the six narrative participants [i.e. real author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, real reader] into merely two—the speaker and the viewer. When Dan Rather (who functions both as supervising editor and anchor of the *CBS Evening News*) faces the camera and relates the evening news, he simultaneously figures as real author, implied author, and on-screen narrator, while I, sitting at home, am simultaneously narratee, implied viewer, and real viewer' (1987, 59).

⁸ The convention of direct address, and the idea that it can break out of the diegesis or narrative world, has been parodied in episodes of the animated TV series *The Simpsons*. For example, a character will suddenly look towards the camera and apparently address 'you', the viewer, but the subsequent shot (or a reframing movement) reveals that the addressee is another character in the diegesis.

militant forces a recognition upon all who share privilege, in life as in fiction; those who tolerate suppression and disenfranchisement (in representation as in commerce or law) are destined to suffer its deadly backlash' (2004, 30). Here is an invitation to think ethically, and a 'direct' questioning of the subject of perception. Similarly, in *Funny Games* (Haneke, 1997), when one of a pair of sociopathic torturers pauses to wink and grin directly at the camera, he steps out of the diegesis momentarily ('stopping' the action, or suspending the narrative), faces the audience, and puts the question wordlessly to viewers that they might be taking some kind of perverse pleasure in his unethical behaviour.

The direct address or frontal facing position can be seen, Renov notes, as a threat to the 'imaginary plenitude' of cinematic vision (2004, 30).⁹ We can say also that it disrupts the 'totality' of film's intentionality, in the sense that a totality for Levinas encompasses everything that can be taken up by consciousness as an object. The face that looks back at the screen, and back at the viewer, may cause a rupture to occur in the classical form of film perception: that of the transcendental subject. In other words, it expresses something that cannot be accounted for within the totality of the transcendental subject's intentions. Why does such a rupture occur? In transcendental perception, the subject is always intentional, and present in each act. But when a face stares back at it, the subject of perception is asked a question: who is being faced or addressed? In the example from *Medium Cool*, there appear to be multiple addressees, or 'registers of spectatorship', as Renov calls them (2004, 30). The sense of plenitude in the transcendental subject is therefore lost as it splits off into a diversity of positions.¹⁰ Another way of saying this is that the questioning, frontally orientated face on screen disrupts any belief or tacit awareness on the part of the viewer that there exists only a single subject of perception in the film experience. The viewer is not only confronted with the fact of his or her own perception (intentionality, consciousness, etc.), which is distinct from the film's, but must also face the possibility of a third or even fourth subject of perception—in *Medium Cool*, the filmmaker and the interviewer (not to mention the rest of the audience).

⁹ This is a reference to Christian Metz and psychoanalytic film theory. For Metz, the spectator is 'all-perceiving', 'a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every *there is*'; the spectator's sense of plenitude comes from identifying 'with himself as a pure act of perception' (1997, 173-174).

¹⁰ This splitting is different from when, for example, editing is used to give us multiple perspectives of an event or scene. In such cases, the integrity of the transcendental subject position can still be maintained.

Likewise, in Morris's work—particularly *Mr. Death* and *The Fog of War*—the Interrotron enables interviewees to face more than one subject front-on.¹¹ In each case, the audience is brought within the same visual field of spectatorial address as the filmmaker-interviewer. These facing positions implicate multiple subjects of perception, rather than a single, transcendental subject capable of synthesising and accounting for everything that comes before it. The effect of the Interrotron technique can be unnerving: with Fred Leuchter or Robert McNamara facing the camera directly, implicating us as well as Morris in the interview space, it feels as though we are being recognised and misrecognised—incorrectly addressed or identified—at the same time. They seem to be responding to questions that we, not Morris, have asked, although we know this to be untrue. We are aware not only of Morris's 'visual' presence, but also that the face on screen is addressing that presence, that consciousness, rather than ours. Surely the 'direct addressee' is not us but Morris himself? Then again, for the interviewees, Morris is only an image hovering before the camera lens. Thus, the Interrotron appears to eliminate directness from the face-to-face interview, even though it yields especially intimate results where the viewer is concerned. Further, it highlights what may be an essential aspect of all face-to-face encounters and all social relations, namely that the other person is never 'given' or available to us directly—whether in consciousness or phenomenological description. Instead, recognising another person always contains an element of misrecognition, or something irreducible that escapes identification. For example, Robbins explains, following Levinas and Maurice Blanchot, that 'the face-to-face encounter has nothing symmetrical about it. Blanchot comments: 'I never face the one who faces me. My manner of facing the one who faces me is not an equal confrontation of presences. The inequality is irreducible'' (Robbins 1991, 140-141). Yet acknowledgment of this failure to reach complete identification, to reduce to presence, is also fundamental to an ethics of alterity.

The central themes in *Mr. Death* and *The Fog of War* are also ethical ones, focusing on capital punishment, the Holocaust, and United States policy in Vietnam. Fred Leuchter, the protagonist of *Mr. Death*, is a designer of state execution machines, and his expertise in this field leads to his being called upon legally to inspect remnants of the gas chambers at

¹¹ Morris uses the same technique in *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control* (1997). See also Rosenheim's (1996) discussion of the Errol Morris TV series *Interrotron Stories*.

Auschwitz. He concludes controversially that they could not have been gas chambers at all, and later becomes a revisionist spokesperson. Robert McNamara was U.S. Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, and he speaks candidly about the fatal consequences of his actions and decisions, conceding that some of them might be seen as war crimes. And yet the first of his eleven 'lessons' outlined in *The Fog of War* is to empathise with your enemy: 'we must try', McNamara explains, 'to put ourselves inside their skin and look at us through their eyes'. The Interrotron technique seems particularly appropriate here, inviting the audience to divide its empathy between interviewer and interviewee: we are 'inside the skin' of Morris watching McNamara's face, which appears to stare back at us.¹²

Arguably, the ethical dimension of Morris's films derives not simply from the fact that they deal with ethical problems, but it is complemented and enhanced by the direct address. The moral ambiguity of the interviewees relates to concerns that they are overly removed from the people whose deaths they have been responsible for, and this is reflected in the ambiguity of their address. The front-on facing position hides an indirectness and mediation that are illustrative of the reasons why such deaths may have been facilitated and carried out. In *Mr. Death*, for example, Leuchter describes proudly how he has designed a lethal injection machine that removes the human factor from executions, thus maximising the level of mediation involved in killing another person. Responsibility shifts from Leuchter to the execution machine—or, in McNamara's case, to the war machine. For instance, McNamara tells how, one night in 1945, the Americans burned to death 100,000 Japanese civilians. 'Were you aware that this was going to happen?' asks Morris. 'Well,' McNamara replies sheepishly, 'I was part of a mechanism that in a sense recommended it'. Such mechanisms remove the need for a face-to-face encounter with another person—here, the 'enemy'. They mediate violence, making it seem less direct and less brutal. Ironically, Morris also mediates his interviews using a machine, the Interrotron. This makes our face-to-face contact with Leuchter and McNamara seem both direct and indirect, suggesting its immediacy while being inescapably mediated. This ambiguity encourages us to think of the ways in which we 'face

¹² The idea of being inside the skin of a character is suggested by films such as *Dark Passage* (Daves, 1947) and *Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery, 1947), wherein we see things from the protagonist's point of view for long segments (or in the latter's case, the entire film). Other characters therefore directly address the protagonist, the camera, and the spectator at once. Vivian Sobchack discusses *Lady in the Lake* at length, claiming however that 'the kind of identification that [it] attempts to achieve between spectator and character fails' (1992, 235).

up' to people in general (i.e. perhaps not always as directly as we think), and to what extent we take responsibility for our behaviour towards others.

How, then, are we to respond to faces on screen like those in Morris's films? Should we sympathise with Leuchter, or at least try to understand his point of view, however perverse? It may sound absurd to suggest we should feel responsibility towards this man, given that he has absolved the Nazis so massively of blame for the deaths of the Jews in World War II. Leuchter designs machines that kill people, machines that remove the need to face up to the victims directly. He is comfortable making claims that deny the Holocaust because he does not have to confront the victims or their families. We can see how this is possible for Leuchter. We can also understand how McNamara could get caught up in a 'mechanism' that recommended the burning of Tokyo. The mediation of face-to-face encounters can restrict our ethical imagination—which becomes apparent when we are aware of the mediating work of the Interrotron. How does the Interrotron affect our ability to empathise? In one sense, it enhances the effect of viewing the world through the mechanical 'eye' of a camera. If our empathy shifts according to this new perspective, the Interrotron enables us to empathise with Morris, who shares the camera's line of sight. We therefore come close to experiencing the face-to-face encounters between Morris and Leuchter (or McNamara), even though the use of the Interrotron means those encounters were never 'direct'. But by viewing these films, we also experience a mediation process that allows us to grasp intellectually the fact that both Leuchter and McNamara have been involved in mediated encounters which had morally questionable, even repugnant, consequences.

The Interrotron adds to the mediating effects of the screen while simultaneously creating the illusion that mediation between character and viewer is minimised. The way in which we respond to Leuchter's or McNamara's face, and whether or not, in Levinas's terms, we submit our consciousness to the Other—in other words, respond ethically—depends on how we understand mediation. If responsibility begins with the face-to-face encounter, perhaps in the age of the screen and mediated social encounters our sense of responsibility is changing. The ubiquity of screens does not mean the end of responsibility or empathy; rather, it makes the viewer responsible for reaching beyond the presence of images in order to 'see' and respect the conscious life of others.

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