

Which Movie Worth Your Money: Kierkegaard's Perspective

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Theme: Art and Aesthetic

Department of Philosophy- Savitribai Phule Pune University

Presented by: Joyson K Cherian (*Research Scholar*)

I. Introduction

Art is expression. It is communication. It is an experience in itself. Although there is no universally accepted definition of art, it is commonly used to describe something of beauty, or a skill which produces an aesthetic result. There are various forms of art. Traditional and contemporary art encompasses activities as diverse as: painting, sculpture, music, dance, architecture, theatre, painting, drawing, cartoons, printmaking, ceramics, stained glass, photography, video, film, cinematography etc.

From this vast array of artistic work, I would like to focus on cinema or movies. I approach the topic not as a movie critique which is a discipline in itself but as a student of philosophy, particularly from the perspective of Kierkegaard who is considered as father of existentialism and recently been noted in some philosophical literature as grandfather of existentialism. I will be using the Kierkegaardian framework in the analysis of movies and its significance. Perhaps, it would be apt to mention that I am referring to movies which are released in the movie theaters in ten metropolitan Indian cities.

II. Kierkegaard's Epistemology

Kierkegaard's philosophy revolved around the search for the answer to the question, 'What life is all about?' This he proposed could not be discussed using direct communication. So he used 'indirect communication' as means of communication chiefly through pseudonyms, irony, sarcasm, metaphor, paradox. His aim was rhetorical, to attract the readers' attention and then seduce him into the truth.

Secondly he proposed the question of life can be appropriated subjectively. So he makes distinction between objective and subjective truth. Objective truth includes natural sciences, mathematics, and consensual knowledge. But subjective truth includes truth for life, personal experience and religious faith. From the point of art, objective thinker focuses on illusions but subjective thinker focuses on the lived reality of actual existence. The objective thinker relates to his life as a spectator but subjective thinker recognizes his own existence as an actual, finite, ethically responsible individual.

However we must note that subjective is always in danger of becoming objective, for example a religious fanatic who believes God like as if it is an objective truth. The mark of subjective truth is that it is not based on general consensus of the crowd but it is individualistic. In subjective truth doubt and faith co-exist but the individual puts whole life into what one believes in the form of passionate commitment which is contrary to following of a ritual or tradition based on the consensus of others.

III. Three stages of life

Kierkegaard's looked upon development of self as three stages of life- the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. It can be viewed as progressive but his approach to these stages of life is hardly straightforward. The aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious are not mere steps on a ladder, arranged in such a way that to reach the ethical is to abandon the aesthetic or to reach religious is to abandon the other two. Evans aptly writes, "The ethical must in some way be preserved within the religious sphere, even if it is transformed as well, just as the aesthetic must be preserved within the ethical and religious spheres."¹ Therefore the Stages are paradigms of existence and not necessarily as periods of life that one proceeds through in sequence.

a. Aesthetic Stage

For Kierkegaard aesthetics concerns what one can see, touch, hear, and so on, just as "the aesthetic" refers to a life oriented to the senses. At Aesthetic stage man's chief goal is pleasure. In the words of utilitarian philosophy it suggest a stage of life where man seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The epistemic bent is objective. This stage of life seeks consensus of the society. But in the end it leads to despair because the temporary nature of pleasure is always chasing. From the point of art at this stage the aesthete is preoccupied with form than meaningful content. Climacus the pseudonym of Kierkegaard voices his objections to the objective and the aesthetic by noting, "Esthetically it is altogether appropriate that I as a spectator am enchanted by the stage scenery, the theatrical moonlight, and go home after having spent a very pleasant evening, but ethically it holds true that there is no change."² The objective thinker relates to his life as a spectator as if it did not require his own actual, ethical involvement. By failing to recognize his own existence the individual pretends to be what he is not. Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*, "The esthetic is not evil but the indifferent."³ For example he writes, "tragedy is supposed to awaken compassion, 'but what sort of compassion is it in which the spectator is not called upon to rush to provide assistance, but is only invited to enjoy the pain.'⁴

¹ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 69.

² Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Vol. 1 Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 393.

³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*. 2 Vol. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 169.

⁴ *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* 2 vols. Ed. Niels Jorgen Cappelorn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Soderquist. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 282.

Thus art, titillates but does not elevate. As Pattison explains, “The aesthetic may no longer be regarded as a legitimate stage on the path to a religious awakening. To stay with the aesthetic is to refuse the religious. . . . an age that fails to choose faith with the decisiveness of inward passion is . . . an ‘aesthetic’ age. The aesthetic has become the inauthentic.”⁵

b. Ethical Stage

The second stage is Ethical stage in which the focuses on doing right in contrast to seeking pleasure. The epistemic bent is subjective. This stage of life is marked by choices. The individual recognizes his own existence as an actual, finite, ethically responsible individual. From the point of art an ethical individual takes serious cognizance of the actuality of lived experience, in which subject ought to be engaged.

c. Religious Stage⁶

The third stage is Religious stage in which there is a tension between ‘what is right’ versus following ‘divine command.’ Kierkegaard repeatedly uses example of Abraham a character from Bible to illustrate it. In this illustration Abraham has to choose between the divine command to sacrifice his son versus the ethical implication of murder. This chasm cannot be bridged by logic or empirical observation but is a leap of faith. This leap is not divinizing of faith but formation of faith itself. From the point of art it brings individual into passionate commitment to something. This would result in tension of inwardness. On one hand the aesthetic strives for completion, for unity like Hegelian dialectic i.e, when a thesis is posited, its opposite is *eo ipso* posited, which is the antithesis. This yields a result, which is the synthesis (unity) of the two. On the other hand is subjective appropriation which is ‘becoming.’ It is this constant inwardness of becoming from which there can be individual character.

IV. Classification of movies

For Kierkegaard Objective truth is understood as the adequacy between thought and being and is expressed in direct communication - WHAT

Subjective truth is understood as subject’s appropriation and it can only be communicate indirectly – HOW

Cinematic expression is concerned with:

⁵ George Pattison, “Art in an Age of Reflection,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 97.

⁶ The religious sphere is divided into Religiousness A and B. Religiousness A applies to the individual who feels a sense of guilt before God. It is a religiousness of immanence. Religiousness B is transcendental in nature. It consists of a leap of faith to the divine. Kierkegaard also mentions intermediate stages, each of which he calls a confinement, or boundary. Irony lies between the esthetic and the ethical, and humor lies between the ethical and the religious. Religion A is characterized by a passive relation to the divine, with the accompanying suffering and sense of guilt. But it is distinguished from religion B, or transcendent religion, in that the tie which binds the individual to the divine.

- How to speak what cannot be spoken
- How to think what is unthinkable
- How to approach what cannot be represented

It forces people to think- and each may take away a different thought from it. In this sense I think cinematic expression is indirect and is subjective. However, as noted earlier subjective epistemic condition is always in danger of becoming objective if it is not appropriated by making a passionate commitment towards it.

Using the framework of Kierkegaard's methodology movies, I think movies can be classified into four types.

1. Sensical Movies

These movies reveal the face of the society. They use imitation. They try to reveal 'things as it is' i.e., present reality or 'things as it was' i.e., past reality. For examples the movie, '*Uri: The Surgical Strike*.' According to Kierkegaardian framework these movies would fall under the purview of objective knowledge because they talk of things that are in the present or past history.

2. Enigmatic Movies

These movies are futuristic imagination. Here the thoughts are liberal i.e., not bound to present realities so much so that they may be presently unintelligible that is why I call them enigmatic. They try to reveal 'things as it is going to be' i.e., possible future reality, for example most of the space movies, '*Transformers*' etc. According to Kierkegaardian framework these movies would fall under the purview of objective knowledge because they talk of things that are inferences drawn from imagination based on the present knowledge. They bring forth a future prediction based on present or past history.

3. Moral Movies

These movies are normative i.e, they try to reveal 'things as it ought to be' for example the movie '*Jai Ho*.' They reveal aspirations and may include dreams and utopia. According to Kierkegaardian framework these movies would fall under the purview of subjective knowledge because they talk of things which are ethical based on present or past history i.e., a combination of present description and normative. It is subjective because it calls for personal action.

4. Non-sensical Movies

These movies are trying to capture what is elusive and indescribable. Here there is constant juggling between real and non-real. They try to reveal 'whether things or non-things.' Here the idea is of redemption. For example '*Time Machine*' has an innate desire to reverse the past; Horror movies whether comical or scary explores life beyond physical; Fantasy inclusive of fairy tales, mythology and super-humans search 'beyond the world we know as it is' or is non-historical. According to Kierkegaardian framework these movies would fall under the purview of

subjective knowledge because they talk of things which transcend history and objective knowledge. They are subjective because it creates existential tension between ‘what is’ and ‘what is not.’

V. Crowd Vs Individual

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is the search to be an individual. I think the three stages is a journey ‘from crowd to individual.’ He makes clear distinction between crowd and individual. This has specific references to art and press. For Kierkegaard, consuming media is a risk-free activity, allowing people to adopt all sorts of opinions without ever having to act on them, without being accountable for them. Authentic faith requires decision, commitment and responsibility. Being an individual is not something to be expressed externally but something to be experienced internally through life. For Kierkegaard, the filmmaker’s duty is not to give answers or explain ideas but to provoke the viewer through indirect communication in realizing the importance of the individually experienced point of view.⁷

On the contrary by becoming a part of the public, people become anonymous and lose their individuality. They become just a number in the crowd. This takes away the individuals’ own responsibility and commitment, discouraging people from coming to their own conclusions and making decisions that can serve as foundation for action. Under such circumstance it does not create community because it is made of “unsubstantial individuals who are never united or never can be united in the simultaneity of any situation (either good or bad).”⁸

Participation in ‘the public’ creates a mood of tension without resolution. Engagement is replaced by halfhearted reflection. As a ‘member of the public,’ an individual does not relate himself in the relation but is a reflection.

According to Kierkegaard reflection has paralyzing effect. Reflection here means two things:

- Firstly reflection as in a mirror. The world of art merely reflected things, with no substance of its own. What the public received was no more than reflections of reality.
- Secondly, he talks about reflection as pondering. The abundance of possibilities made it impossible to ever reach any conclusions, and therefore also made it difficult to make any decisions

So he writes, “Reflection is a snare in which one is trapped,” and with the constant supply of new information, it could go on endlessly: Endless reflection leads to passivity and impossibility of enthusiasm, and in the end, despair. It can also serve as an excuse for not acting: Kierkegaard writes, Reflection “maintains the flattering notion that the possibilities which reflection offers are

⁷ Cavell, S. “Kierkegaard’s ‘On Authority and Revelation’,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.177. (163–79). Cavell believes that films like philosophy should ask deep questions but through reference of ordinary aspects of life, such as sex and marriage, and like Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith, men should reconnect with the finite earthly human life while acknowledging its sublime nature

⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, *The essential Kierkegaard* (ed.) Hong, H. V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 262.

much more magnificent than a paltry decision.”⁹ This for him leads to the decay of one's inner thoughts.

In contrast to reflection is passion. Passion and enthusiasm are irrational emotions, but often decisive in making people act. A passionate age “wants to overthrow everything, set aside everything,” it may be the wrong thing, but at least something happens. In a passionless age, “...it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it.”¹⁰

For Kierkegaard only in a passionless but reflective age can the media take it upon itself to represent the people by speaking in the name of the public. In this way, no one had to take responsibility for what was being said, no one had to make a commitment since it was said in the name of the abstract public: The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless. One may speak to a whole nation in the name of the public, and yet the public is less than one ever so insignificant actual human being (Kierkegaard, Søren (2000), “Two Ages” p. 263). For Kierkegaard, media which bases itself on anonymity and allows for opinions without commitment is the “aesthetic” mode of existence.

VI. Personally beneficial movie

Kierkegaard sees art as functional, rejecting the notion of art as contemplative pleasure without any relationship to an existing person. Material works of art serve life. Hubert Dreyfus, writes that the key concepts in Kierkegaard’s negative view of the media are, according to “anonymity” and “commitment.”¹¹ From Kierkegaard’s perspective the movies that offer escape from reality and forces us from your own experiences into someone else’s is a hindrance in achieving true self. His dislike is to that which offers a shortcut and in so doing bypasses the forming of own opinions by presenting ready-made thoughts and shallow entertainment instead of helping people in facing reality. In the end it leads to indifference and undecidedness.

Kierkegaard’s criticism of the media and of the public, points to something other than just the shortcomings of the present age. Kierkegaard doesn’t stop at the realization that we are stuck in the snare of passive reflection and victims of passionlessness, left to perish in superficiality and endless chatter. Having lost individuality or as other existential philosophers would put ‘fear of losing into nothingness,’ Kierkegaard draws attention to the concept of dread. Dread for Kierkegaard is part of existence. We fear self annihilation but at the same time we desire self annihilation. For example standing on stool versus standing on top of a hundred feet high

⁹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The essential Kierkegaard* (ed.) Hong, H. V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 261.

¹⁰ Soren Kierkegaard, *The essential Kierkegaard* (ed.) Hong, H. V. and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 255.

¹¹ Dreyfus, Hubert L. *On the Internet* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) pp. 73- 89)

building. At that height one is afraid of the freedom to throw oneself down. Thus human confront not just freedom to desire but fear the desire to annihilate self.

I suspect the prolific production of movies based on the theme of annihilation is expression of this fear- the fear of self annihilation.

This theme is expressed in movies based on

- Apoclyypse- end of the world
 - Nuclear War
 - Revisiting World Wars
 - Domsday- economic, ecological, pestlential, cosmological
 - Signs of exhaustion everywhere
 - Terminal illness

Post 9/11-

- The word ‘terrorist’ has achieve a new significance
- And there is an obsession with security
- In opposite to the theme of self annihilation are movies based on
 - Superhumans who could stop the end
 - Evolving of present race into hybrid
 - Alien race
 - Artificial intillegence
- In between both the existence of another ultimate reality- movie Matrix

The theme in all this movies are twofold- possibility of end and anxiety faced when the people are facing the end. If we move from universal or community to persona level, at personal level the survival of daily wear and tear which may annihilate- a family or personal life. This leads to question of ethics- becomes question between what is after all good and bad- not clear which gets depicted in most of the movies with underground mafia or freedom struggle

Is this manifestation of what Kierkegaard calls- earnest thought of death or anxiousness about death or thinking the unthinkable.

From Kierkegaard’s point of view then

- Movies that entertain or are for pleasure are of aesthetic stage and would get negative grading
- Movies that forces one to do something are of ethical stage and would give some value for money.
- Movies that forces one to think (compels one either to be offended or to believe” resulting in choice and action is worth one’s money.