

Joseph H. Kupfer

Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care through Cinema

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*In **Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care through Cinema**, Joseph Kupfer offers an introduction to the ethics of care in popular film appropriate for an undergraduate or graduate course on philosophy, film, or masculinity studies. Care as a philosophical field has been profoundly influenced by feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, although care and feminism are not synonymous, and Kupfer does not here build a critique of gender-based oppression.*

Kupfer's emphasis is on the tension between the individual and society in film narrative. He studies an individual in *Saturday Night Fever*, the intimate spheres of family, friends, and community in *The Squid and the Whale*, *Friends with Money*, *Monster's Ball*, and *Radio*, and the nation-state in *Gandhi*. Despite Kupfer's stated progression from individual to group, almost all of the chapters are clearly framed by the experiences of one male character--Tony, Walt, Hank, "Radio," and Gandhi. Although he does not use the term *masculinity studies*, it would be more precise than his title's reference to feminism. The ethics of care has been critiqued as theoretically indistinct or ambiguous; Kupfer's decision to focus on mostly male characters in film narratives brings definition and specificity to his work.

For Kupfer, film narrative is "even more critical" for care than the intelligible concept of personhood found in moral philosophy: "It is fair to say that without the concrete quasi-biographies of fiction--of film and literature--the ethics of care is inconsistent with itself or radically incomplete" (1). I would have liked to have seen that conclusion explained or discussed further. However, if we accept it for the moment, then it would also be fair to say that without "rounded portraits" of nonnormative characters in film and literature discussed at equal length with Kupfer's mostly male, cisgender, heteronormative, and white subjects, the ethics of care remains internally inconsistent and radically incomplete (1).

Indeed, it would be fair to say that the ethics of care requires a much greater emphasis on marginalized, nonnormative characters than is present in most academic studies. For example, regarding *Monster's Ball*, Kupfer posits that the black female character of Leticia, oppressed by society, finds stability and care in an intimate relationship with the white male character of Hank. However, the film's specific narrative choice to make Leticia dependent for her personal and financial well-being on the generosity of a white male lover remains questionable. For Kupfer, issues of social justice, including critiques of whiteness and maleness, are of secondary importance to film narrative and the philosophical dimension of care.

The introduction provides a historical overview of the ethics of care, including a brief section on related feminist studies. Kupfer founds care on a view of others as individuals in particular circumstances and on interpersonal relationships juxtaposed with competent autonomy. Feminist scholarship is rhetorically distanced from the author's own ethical position with such comments as "even feminists view autonomy as a set of competencies" (3). Kupfer is particularly critical of some feminist approaches; he finds that Marilyn Friedman is "extreme," "too strong," and "overly restrictive" in her emphasis of social relations in understanding autonomy (3).

The first chapter, on the classic film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), examines self-care and moral growth in the narrative focused around the central figure of Tony. Kupfer's references to the rape culture of the narrative, emphasized so strongly in the closing sequences of the film, are brief, male-centric, and casual--remarkable in a self-described feminist study of care. The word "rape" is not used: to Kupfer, Tony's attempted "manhandl[ing]" of Stephanie and "forcing himself on her" demonstrate Tony's immaturity (26). The gang-rape of a first barely conscious and then explicitly unwilling Annette is addressed in terms of Tony being "hypocritical" by objecting to "Annette having sex with his friends" (26). The viciousness and then illusory optimism of the closing sequences are secondary for Kupfer to Tony's formation of an autonomous, transcendent narrative of self.

The second chapter, on the independent film *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), offers a more diffuse picture of care in family relationships, though etched in "failure" and "negative space" (32) and focused on the emergent authenticity of the male character Walt. Lacking "those cardinal virtues of care, attentiveness and responsiveness" from his father, Walt suffers emotionally and socially and does not develop the ability for self-creation that supports authenticity (114). Ironically, because of the paternal lack of care, Walt over-identifies with his father in an attempt to build that caring relationship on his own. This dysfunctional over-identification with a withholding father prevents Walt from developing adequately through his adolescence, because his distant father does not allow for essential mutuality in their experience of care. Distance and lack of care are depicted dramatically as a struggle in the titular museum diorama that had haunted Walt since childhood, emphasizing the destructive and even violent impact of paternal neglect. The end of the film suggests that Walt has become able to achieve some measure of healthy separation from his father;

development of introspection, self-exploration, and resistance to social pressure allow the young man to begin moving toward a healthy adult authenticity informed by the care he previously lacked.

The third chapter, on Nicole Holofcener's independent film *Friends with Money* (2006), studies the specific circumstances and exigencies of another diffuse group, six friends composed of three male-female married pairs. Economic inequality, and by extension social inequality, tests individual autonomy and interpersonal relationships. Kupfer quotes Linda Barclay's statement "Our ongoing success as an autonomous agent [sic] is affected by our ability to share our ideas, our aspirations, and our beliefs in conversation with others" in his chapters on *Monster's Ball* and *The Squid and the Whale* as well as in the introduction (3, 33, 65). That conversational ideal holds especially true for *Friends with Money*, as ultimately "helping friends see what is positive in their lives and encouraging joy in life itself" is a pivotal element of intimate personal relationships (51). The diffusion of this group struck me as a profound difference in narrative from the other five films discussed, and it would be interesting to see the director's choices unpacked from a gendered perspective.

In the fourth chapter, on the independent film *Monster's Ball* (2001), Kupfer's meticulous and sensitive unpacking of male characters who question their traditional gender roles continues to offer an important addition to masculinity studies and to respond to long-held critiques of care as a Nietzschean slave morality for women. Analyzing such moments as the yearning of the young male prison guard Sonny in *Monster's Ball* to transcend the Hegelian master-slave dichotomy, Kupfer demonstrates that care is not reducible to a trait oppressively assigned to women. When the dominant system is disrupted, care can have profound healing and liberating effects for men.

In the fifth chapter, the film *Radio* (2003), based on a true story, parallels *Monster's Ball* and foreshadows *Gandhi* with its depiction of a sensitive, mentally challenged young black man who gives and receives care in the context of a broad community. Maternalism and femininity often define care in the traditional sense, but *Radio* subverts traditional gender roles when the football coach relinquishes his prominent, deeply masculinized position to facilitate multiple communities' provision of care to the intuitive, vulnerable young man. For Kupfer, this gender reversal "is a merit of the film" that questions the stereotypical masculinity of football, although it could also be read as male co-option of traditionally female positions and another example of the focus shifting from female to male characters (90). The choice to portray a black character who must rely on the generosity of a white one, as in *Monster's Ball*, dampens autonomy and raises questions of race that this relatively unsophisticated film is unprepared to handle.

The sixth and final chapter, on Richard Attenborough's classic film *Gandhi* (1982), contrasts the ethics of care with the ethics of justice and offers Kupfer's most extensive, complex reconsideration of the feminist ethics of care. Justice is abstract and individual, whereas care is understood as concrete and social, as Kupfer demonstrates through a series of episodes from the film addressing racism, sexism, classism, and religious conflict in Gandhi's India. Although Kupfer took issue in the introduction with Marilyn Friedman's emphasis on social and dialogical relations, he returns to it throughout his book, and social relationships clearly form the basis of his approach to the individual, family, friends, communities, and the nation-state. Kupfer finds that, from the perspective of care, autonomy is ultimately inseparable from responsibility to others.

Ultimately, Gandhi demonstrates an integration of care and justice, through nonviolent resistance, for example, but also on such micro levels as insisting that cleaning of the latrines be done by all in turn, not only by "Untouchables." Gandhi's "emancipatory narrative," building from a picture of caring within families, extends that responsibility to social leaders as they make decisions that will affect all of society (100). Kupfer parallels this to Sara Ruddick's maternal theory that the parents are responsible for the family's welfare. The country of India becomes a social self, requiring care from its political and religious leaders.

This is a deceptively slim volume. It slowly builds in complexity until the conclusion, which retrospectively offers a new thematic arrangement: the parent-child relationship as fundamental to society, the virtues of care and the challenges of self-care, and the need to fashion narratives of self. Kupfer offers a

complex and provocative rereading of the texts, drawing out new meanings and parallels. The central parent-child relationship is a father-son relationship for most of these films, although that remains beneath the surface of Kupfer's discussion. Gandhi is described as a "*paterfamilias*," although his subversive paternalism is informed by care, not power (115). Care diffuses, and defuses.

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