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### [Review of: F. Sticchi (2019) Melancholy Emotion in Contemporary Cinema : A Spinozian analysis of film experience]

Laine, T.

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Francesco Sticchi. *Melancholy Emotion in Contemporary Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2019, 206 pp, \$39.20 (softcover), ISBN: 9780367663421.

Reviewed by **Tarja Laine**

In his final book, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, Hugo Münsterberg wrote that the central aim of cinema must be to picture emotions, which he considered crucial resources of the mind (2001, 104). Regrettably, this visionary book was overlooked for many decades, while “serious” film theory largely ignored emotions as being mere subjective impressions. Fortunately, emotions as resources of the mind are now a legitimate research area in cognitive film theory to which Francesco Sticchi’s *Melancholy Emotion* is a recent contribution. By combining Spinoza’s philosophy with cognitivism, Sticchi’s book addresses the question of film experience as a form of interaction. This involves the intersubjective sharing of ideas resulting from the “continuous mutual enactment between the bodies of the film characters’ [sic] and those of the viewers” (39). The book attempts to “re-evaluate” cognitive film theory through Spinoza’s philosophy, developing a model of empathy based on “embodied cognition.” In addition, it addresses the question of negative emotion in the cinematic experience and the ways in which viewers can negotiate this without resorting to catharsis.

The book’s four case studies—the Coen Brothers’ *A Serious Man* (2009), Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011), Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012), and Jim Jarmusch’s *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013)—have been chosen as examples of films that confront the viewers “with the ‘logic’ of wicked behaviors” (70). These films enable a violation of “the limits of our understand-

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ing" that can transform negative emotion into new knowledge through a Spinozian "experimental and creative intellection" (90). The first two thirds of the book, however, are heavily reliant on summarizing different studies, and it occasionally requires quite an effort to try to follow the author's own, independent arguments. Therefore, instead of merely paraphrasing *Melancholy Emotion*, I organize my review around the concepts I consider central in the film discussions it presents: empathy, spectatorship, trauma, and embodiment.

The notion of "empathy" is often understood as a process by which the viewers not only imagine what fictional characters feel but also share their emotion in the form of "feeling-with." The "new" model of empathy that Sticchi proposes is based on Vittorio Gallese's notion of mirror neurons and Murray Smith's understanding of "mimicry," on the one hand, and on Spinoza's concepts of "imitation" and "parallelism," on the other, which would enable a "constant interaction and semantic negotiation" (3) between the viewer and the character. The author discusses *A Serious Man* in these terms, writing that the "sad passions" in the film "facilitate our alignment with the character, Larry (Michael Stuhlbarg), and increase our desire for a resolution and for a positive turn in the course of the events" (118).

*A Serious Man's* narration is clearly focalized through the main character Larry in a manner that invites what Murray Smith has called "alignment" (2002, 82). But much more than narrative focalization is needed for us to actually *care* for an unlikeable character such as Larry, which is a precondition for any kind of ethical imagination to take place in the film experience. Sticchi writes:

*We have seen that morality is experientially based . . . it manifests itself in relational systems, and it is possible to embody and negotiate ethical values through affective imitation and semantic interaction. By empathizing with this character, then, we can generate his person schema and recognize how he attributes significance to things and events.*  
(2019, 119)

Thus, for Sticchi, empathy seems to be a precondition for what Smith has dubbed "recognition" and not vice versa (Smith 2022, 82). This seems intuitively implausible as it fails to explain what would motivate the viewers to share the film characters' ethical projects or even to root for them in the first place. Indeed, even though the author characterizes Larry as "morally correct" (Sticchi 2019, 108), he more convincingly demonstrates Larry's moral "incorrectness" when he writes that this character "does not show a critical and autonomous agency since he relies on . . . rules and assumptions passively" (112). Precisely for this reason, the more appropriate emotional response that Larry inspires would be pity, which is not an

empathetic emotion as it implies distance and superiority. At some point Sticchi writes that “we . . . participate in Larry’s frustrations and difficulties by observing his home life” (114), which is convincing, but to participate in someone’s plight by simply observing is also not the same as empathy. It is unfortunate that the Spinozan concept of parallelism (discussed briefly in Part One of the book) is not explicitly invoked here; it might have enabled the author to explain viewers’ engagement with Larry without resorting to the idea that they would somehow share “his state of passivity and incapacity to act” (120).

It is also not entirely clear either what the author’s proper notion of the “viewer” itself is based upon. On the one hand, the viewer is “interpreted as a problematic space with indefinite potentialities based on the possibility to complicate and use the semantic/experiential outcomes of his/her connection with the screen” (2). On the other hand, the author’s goal is “to develop a prototypical model of the film viewer, in which all the aspects of cognition coexist” (3). But if spectatorship is simultaneously a question of infinite possibilities and of prototypical cognition, how are we then supposed to make sense of the specific ways in which different types of film address their “preferred” viewers, who can nevertheless negotiate the meaning of these films in different contexts? A number of claims that the author makes would seem to be based on his own subjective interpretation anyway, rather than on some prototypical semantic frame.

For instance, the author describes a voyeuristic scene in *A Serious Man* in which the main character watches his unsuspecting female neighbor sunbathing in the nude in the garden next door. In this scene Larry’s voyeuristic look is “connected to the capacity to act,” conveying “a sense of independence and control,” and his “higher position is connected with a sense of power and opportunity” with which the viewer can align by sharing his vision through a point-of-view shot (115). Even though the author argues that this “higher position” is interrupted by images of dizziness imitating the character’s confused sensory-motor state, the initial suggestion that the viewer would “prototypically” align with an obvious example of the male gaze seems problematic from a gendered point of view. As Smith has pointed out, the assumption that a point-of-view shot would somehow wire us directly into the mind of a character is a fallacy that arises from abstracting it “from its context, and assuming that it works in glorious isolation” (1999, 418). Even though the emotional response based on mimicry might not require contextualization, more ethically complex forms of alignment do require this. Therefore, in this voyeuristic scene, our empathy is likely to be with the unsuspecting neighbor rather than with Larry.

Similarly, when discussing *The Act of Killing*, Sticchi claims that by staging “the lack of God’s eye perspective which reconstructs the events from a

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higher existential point of view," the film "calls for an 'alignment' with the semantic world of the killers without strong prejudicial elements" forcing us to understand "their 'moral' politics" (Sticchi 2019, 149). This is due to the "intellectual model according to which a certain type of brutality against a specific alien and inimical identity is justified and encouraged" (ibid). It is hard to agree with these claims since alignment is not a guarantee for moral understanding, and we do not somehow lose our own moral compass even when engaged with these immoral characters and events. And besides, the strength of Oppenheimer's film lies precisely in the way in which it spatio-temporally aligns us with the perpetrators even while our moral allegiance is clearly with the victims. Indeed, the author himself asserts that "the problematic point of the film is that it prevents us from using simple dialectical and moral mechanisms, thus staging what [Thomas] Elsaesser would define as a failed performance" (151). "Failed performance" refers to faux pas in public figures' speeches, which inadvertently let disavowed truths slip through. *The Act of Killing* is full of such moments, such as when Anwar Congo retches while reminiscing about an execution he has committed—his body taking over and confessing the truth his mind has disavowed, but this scene is not discussed in terms of failed performance.

One important theme in Oppenheimer's film is the question of what it means to represent and to watch the suffering of others. This is central in the context of trauma studies, where the concept of trauma is often discussed in connection with (un)representability of a traumatic event. As Cathy Caruth (1996), Jill Bennett (2005), and many others have argued, since trauma is an experience that resists integration in the memory, exceeding the possibility of narrative knowledge, most trauma-related films are best understood as transactive rather than representational. They engage us by means of affective intensity, without aiming to communicate the "truth" of a traumatic experience. These questions are not addressed in *Melancholy Emotion*, which explicitly distances itself from trauma studies due to its apparent "focus on the symbolic-cultural crisis affecting the representation in specific films and the viewer's absorption of it" (9). Instead, trauma is understood through Spinoza's thinking, as when Sticchi claims that "for Spinoza, in Nature negation is impossible, and the traumatic experience of a limit is the perception of a semantic closure, or the incapacity to extend comprehension" (139). But Spinoza did not write about trauma as the concept as we know it today originates from 1889, when Pierre Janet published the foundational account of traumatic stress in his *L'Automatisme Psychologique*. Of course, this does not mean that the notion of trauma could not be discussed in connection with Spinoza, and in fact this is exactly what Catherine Malabou does in her *Ontology of the Accident* (2012), which regrettably is not referenced in the book.

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The problem with treating trauma as some generic “sad passion” is that it reduces the concept to not much more than a convenient tool for understanding the cinematic experience. However, in order to understand how we can resonate with trauma in a cinematic experience without necessarily appropriating the other’s pain, it is necessary to first understand the structure of trauma and what happens to the embodied mind during a traumatic event. Of one scene of enacted torture in *The Act of Killing*, the author writes, “here the viewer can experience a traumatic frustration, expressed by the total negation of Suryono’s demands for moral recognition and by his absolute mortification” (154). This passage suggests that the film would grant us direct access to the traumatic experience of another person, which is not only a problematic claim from the perspective of trauma as a pathology of memory, but it also banalizes the experience of the trauma victim.

Ever since the publication of Vivian Sobchack’s groundbreaking *The Address of the Eye* (1991), the notions of embodiment and the sense-making body have been catchwords, especially in the phenomenologically oriented studies in cinema. Yet the book does not mention one single film-phenomenological study nor does it explain what the benefits might be of the author’s understanding of the “embodied mind” in comparison to the sense-making body in the context of the phenomenological approach. This dismissal is not justified, especially as many film scholars are increasingly demonstrating that the research interests of cognitivism and phenomenology are complementary rather than oppositional. Both approaches are critical of the Cartesian mind-body dualism, demonstrating that the mind cannot be independent from the input of bodily senses and vice versa. So at least an acknowledgment of the legacy of phenomenological thinking in film studies would have been in order.

In spite of these various criticisms, I acknowledge that *Melancholy Emotion* is a densely argued intellectual effort. Sticchi commendably navigates some of the most complex philosophical writings ranging from Spinoza through cognitivism to Gilles Deleuze and back. This, in and of itself, is no mean feat, and the material Sticchi discusses is extraordinarily rich, complex, and open to a variety of interpretations.

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**Tarja Laine** is assistant professor in film studies at the University of Amsterdam. Her latest book, *Emotional Ethics of The Hunger Games*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021. Email: T.Laine@uva.nl

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