

Reality and its Contact Point: Criticism and Ethics

Kitakoji Takashi (Film Critics)

In *Yi Yi* (2000), directed by Edward Yang just prior to his tragic early death, there is a handsome rather ephemeral young man in his teens who, having invited a friend — the girl whom he loves — on a date to the cinema, announces as follows: “Films mirror life. Movies make everyday life twice as interesting. For example, we might not have committed murder, but we can understand what murder is. We can thank film for that.”

Historically, one of the strongest criticisms of cinema has been the claim that violence depicted on the screen has a bad influence on viewing audiences. We might think that it is because Yang is playing with the grossly simple moralistic judgements that are brought down on cinema that he gives to this young man these lines which appear to us as both natural and appropriate. However, the issue presented by the film maker is actually not so straightforward. In fact, we discover towards the end of the film, together with the girl who was the young man’s date as she watches television, that he has, in fact, committed murder.

Critiquing film on the grounds of an absence of moral value doesn’t necessarily imply that cinema should be morally worthwhile. While we often see this sort of reverse argument, the film maker’s intention should perhaps be to avoid precisely that. Film should not be forced to critique crime in the name of morality, nor should it be required to champion causes. Of course, these sorts of positions will always be put forward, but they are unrelated to the field of film criticism. Film might teach us what murder is without the necessity of our getting blood on our own hands, but it will not prevent real murder. This is not the role of film. While freeing film from the need to be a faithful representation of reality, film criticism should nonetheless acknowledge that film

does dismantle this reality. It is this sort of acknowledgement that situates film criticism in an ethical realm. The great filmmakers distanced themselves from evaluating cinema as either good or bad and thereby revealed the media’s ambiguity. Here we find a model for an ethics and critical approach that is suitable also for film criticism.

Nietzsche trenchantly critiqued morality based on the rigid construction of a pre-determined set of values that marked good from bad or true from false as something that judged and atrophied our lives. If we regard “ethics” as something that resists such a rigid moral code, then surely this (resistance) gives rise to questions such as what it is that we, in fact, do value, how values change and [how these things are related to] creativity. Film criticism should not subscribe to a predetermined set of immovable values. On the other hand, critics need to avoid the misinformed relativist position which says that you critique by writing whatever you like and to not abandon the search for a sort of universalism. This is a necessary ethic in criticism. Yet, although criticism cannot proceed without values, neither can we in the first place form values without critique. So while we can say that values already encompass criteria (or standards), we should not be fearful of on-going changes or the transmutation of these values. These concerns are no empty armchair theory for neither is cinema some sort of empty armchair theory. I will repeat that while cinema may not be a faithful representation of reality, it is at the very point that it dismantles (and thereby reconstructs) reality that film most definitely touches on “reality.” We might regard this as the site of crisis of cinema and it is precisely at this site that the demand for an ethical critique is located. (Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Yamagata Film Critics’ Workshop

This project aims to encourage thinking, writing, and reading about film, using documentaries as an entry point, while offering immersion in the live atmosphere of an international film festival. Participants will receive guidance from professional film critics and write their own articles, which will be presented publicly.

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