

An Analysis of Ethics and Morality in *American History X* (Kaye, 1998).

Foucault states that the term 'ethics' isn't simply a general morality code but the rules that one sets for one's own behaviour (2000: 263). This suggests that morality represents standard codes that most people obey, and often have laws revolving around them. Whereas, ethics are the behavioral rules that individuals set for themselves and abide by, regardless of how personal and subjective they may be. Gauntlett gives the example of cheating; most people consider it immoral to be unfaithful to one's partner, but one's ethics will define what 'cheating' truly is and what is immoral and moral in relation to cheating (2008: 135). Thus it can be suggested that ethical positions can be influenced and manipulated, be it through socialisation or certain situations, due to the fact one's own behavioural code for life is subjective. One's ethical standpoint can also be influenced and changed by media, this is known as the Gerbner's cultivation theory:

This simple hypothesis – that watching a great deal of television [media] will be associated with a tendency to hold specific and distinct conception of reality, conceptions that are congruent with the most consistent and pervasive images and values of the media. (Shanhan and Morgan 1999: 3)

Gerbner argued that media could gradually change one's values and one's mindset, this suggests that films through their narrative and cinematic elements can persuade and manipulate a spectator's ethical viewpoint. I argue that *American History X* (Kaye, 1998) manipulates the audience's

understanding and view of ethics through the editing and perspective in certain scenes, the portrayal of certain groups and characters and the film's criticism of the justice system. *American History X* is the story of a young man, Danny, who writes a report about his older brother, Derek, who is being released from prison after murdering two black men who were trespassing on his property. In the first part of the film, the spectator is persuaded to believe that what Derek did was morally right, however as the film progresses it reveals a new perspective and new representations of previous characters and events which changes the audience's ethical view of Derek's crimes.

The first part of the film attempts to justify to the audience Derek's killing of the black intruders. The audience's ethical perspective is manipulated by several factors: the negative representation of black men, Derek being the family protector, and the glorified portrayal of Derek as a heroic figure.

The negative representation of black characters convinces the audience that the world will be better off without them – essentially making them the villains. In most mainstream action films, such as the James Bond franchise (1962-2012), the protagonist kills villains to save the world, which is for the greater good thus makes him the hero and morally right. Thompson says that utilitarianism, which was set out by Jeremy Bentham and developed by John Stuart Mill, is that when one makes a moral choice, one should do that which results in the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (2008: 82). Taking the example of James Bond again, he murders nameless goons throughout the films but since they are 'evil', thus a threat to the world,

there are no consequences for Bond's murders. He is hailed a hero for saving the greatest number of people possible, regardless of how he achieved it. Therefore, if the black characters are portrayed as the enemy, a threat to the world and to society, Derek is justified in killing them. This is for the greater good as it is in the best interests of both him and his family, but also the white American community.

Throughout the first half of the film, black men are represented as dangerous and threatening. In the basketball game scene, the separation between whites and blacks is enhanced and promotes the idea of seeing the black characters as 'the other' (Said, 1991). The black characters are different, they do not belong to the society that Derek was born into – therefore they are a threat to the norm and must be excluded and exiled. This is further enhanced by the fact that none of the black characters' names are ever mentioned, and the few bits of dialogue they have are littered with offensive racist phrases. The same black character also elbows Derek in the face while playing, and after that he is always on the right-hand side of the screen whereas Derek is always on the left, the dominant side, connoting that the black character is the 'bad-guy' in this situation as well as visually separating them. After the whites beat the blacks, the latter are forced to leave and never come back to the courts – there is a montage of cheering, happy white faces accompanied by heroic fanfare music. This suggests that the whites have won a war against "villains", representing black men as the enemy and as an obstacle to overcome.

Furthermore, in the first scene, when the two black men are breaking into Danny and Derek's truck, both men are crouching while holding weapons.

The static camera looks down on them from a high angle – connoting surveillance and criminality. They both have no dialogue and one is shot within the first three minutes of the scene – his death glorified by Derek shooting him multiple times as he flails in slow motion. These negative representations of black men make them appear dangerous, threatening and almost worthy of extermination for the good of the majority – therefore, by utilitarianism's criteria Derek is morally right in killing them. This argument is enhanced by the importance in American culture on self-defence (carrying a weapon) and protecting one's property. This contributes to Derek being morally right, not just from an ethical perspective but also within the eyes of the law. Throughout this opening scene, the audience is made to believe two things about Derek: that he is the father figure, the protector of his family; and that he is god-like. These two elements are in favour of Derek's killings being morally justified.

Litch (2002) summarizes Kant's ethical theory thus: morality is based around intentions; therefore Derek's reasons or intentions to kill his intruders determine whether it is a moral or immoral action. Derek is calm and collected as he grabs his gun and walks through his house to meet the intruders outside. Danny, who is shown as young and nervous, follows loyally, hiding behind Derek who acts as a protector. Though his family is not seen in the opening, there are several photos of younger siblings throughout the house, suggesting that there are children in the home as well as Danny, plus Derek's girlfriend. This enhances the need for Derek to take action – to protect his family. Protecting family, and especially children, is a high priority in western society, so Derek is justified in shooting the intruders to protect his family, a

morally good intention. This is also enhanced by the fact that Derek and his family are seen as actual people –humans and the innocents- whereas the black intruders are seen as ‘the other’, ‘the different’ and ‘the non-human’. The black intruders are not apart of their society, so they are a threat to the norm and the innocent.

After Derek kills the first intruder, there is a slow-motion scene of Derek walking towards the second intruder. In this scene he is made to look like a representation of God. The ‘Divine Command’ theory argues that whatever God commands is good (Thompson 2005: 134), so Derek, through his portrayal as divine, is morally right. There is no higher judgment than god, thus Derek is above all, including the spectator, so therefore all he does is morally right and unquestionable. Derek is in mid-long shot, and the background is completely black other than a bright light to the right of his head– connoting the shining star from the Christian Bible. His skin is pure white, contrasting the black background and he is also the definition of male beauty: tall, trim and muscular. Since Derek is aesthetically pleasing to the audience, it is easier for the spectator to believe him to be good and easier to pinpoint him as the hero/savior as opposed to the villain/threat. Non-diegetic choral music compliments this scene while also suggesting holiness with its associations with churches. He is centre of screen, and this shot lasts far longer than the others of this scene, only interrupted by close-ups of the remaining intruder and Danny staring off screen towards Derek. This shows his importance and his dominance over the characters, as well as the audience. Being shown as a god-like figure, Derek’s own ethics dictate and decide whether he is moral or not – this is known as ethical egoism. Ethical

egoism argues that when a person is making a moral choice that person will pursue his or her own interests exclusively (Rachels, 2003). Normally this is seen as selfish and self-serving, however when looking at Derek in this scene the audience is made to envy him, desire to be like him and generally adore him visually through what Mulvey describes as narcissism and scopophilia (1975). Also, since Derek is represented as a god, his word is law – linking divine command theory with ethical egoism, strengthening the argument of Derek being morally right. These positive elements of Derek, alongside the negative portrayal of black men, convince the audience that Derek killing the two black intruders was morally correct.

In contrast to the first part of the film, the second half shows Derek's actions as being immoral. Christopher Hamilton states “one cannot properly understand someone's moral judgment [or actions] without understanding the details of his life” (2001: 60). Therefore the audience could not truly judge what Derek did, until they saw the opening replayed again halfway through the film from a new perspective with more information on Derek as a character. The new scene reveals Derek's true intention; he had no desire to protect his family, he wanted to murder out of his racist hatred towards black people. This makes Kant's ethical theory no longer a usable tool in justifying the murders because Derek's intentions are now morally wrong. Furthermore, Derek is no longer the protector of the family and of society; he is now the intruder and the threat as opposed to the black characters. Also utilitarianism, the idea that killing black people will help the good of the community, gets wiped away through showing the humiliation and horror of the black victims,

thus making them actual characters with personalities and feelings as opposed to one-dimensional villains. They are no longer the 'other' or a threat to the norm; they are made to be seen as people and thus apart of the human community.

When the opening is played again from a different view point, Derek is no longer the calm protector, but a vicious neo-nazi murderer. His calm and controlled facade is replaced by an attitude of racist language and violent threats. Furthermore, hidden from the previous scene, Derek's girlfriend is shown in close-up screaming at Danny to get down as bullets fly. Derek's mother comes running down the stairs, face skewed in horror before cutting to a baby crying. This shows the horror and reality of murder, portraying Derek as horrifying as opposed to protective, representing him as the true danger and threat to society in the spectator's eye.

In the same scene, instead of walking in slow motion, Derek drags the remaining intruder across the pavement, forcing him to put his teeth on the curb. The diegetic sound of his teeth grinding on the concrete is enhanced, enforcing the pain and shock of the action. The choral music is replaced by unsettling orchestral music dominated by brass crescendos building tension and horror before the 'curb stomp'. There are medium-close ups of Danny screaming at Derek to stop, no longer the loyal brother, followed by an extreme-close up of the black man's teeth as he cries out for help – all connoting the immorality of what Derek is about to do. After the murder, Derek spits on his victim as Danny falls to his knees. While the police arrest Derek, he turns to Danny in slow motion with the choral music from the opening scene playing again the background. This time, there is no connotation to

holiness, his heroic god-like figure is now broken and replaced by that of the devil. Also, by reusing the slow motion and the choral music the film is being ironic; criticizing society, while pointing the finger at the audience, on its narrow perspective of this situation and of the world. This negates the divine command theory whilst indicating that ethical egoism is not a good way of judging what is morally right and wrong. Furthermore, the philosopher Schopenhauer describes *schadenfreude*, a term meaning pleasure gained from the suffering of others and often associated with revenge, as one of the worst traits of humanity (2002: 12); this can be linked to ethical egoism. This can be seen when the police arrest Derek; the camera is placed below him, suggesting his dangerous superiority, and his facial expression is one of arrogance and satisfaction, getting joy from the crime he committed – this is further enhanced as he lifts his eyebrows smugly at Danny. Danny no longer looks at Derek in awe, the way the audience did previously; instead he has a look of absolute despair, unable to comprehend what his brother has just done. This new portrayal of Derek and his true intentions when killing the intruders, has switched the audience's ethical perspective on the situation. The film has manipulated the ethics of the situation by withholding information from the beginning scene, and revealing it here in the replay. Thus I argue that, regardless of general morality, one's ethical standpoint can be manipulated and this can change whether one may judge an action as immoral or moral. In this case, Derek was portrayed as moral by protecting his family, but now he is seen as immoral since he killed out of blind hate.

Another scene that manipulates the spectator's moral and ethical

opinion is the speech that Derek gives to his Neo-Nazi group and the supermarket raid afterwards. During the speech, Derek is always centre of screen, with the camera below his eye line causing the audience to look up at him as he spouts intelligent claims and facts about immigrants in his State. This is inter-cut with several close-ups of members' eyes, including Danny's, starring off screen at their leader, Derek, in awe. His calm attitude and leadership, as well as the cinematic elements, causes the spectator to believe his words and convinces the audience that what he is saying is right. It is represented as another fight for the hard-working Americans against the illegal immigrants. However this illusion is shattered when they raid the supermarket store afterwards. Baggini says "the rightness or wrongness of an action is dependant on the overall consequences" (2002: 131). If the raid was never seen, then the spectator may have continued to believe that Derek and his group of Neo-Nazis were morally right in disliking immigrants. However by revealing the consequences of the raid and their hatred, the audience has a different ethical opinion.

During the raid, the whites are now the violent, threatening and dangerous ones, instead of the non-Americans. This is shown through a montage of violent attacks, vandalism and threats. A black-woman and an Asian man are shot in high-angle, stressing their victimization and vulnerability, as they are beaten and restrained by Derek and his group. The woman shakes violently and begs for mercy as the white men laugh at her, saying that she stinks. The woman screams silently in extreme close-up as the white men pour food products on her face, including milk. As they run from the store, the woman slumps to the floor, her trousers wet through urinating

herself, and cries hysterically. The woman has been humiliated, abused and traumatized – making her human. These consequences reveal this act to be immoral. This makes this scene an interesting insight into ethics because 2 minutes prior to this scene the film had convinced the audience, through Derek's speech, that white Americans needed to stamp out immigrants since they are nothing more than parasites to American society, therefore by taking action they were being moral. The non-Americans, or more specifically Blacks, are no longer the violent thugs that were portrayed in the first part of the film; they are now innocent victims who are targets of vicious racism. By revealing the overall consequences, an action that originally appeared moral can be seen as immoral, as was proven by this scene and the first scene with its second perspective replay.

Derek now being threat to society and the reveal of the consequences of the black victims, making them human to the spectator, the audience can conclude that Derek was in fact immoral when killing the black intruders.

One of *American History X*'s major themes is the criticism of the justice system while questioning how one pays for one's crimes when it comes to morality? This is shown through the time Derek spends in prison, along with Danny's death at the end.

In prison, Derek encounters Lamont, one of the few positive, though slightly stereotypical, representations of black men. Lamont is seen as a funny yet kind character, helping Derek through prison and befriending him regardless of the fact that he is a racist – these elements signify that he is an ally and a decent person. Derek, knowing his own crimes, asks how it is

possible for someone like Lamont to get six years in prison. Lamont, reluctantly, says that while robbing a store, he accidentally dropped a television on an officer's foot – however the officer claimed it was assault. The camera looks downward and lingers on Lamont's serious expression, a contrast to his usually humorous carefree self – connoting the seriousness of his racial profiling. Despite the contrast in the level of immorality of their crimes, Lamont has more prison time than Derek. Is this because Lamont “assaulted” the officer? Is Lamont a victim of racial profiling? Or is the importance of white men greater than that of black men?

American History X confronts the issues of ambiguity in justice systems as well as in government laws. Lamont's prolonged time in prison determined by his colour and by a twisted truth/lie is evidence for this theory of ambiguity. Another indicator is the scene where Danny is typing his report about Derek. Danny stares silently at his computer. He types, “If I had testified he would have gotten life”. This statement suggests that Danny was able to get his brother released sooner simply by not telling his side of the story. Also the fact these words are typed, never spoken and quickly erased before the audience can fully read them connotes the sneakiness and hidden truths revolving around the justice system.

Derek may have only served three years in prison, however he was also punished outside of the law system when the other Neo-Nazi prisoners raped him. The only one who comforts him is Sweeney, his old (black) lecturer, and shortly afterwards he begins to form a true friendship with Lamont. This suggests that the horrifying rape that he endured, that the police had full knowledge of, changed his ways and led him on the path to morality.

Does that mean that one crime can pay for another? Rachels says that retributivism is the idea that wrongdoers should be “paid back” for their wicked deeds: an eye for an eye (2002: 446). However, retributivism is flawed since how does one crime pay for another? And how does one measure the worth of a crime or measure its punishment? This can be seen when Danny is shot - Derek is still being punished even though he has paid for his immorality. Is this to suggest a never ending-cycle of revenge and punishment? Bentham thought so – he believed that the idea of retributivism simply increased the amount of suffering in the world because punishing a crime with another crime is simply immoral (1948: 170).

American History X thus reflects humanity’s questions and criticisms regarding ethics and morality. The film stresses flaws in the justice system and those who run it while also signifying that even within theories of morality, there is ambiguity in deciphering what is truly moral. Above all, the film shows that the changing of the situation, or the changing of its representation, is capable of affecting one's ethical opinion. I argue that *American History X* stresses that when judging something to be immoral and moral, one must always be bias and see the situation from several perspectives, not just the one’s that society dictate to us through socialisation and media.

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