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Experiencing Responsibility: A Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Media Ethics

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Experiencing Responsibility

A Phenomenological Approach to the Teaching of Media Ethics

Abstract

One central concept in media ethics – and in the field of applied ethics more broadly – is “responsibility”. This contribution asks how the term “responsibility” can be considered productively in the classroom. Since responsibility is always tied to agents, their actions, and the consequences of these actions, the agents involved in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption are identified. The phenomenological method of “lived experience”, on which I draw as a pedagogical framework, offers a particularly fruitful approach for engaging responsibility in action. The framework draws specific attention to the students’ viewing experience. These considerations are then discussed in the context of the short documentary 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22’). The film, which addresses the refugee crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos, follows the captain of a coastguard ship and his crew.

Keywords

Pedagogy, Media Ethics, Short Film, Responsibility, Phenomenological Method, Documentary

Biography

Marie-Therese Mäder is a scholar of religion, media, and philosophy with particular expertise in the field of media and religion. Since 2020 she has been a senior lecturer at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich, Germany. She also teaches at the Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics at the University of Zurich and on media ethics at Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH) and at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons (FHGR). She is a member of the research group Media and Religion (www.media-religion.org). In 2021 she won a [Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship](#) (EU Horizon 2020). She is the author of numerous essays, book chapters, and books on film and religion, migration, funeral culture, ethics and documentary film, religion in reality shows, and audience research. For more information see marie-therese-maeder.com.

Introduction

For several years I have taught media ethics at different institutions and in diverse courses. My students come from a range of disciplines: the study of religion, theology, political sciences, psychology, media studies, or anthropology. One of these courses is a three-part class on media ethics which is part of an applied university program called “Multimedia Production”, taught at a Swiss institution. These students will work as media professionals. During their studies, the students learn to use sound, images, text, film, and websites to communicate messages through a variety of media. The course introduces students to media ethics and media analysis and includes case studies that cover fundamental topics such as the representation of discrimination, sexuality, and violence. The curriculum ultimately aims to enable students to formulate (media) ethical questions and reflect critically on moral behavior in the context of media production, reception, and distribution.

One central concept in media ethics – and more broadly in the field of applied ethics¹ – is “responsibility”. Responsibility has replaced religious value systems that are no longer thought efficacious and are no longer held accountable. The rather modern concept of responsibility sets the individual in motion, in place of a transcendent entity.² In this contribution I consider the following question: how can the term “responsibility” be engaged constructively in the classroom? A film that has proven very valuable for examining the concept of responsibility is the short documentary *4.1 MILES* (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22'). The film deals with the refugee crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos, following the captain of a coastguard ship and his crew as they save from drowning in the Aegean Sea people who are fleeing unendurable lives in their home countries.

I will first introduce the documentary with the media-ethical questions it raises. Since responsibility is always tied to agents, their actions, and the consequences of these actions, in a second step, the agents involved in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption are identified. In a third step the concept of responsibility is introduced and media-ethical challenges are considered on a systematic-theoretical level. I will then discuss the phenomenological method of “lived experience”, on

1 Bohrmann 2018, 25–34.

2 Vogt 2020, 50–55.

which I draw as a pedagogical framework because it offers a particularly fruitful approach to putting responsibility into practice. Finally, I apply the phenomenological-pedagogical method of lived experience to consider the concept of responsibility in the context of the short film 4.1 MILES.

A Short Documentary and Its Social Actors

A peaceful view of the small harbor of a fishing village on the island of Lesbos is depicted in a long shot. In voice-over, with a calm but also tired voice, coastguard captain Kyriakos Papadopoulos talks about his feelings as day after day he saves people from drowning in the Aegean as they try to make their way to Europe. The captain's voice continues in the voice-over: "In a way, I panic, too. I'm scared. I can't reassure them. It's impossible." We see Papadopoulos thoughtfully walking hand-in-hand with a girl, probably his daughter, along the harbor. He strolls past men, women, and children who have apparently fled to Lesbos and have been saved. He continues in the voice-over: "When I look into their eyes, I see their memories of war. They come from war. They escape the bombs that fall on their homes. And we see these families in the Greek sea. Losing each other in the Greek sea. In the sea of a peaceful country. Because of the way they have to cross." This reflective scene is followed by a rescue operation on the open sea. By means of a camera attached to the cinematographer's head, the audience is able to closely follow the rescue operation, observing people panicking and in fear of drowning.³

Captain Papadopoulos is the protagonist of the short film 4.1 MILES. The camera accompanies him on a single day as he and his crew save men, women, and children who are fleeing from war, political conflicts, persecution, poverty, and famine in their home countries and trying to reach the European mainland. The camera is mostly positioned in the middle of the action. It records people screaming for help in overcrowded rubber dinghies on the open sea and shows how they are discovered by the coastguard and rescued. Hypothermic people are pulled out of the sea; frightened people are sitting shoulder to shoulder on the deck of the ship; infants are wrapped in blankets and revived. The scenes depict the harsh everyday work of the coastguard at Lesbos, where the migrant crisis is not simply an abstract

3 See the detailed analysis of the described scene in Mäder/Fritz 2022, 89–93.

political problem, for here a human catastrophe is actually taking place. 4.1 MILES hauntingly and unsparingly shows what people have to endure during their escape across the open sea. The audience experiences the closeness of the camera, which films the distressed faces of the rescued.

The film raises several ethical questions. Is it ethically correct to depict people in need and fear? Is there an ethically right or wrong cinematographic or aesthetic form for showing people in such a situation? More broadly, how can such questions be meaningfully posed in the context of a documentary, and how can responsibility serve as a useful concept in answering these questions? One premise in asking such ethical questions about a film is that the film does something to people, it interferes with their world. But about whom are we talking? With whom does the film interact? Who are the social actors of a documentary?

There are many people involved in a documentary's spaces of production, representation, distribution, and consumption.⁴ In the current case the most important social actor in the space of production is Daphne Matziaraki, the director and producer of the short film. Matziaraki was born in Greece, studied journalism at the University of California, Berkeley, and now lives in San Francisco. We find further social actors in front of the camera, in the space of representation because they are visible in the narration: first and foremost the captain of the coastguard, his family, and his crew. Then there are the men, women, and children fleeing from their homelands, the inhabitants and volunteers of Lesbos, tourists, and again the filmmaker, who is audible and visible, at least as a shadow. The spectators belong to the space of consumption. They are watching the short film for various reasons – including because they are students in my class and have to watch it as part of a mandatory group task. Additionally, the editors of the *New York Times* Op-Docs platform are actors in the space of distribution, because they decided to make the film available on their website.⁵ As are also, and finally, the members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2017 who nominated 4.1 MILES for an Oscar in the category of best short documentary. All these social actors are located in different spaces and situations, some of them contributing more, and others less, to the film. However, all are doing something, be it working behind the camera or in

4 Mäder 2020, 48–62.

5 Daphne Matziaraki, "Video: Opinion | 4.1 Miles", *New York Times*, <https://is.gd/LIVFBS> [accessed 5 July 2021].

front of it in the space of production or watching the film in the space of reception. These actions are open to ethical evaluation by the posing of moral questions and the determination of responsibility.⁶

Teaching Responsibility in Media Ethics

Responsibility as an ethical issue presumes that human beings are rational and autonomous actors, who therefore are accountable for their actions. Thus, as soon as actions are performed in the spaces of production, representation, distribution, or consumption of media that concern other people, questions of responsibility arise. The term is central to media ethics and the theories of ethics, as these theories have to replace previously shared (religious) value systems, as the social-ethicist Markus Vogt argues:

The weakening of security in religious horizons of meaning or in optimism about the future that believes in progress leaves a vacuum that is compensated for by moral appeals. We seek support and coping with contingency in the political, legal, medical or economic assurance that there is someone who takes responsibility and is liable for risks.⁷

In a secular context, responsibility replaces the transcendental moral authority of religious traditions that no longer provide guidelines for moral behavior.

Responsibility is theoretically conceived as a normative or descriptive-analytical term understood in the sense of a normative principle. In *The Imperative of Responsibility*, the philosopher Hans Jonas argues that responsibility not only includes relationships between people but also “extends beyond this to the state of the biosphere and the future survival of the human spe-

6 These kinds of questions are located in the field of applied ethics, of which media ethics is a part. For more about media ethics from a cultural studies approach, see Fritz/Mäder/Scolari 2022, 13–20.

7 Vogt 2020, 50 (translated by the author). The original reads: “Die Schwächung der Geborgenheit in religiösen Sinnhorizonten oder im fortschrittsgläubigen Zukunftsoptimismus hinterlässt ein Vakuum, das durch Moralappelle kompensiert wird. Wir suchen Halt und Kontingenzbewältigung in der politischen, rechtlichen, medizinischen oder ökonomischen Zusicherung, dass es jemanden gibt, der Verantwortung übernimmt und für Risiken haftet.”

cies”.⁸ This normative approach has human dignity as a guiding criterion, and thus responsibility is less about questions of moral attitude or good intentions and more about the consequences of human actions. One remarkable aspect, and also challenge, of this normative understanding is that it also extends to unintentional side effects that are difficult or even impossible to foresee but have to be accounted for.⁹

In the context of my course on media ethics, such a normative understanding is quite abstract and difficult to include in media-ethical considerations that are based on a descriptive-analytical approach that analyzes the film in light of its story, plot, and style.¹⁰ The media ethicist and pedagogue Rüdiger Funiok suggests a descriptive-analytical approach also be applied to responsibility. He highlights the relational dimension of the term, for it concerns not just me but my counterpart as well. With Bernhard Debatin, I consider six central dimensions of responsibility, captured by six “W” questions: (1) *who* is responsible (2) *for what action* and (3) *with what consequences* (4) *for whom*? Every action has consequences, and the person who is responsible for the action is also responsible for its consequences. And further: (5) *What authority* assigns responsibility? Is it the conscience, a moral worldview, a political attitude, God, or a combination of these? And finally, the last question concerns the reason for responsibility: (6) *why* is the actor responsible?¹¹ This final question also refers to the norms and values which guide an action.

Another important distinction, especially in the context of film, is that between individual and corporate responsibility. The individual actors in the current example of 4.1 MILES include the filmmaker, the captain, and the spectator. Corporate responsibility relates to the responsibility of a group, not just in a legal sense but with regard to their differentiation from another group via shared interests. In the film’s case, this concerns, for example, the film crew, the boat crew, the population of Lesbos, the tourists, and the volunteers. Thus, the question of responsibility in the field of documentary film-making offers a catalogue of issues to systematize in the context of me-

8 Jonas 1979, 248 (translated by the author). The original reads: “Daß die Verantwortung sich neuerdings darüber hinaus auf den Zustand der Biosphäre und das künftige Überleben der Menschenart erstreckt, ist schlicht mit der Ausdehnung der Macht über diese Dinge gegeben, die in erster Linie eine Macht der Zerstörung ist.”

9 Vogt 2020, 64.

10 Bordwell 2008, 48–62.

11 Debatin 1997, 292–297.

dia ethics. In an analysis of the ethics of film production and consumption, the responsible parties and their accountability need to be defined. Acting with ethical responsibility means discerning different options for action and being aware of consequences that, as Jonas argues, extend not just to other individuals but also to nature and society at large.¹²

Experiencing Responsibility

To understand responsibility on a descriptive-analytical level, it is important that the students are able to systematize the abstract term and ask questions that can be transferred to the concrete example. These questions also allow the analytical argument to be structured at a later stage according to the method of visual interpretation that goes back to Erwin Panofsky and which proceeds through the three steps of description, analysis, and interpretation.¹³ Panofsky applied a phenomenological approach that is based on the sensory perception of the phenomenon to be studied, as described by Kiyomet Selvi:

Each perception is a source of phenomenological knowledge. Perception begins with intuition. Perception occurs at an individual level and therefore cannot be explained just by observation by others. It can be described precisely by the person engaged in the process.¹⁴

Perception is also the point where a phenomenological approach to the teaching of responsibility starts. In class, as we view the film together, I ask my students not only to activate their sensory perception regarding film style but also to pay attention to their emotional response to the situations depicted and the social actors on screen.

In order to understand not only cognitively but also emotionally what responsibility means for the actors involved, one has to expose oneself to the film and actually experience what is happening on screen. Therefore, the starting point of an ethical analysis, and there is no way around this kind of exposure, lies in the reception process, during which the students immerse themselves in the story and allow themselves to be touched by the

¹² Bohrmann 2018, 28–32.

¹³ Panofsky 1979, 207–225.

¹⁴ Selvi 2008, 42.

events and destinies of the protagonists. This pedagogical approach of hermeneutic phenomenology highlights precisely the moment of experience in the reception process, a moment that is the indispensable beginning of media-ethical considerations.

Three elements are key to this method of hermeneutic phenomenology: the phenomenon itself, the receiver, and the “lived experience” that takes place in between the two. The phenomenon is the film, and as receivers the students need to be aware of their preconceptions and “forestructures of understanding”¹⁵ in relation to the audio-visual representation. The students therefore have to reflect critically upon their own understanding of the depicted topic and the social actors on screen, that is, in the current case, on the refugee crisis and the individuals involved. Furthermore, in a media-ethics class, the students are asked to focus not only on their own lived experience but also on the experience of others. This is especially relevant in the context of documentary media that represent the historical in the sense of the actual world and concrete human beings in their contexts. Thus the “lived experiences” of media take place in the four spaces of communication mentioned above, which are also the ethical spaces of film: (1) the social actors on screen occupy the space of representation, (2) the director, the cinematographer, and the crew are in the space of production, (3) specific people are responsible for the film’s distribution (3), and, finally, the audience, to which the students belong, are in the space of consumption (4). In these four ethical spaces, in which different actions take place, empathy is key to understanding not only my own experience as a spectator but also the experience of others, including those who appear on screen.¹⁶

Applying empathy in pedagogy is often studied in the context of the relationship between teacher and students or among students.¹⁷ In the current case of empathizing with the social actors on screen, I focus on the conceptualization of the term in the context of film reception. Tania Singer and Claus Lamm’s discussion of the emotional response of empathy provides some helpful parallels to the reception experience: “In our own understanding, empathy occurs when an observer perceives or imagines someone else’s (i.e., the target’s) affect and this triggers a response such

15 Farrell 2020, 4.

16 Mäder 2020, 48–63.

17 Loreman 2011, 15–31.

that the observer partially feels what the target is feeling.”¹⁸ In her virtue-ethical approach to technology, Shannon Vallor describes empathy and sympathy as interacting terms and closely connected to the virtues of compassion, benevolence, sympathy, and charity.¹⁹ She proposes that empathy is a “cultivated openness to being moved to caring action by emotions of other members of our technosocial world”.²⁰ The idea that the social actors on screen belong to the same world as the spectators is a useful approach specifically in the context of film reception. It allows one to put oneself in someone else’s place in order to feel what they feel in a specific situation.

Having considered their own lived experience, the students are asked to consider the possible experiences and emotions of the social actors in the four spaces of communication of film. They define the social actors in each and develop empathy with their situation by describing the actions that occur and by considering how they would feel in the same situation. Further, I ask students to locate problematic moral behavior, such as disrespecting physical and mental integrity.

The aim of a lived-experience stance, the third aspect of a phenomenological approach and its reflection in the context of media ethics, is to understand the meaning of (correct or wrong) moral behavior. Drawing on Martin Heidegger’s transcendental philosophy that centers on lived experience as the source of understanding,²¹ educationalist Emma Farrell distinguishes between understanding and Understanding. The latter is what phenomenology is concerned with:

Phenomenology, as a philosophy and an approach to research, is all about Understanding. It [phenomenology] brings us into closer contact with what it [Understanding] is actually like which, in turn, enables us to respond, as educators, as humans, with insight and compassion in developing policy, investigating change and in engaging in our role as educators and as humans.²²

This approach highlights both the students’ lived experiences and the importance of a trusting relationship between teacher and students. It is im-

18 Singer/Lamm 2009, 82.

19 Vallor 2016, 132.

20 Vallor 2016, 133.

21 Farrell 2020, 4–5.

22 Farrell 2020, 6.

portant to create a safe space for the students by, for example, letting them know that what they are going to see may be touching or even shocking. Before screening the film in class, I briefly explain that the film shows how people are rescued from drowning, how first aid is provided for unconscious children, and that the naked body of a toddler is shown.²³ If a student does not feel able to watch the scene, they can leave the room (which so far has never happened). As I tell them about this option, the students' awareness of potentially painful representations is raised.

The "lived experience" method allows the students to learn from their own experience during the film screening and from the experience of the depicted social actors in the film. This "learning" effect entails that they try to understand how these social actors might feel not only in the moment of filming but also when watching themselves on screen. While the attempt to empathize with social actors on screen is important, it must be acknowledged that the viewers' understanding (or Understanding) is always limited. We can attempt to empathize and understand, but we cannot really know what those we are watching really feel or really experience. This is true for actual life when we look at other people and is even more so the case for a film, a construction intended to evoke certain feelings (through framing, music, editing, etc.) that may or may not reflect what the people on screen are feeling.

In our work with the film in the classroom, the three stages of description, analysis, and interpretation structure the discussion following the film's screening. The description asks about what the students have perceived emotionally and aesthetically. Without expanding further they are asked to name what they saw and experienced during the screening. My guiding question for this step is: What was specifically touching, irritating, comprehensible, or incomprehensible? Analysis follows as a second step, during which the students scrutinize how the scene is aesthetically presented, what story is told and how, and, finally, what values are expressed. The third step entails ethical interpretation, during which the responsibilities of the social actors are elaborated. These responsibilities refer to the actions represented and the values and norms on which these actions are based. At the end of the interpretation, it may even be possible to define the ethical principles of these actions. Notably, the first step (description of the experience) often foreshadows the third step (ethical evaluation), as the students focus on scenes that are particularly ethically challenging. In small group

23 Cabbage 2018, 18–19; Fenner 2018, 87–89.

discussions with other students, they are able to share their experiences and recognize where they differ and where they overlap.

During class, as a teacher I must be willing to engage not only my own lived experience but also that of the students, to learn from their perspectives. I am aware that I am the one who chooses the clips we watch in class, and these selections tell a lot about my own sensibilities and empathies. With this in mind, I now turn to a specific scene from *4.1 MILES* that I use in the classroom to show the students how a reading that includes my own lived experience is possible. My modeling of a phenomenological reading of this scene enables the students to formulate their own media-ethical question(s) in the space of representation. At a later stage they will then be able to transfer the knowledge they have gained to the analysis of the audio-visual sources they choose for the essay that is their concluding assignment.

Lived Experience during the Reception of *4.1 MILES*

Seeing children, women, and men, young and old, who have fled from their countries because of poverty and war, now treading water in the cold, rough sea, crying for help, even drowning is hard to watch. Among the many touching scenes in *4.1 MILES*, one in particular moves me every time I watch it and even now as I write this article, I have to overcome a certain resistance in order to open the file and watch it again. We are about two thirds into the film. As the coastguard boat enters the harbor, civilians are awaiting the arrival of the men, women, and children who have been saved at sea. The camera frames a man's hands folded in prayer. Then it zooms out, and we see his hands making the sign of the cross (fig. 1).

The next shot shows volunteers from Lesbos rendering first aid to the saved people, wrapping them into silver thermofoil blankets. The sound of the blankets mixes with the sound of children crying and volunteers nervously talking (fig. 2).

In a close-up, a woman holding a child wrapped in blankets stares into the void (fig. 3). Then a hand in blue rubber gloves brings a plastic syringe with liquid to the child's mouth. The woman seems to return from her mental absence and watches the child drink from the syringe.

In the next shot three adults are standing around a toddler. A man pulls the child out of the thermofoil blanket and nervously orders, "Hit her back



Fig. 1: The scene begins with a shot of hands folded in prayer, then making the sign of the cross. Film still 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:16:52.



Fig. 2: The shot provides an overview of the desperate situation on site where the helplessness of the locals and the saved people is displayed. Film still 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:16:59.

in case she's got more water in her lungs." We don't yet see the girl but we do hear the volunteer's hands clapping on her back. Finally the girl is revealed (fig. 4). Her thin, naked, slack body is hanging upside down, held by the ankles by one man while the others try to clap the water out of



Fig. 3: The woman with the toddler in her arms stares into the void. Her empty gaze expresses the senselessness of the situation. Film still 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:17:01.



Fig. 4: Paramedics and volunteers are trying to clear the sea water from the girl's lungs. Film still 4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016), 00:17:24.

her lungs. Then the lifeless body of the infant is wrapped up again in the blanket.

In the next scene a paramedic holds the female infant in her arms and calls for oxygen. The volunteers carry another child away. As the light dimin-

ishes we see that some people could not be saved. Members of the coast-guard are unloading a gurney with a dark body bag from the ship.

The scene described here is very moving. The focus on children reveals the stark injustice of a world where only a prayer might provide some comfort. The most vulnerable human beings are victims of the refugee crisis. I, as a spectator and a mother of three children, feel with the mothers of these children, sensing their fear and their anger at being at the mercy of this situation. At the same time, I ask myself whether such a situation should be being observed by a camera when each helping hand is important. One of the most touching moments occurs when the slack body of the child is hanging upside down. The somehow disembodied infant is hard to watch, as I am exposed to this situation of extreme vulnerability without the ability to help. But this is precisely why I think the scene important and why it is correct to film and show it. The images expose the spectators to these tragic situations, making them accomplices. Although they can choose which side they want to be on – joining the refugees, the boat crew, the helpers, the filmmaker, or the cinematographer – they have to take sides given the immediacy of what is taking place in front of their eyes. The way the scene is filmed urges the spectators to empathize with the children, women, men, and volunteers on site.

After the analysis of the lived experience of this scene, the responsibility – of filmmakers, coastguard, tourists, and others on Lesbos, and of the viewers in front of the screen – can be discussed as presented above. There are no right or wrong answers about the different dimensions of responsibility, but different perspectives are gained from the individual reception experiences.

Teaching the Experience of Responsibility

With its dense and compressed narrative, the short film 4.1 MILES stimulates fruitful discussion of responsibility based on the lived reception experience of a moving subject. As a teacher, I choose the film because it triggers me and I want to expose my students to a similar experience. The reception of the film is a – if not *the* – central moment where all ethical consideration starts. We need to be able to empathize with people and their situations in order to understand their actions. In a next step, critical analysis is important for considering how a narrative is told and why it challenges the viewers and in which ways. After the lived experience of

reception, systematic questions about responsibility can additionally be examined.

For teaching ethics and responsibility, an atmosphere of trust in the classroom, where students can talk about their emotional experience, plays an important role. The theories of responsibility that I introduce influence how the students approach the term. In contrast, their lived experience of the film is their own. However, they have to practice translating their experiences into words and finally into the specialized terms of ethical vocabulary. One of these terms is “responsibility”. As I have sought to show, it is not enough simply to think about responsibility; it needs to be experienced. The human capacity to empathize with others – and film’s capacity to enable such empathy – lays the groundwork for such a media-ethical analysis.

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Filmography

4.1 MILES (Daphne Matziaraki, GR/US 2016, 22').



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