Edith Stein to the Movies. Empathy as Film Theory

- Why did you do that?
- Empathy. I put myself in your place and I felt that you wanted to be kissed.
- You put yourself in the wrong place. I have no desire to be kissed by you, or anyone else.
- Don’t be silly. Everybody wants to be kissed, even philosophers.

Funny Face (S. Donen, 1957)

The tree of empathies

The interest in the concept of empathy as a model to describe the spectator’s involvement links up the very beginning of film theory with its most recent developments, from the first psycho-physiological experiments on spectator response to the neuroscientific findings on mirror neurons. And even if not always explicitly, empathy runs through the whole history of psychologies of cinema, which have always been interested in its double, though unique, root. In fact, the word empathy descends from the neo-romantic concept of Einfühlung, which has had a prominent position in aesthetic and philosophical debate thanks to Robert Vischer, Theodor Lipps and others in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.1 It describes the experience of “feeling into” (einfühlen): to project, or transfer the subjectivity of the observer into the observed object on the basis of motor mimicry and synesthesia. Similarly, in front of filmic images, we can have an “aesthetic” experience of otherness, where such an otherness is the film-world constructed by the expressive and figurative components of film language and images. Lipps’s Einfühlung model includes the possibility of empathising with inanimate objects or formal qualities that express life, “or a specific mode of the activity of the self.”2 In this case, Einfühlung may effectively describe the “live” relationship between the spectator and the images as “objects” on the screen (space, environment, inanimate bodies etc.) and as “language” (movement, depth, lighting, photography etc.). This view of empathy is a constant in the history of film theory. In Neravodušnaja priroda Sergei M. Eisenstein3 argued that the emotional effectiveness of artworks is based on the commutation of expressive registers: the observer performs “ecstatic” operations transferring himself or herself from a sensorial condition to another (the experience of “pathos”) and reach a given feeling (s berksevic) prescribed by the artwork itself.

In 1909 the word Einfühlung had already been translated into the English empathy (from the Greek pathos) by Edward B. Titchener,4 and, once again thanks to Lipps,5 gained the sense of a peculiar relationship between two human subjects, the natural and intentional instinct to imitate or mirror the feelings showed by the Other’s
facial and bodily expression. Similarly, not only can the spectator attribute human features to inhuman objects, but he/she also can perceive and “live” human features as objects and make an “aesthetic experience of the Other.” Describing the Stimmung, Béla Balázs argued that

\[\text{even the inner state of a man is a whole and it cannot be represented in images. But the single instants have the expressive gaze of the eyes. Through the close-ups of such instants, one can give a subjective images of the world and show it in the tonality of a temperament, in the light of a feeling – in spite of the objectivity [Sachlichkeit] of the photographic apparatus: here is a projected, objectified poem.}\]

All Balázs’s essays on physiognomic tends to describe the intersubjective Einfühlung through human expression and the close-up anthropomorphisation: “The man can also comprehend the mimic of elements.” Thus, an aesthetic moment of intersubjective empathy can take place during the empathising experience. However, Balázs’s words suggest a meaning of empathy that affects the peculiarity of filmic experience: the mediation of a technology of the gaze. This is the case in which the spectator identifies with the camera, or with the cinema apparatus. For the Hungarian theorist, “[t]he viewer gives in to the camera as a medium, surrenders to a transport of self-forgetfulness. The imaginary self, the seeing I, has no point of view of its own, and yet it has every conceivable one.” Thus, his definition of identification culminates in an ambiguous image: “For the camera has my eyes, and identifies them with the eyes of the actors. They look with my eyes.” In such a reversal, allowed by self-forgetfulness, the “seeing I” finds a point of view in the Other’s point of view – the character’s one. Therefore, due to the strong sense of reality of the filmic experience, Balázs describes something different from mere identification, or from projection: it is, rather, an exchange of gazes.

Balázs’s words lead us from a projective transfer to a purely intersubjective empathetic relation between the spectator and the character – a fictional entity who is perceived as bearer of a sort of a subjectivity and who expresses a repertoire of emotions similar to the spectator’s emotions. This second meaning of Einfühlung is useful to investigate the spectator’s engagement with “filmic-humans,” and it is close to the phenomenological standpoint of empathy. In fact, the intersubjective meaning of Einfühlung had caught the attention of phenomenology since the beginning, and in his Ideen Edmund Husserl argued that entropathy between the subject and the “extraneous I” (fremde Ich) is constitutive of the comprehension of the Other, the Self, and the World. Husserl’s assistant Edith Stein was the first to enunciate the specificity of empathy in her book Zum Problem der Einfühlung. Developing Husserl’s intuitions, she proposed a phenomenology of the empathetic act, its essence, genesis and structure, differentiating it from other psychological acts, such as judgment (it is a feeling, rather than a knowledge), outer perception (I perceive the Other’s emotion from the inside), feeling of oneness (I am not in front of the Other, and I do not feel “for” him/her, but rather I am “with” him/her in front of his/her identical emotion), and fellow feeling (it is I as individual who empathise, rather than I and the Other, than We). In other words, Einfühlung is an individual and internal feeling of sharing otherness. It is a kind of act in which one “gets” the Other’s experience (Erlebniss) on the basis of psycho-physical and spiritual analogy.

Edith Stein to the movies

Throughout the paper, I delve into Stein’s theory of empathy and outline three points of relevance for film studies, namely for Filmology: 1) the concept of “primordiality/non-primordiality” as a phenomenological explication of the dynamic impression of reality/croyance (belief); 2) the inerasable distinction of the subjectivities involved in the empathetic process as a phenomenological explication of the relationship between the spectator’s subjectivity and
the film character's quasi-subjectivity; and 3) the interpolative role of *Einfühlung* between the perceptual and cognitive poles of experience as a phenomenological explication of the psychological process of filmic experience.

1. Empathy found its first extensive application in film theory in Albert Michotte's essay on spectators' emotional participation.¹³ By empathy Michotte means that which occurs "when we observe what someone else is doing and we ourselves live it in some sense, rather than just understand it at an intellectual level."¹⁴ His experiments helped outline different forms of empathic involvement, both at a motorial level (from observation with no motor reactions, through synchronization of movement to imitation) and at an emotional level (ranging from no empathy at all, through mere parallelism, to fusion of the internal reactions of the spectator with the expressive behaviour of the actor, and to the extreme case of identification of the spectator's personality with that of the hero). Moreover, Michotte states that participation depends on a psychological distance of the spectator from the screen: the more empathy, the less distance, and vice-versa.¹⁵ What exactly is such a distance? For Michotte, it depends on the awareness of the double frame in which the filmic experience takes place. It is the classic and fundamental issue of Filmology, the impression of reality,¹⁶ that is, the tendency of the spectator to live the film as real and to put him/herself into the space of representation. The spectator's attitude to the representation is similar to (yet radically different from) his/her attitude to reality: the image is defined as being like reality. This process, based on sensible perception, depends on its psychic correlate: the paradox of croyance (belief), that is, a state of suspension of incredulity encouraged by the peculiar situation of filmic experience (darkness, hypomobility, focalisation of attention etc.), which is, however, simultaneous to a state of incredulity. Film concurrently suspends belief and creates belief.¹⁷

Christian Metz has explained this paradox in psychoanalytical terms: the spectator has deep beliefs which s/he unconsciously does not allow to crop out to the surface.¹⁸ Rather, I will try to give a phenomenological and conscious explanation. In fact, we could conceive belief as an intentional act, or an act that has an intentional object. We do not generally believe or not believe; rather, we believe that what we perceive is real, while, at the same time, we know that it is not. The filmic experience consists in a perceptual act (impression of reality) that has a cognitive correlate (belief). In a movie theatre, we behave both with disinhibition and restraint. However, what our belief tends towards is the reality of experience as an act of consciousness, the recognition and interiorisation of sensible data. The spectator directly lives the film, feeling it as if it were real. And this "felt reality" depends mostly on the filmic experience as "lived experience" (Erlebnis).

In Stein, empathy as a phenomenological act (to face what appears) answers the question "What is 'real' in the act of belief?" with the question: "What could be more primordial than experience itself?"¹⁹ She establishes her phenomenology of empathy in terms of what she calls "primordiality" (an expression borrowed from Husserl) and describes the empathic process in relation to other faculties of the human mind: “Not all experiences are primordially given nor primordial in their content. Memory, expectation, and fancy do not have their object bodily present before them.”²⁰ The content of memory is completely non-primordial: “It has once been alive,”²¹ because neither the events we remember nor the emotions these events evoked are present to us in time or space. What is primordial is the representational act of remembering. The re-presented non-primordiality points back to the past primordiality, and "this past has the character of a former 'now'."²² As in memory, in the case of fancy, although the act of fancying is primordial, the fancied is non-primordial, even if here there is no temporal distance between the experiencing and the experienced: fancied experiences differ from remembered experiences because "they are not given as a representation of actual experiences but as the non-primordial form of present experiences. This 'present' does not indicate a present of objective time but [the] experienced present."²³ Therefore, Stein defines as "primordial" all our own present experiences and
by present she means their bodily givenness, rather than their temporal presence. In memory and fancy we fluctuate between two different frames: one is the present act of the experience, the other is the re-presentation of the content of the experience. Like memory and fancy, empathy consists in primordially experiencing something that is non-primordially given. It is a primordial act of a non-primordial content. We will see how they differ shortly.

As far as we are concerned, empathy in a broad sense seems to provide a phenomenological description of the filmic experience. Both empathy and filmic experience are immediate experiences into the frame of a mediated experience, and they both are double and paradoxical: filmic experience is the “living-experience” of a “lived-experience,” it is both a presentation and a re-presentation. Moreover, memory and fancy as counterexamples of empathy sound very familiar to film theory. They take place in two separate, though simultaneous, frames. Filmic experience takes place here and now: in the bodily present of the theatre; it is, precisely, an experiencing, an act in progress. But it also takes place there and once, in the indefinite space and time of the events on the screen. As for memory, the nature of film implies a temporal distance: it is always the trace of the past, that belongs both to the present and the (represented) past. As for fancy, the spectator unconsciously feels as if s/he were the origin of the fancied presented on the screen.

2. Empathy actually differs from memory and fancy due to the fact that “the Subject of the empathized experience […] is not the subject empathizing, but another.” In memory, the I that is remembering and the I that is remembered belong to the same Subject. They only differ temporally. And although not temporally differentiated, “the ‘I’ producing the fancied world is primordial; the ‘I’ living in it is non-primordial.”26 In both cases, the “I” relates to another “I” (a past “I” in the case of memory, and a current “I” in the case of fancy) and nevertheless the two “I” do not coincide, though there is a consciousness of sameness.” We may consider these as cases of “intrasubjective” empathy. However, the case of proper, or “intersubjective” empathy is radically different, because the “I” relates to “You” or “S/he”: “[T]hese two subjects are separate and not joined together, as previously, by a consciousness of sameness or a continuity of experience.”28

The subjects of the two experiences are one “with” each other, but they do not fuse “within” each other: I can feel somebody else’s passions as mine, but I still remain myself and those passions are still the passions of somebody other than me. As we have already seen, Einfühlung is the “experience of a foreign consciousness,” it makes both the intentional object and its subject present to me. But nevertheless, it keeps them absent, because the former belongs to the Other and the latter is the Other. I stay both close and at a distance, there is no fusion or projection into the Other’s subjectivity. As Stein asserts, what led Lipps astray in his description was the confusion of self-forgetfulness, through which I can surrender myself to any object, with a dissolution of the “I” in the object – that is why Einfühlung is not a feeling of oneness (Einsfühlten). The new fact is that my primordiality comes into contact with the Other’s primordiality, but “[t]his other subject is primordial although I do not experience its primordiality; his joy is primordial although I do not experience it as primordial.”29 The sui generis experience of Einfühlung, in the end, consists in the feeling of being led by the Other’s primordiality, which is “not experienced by me but still there, manifesting itself in my non-primordial experience.”

In filmic experience, the Other is the character, that is, a paradoxical “otherness.” We cannot say that the character has a subjectivity as Others in real life have. Nevertheless, as Stein would say, the “type ‘human physical body’” of the characters, their being so similar to the spectator – a sort of ontological consonance –, drives the latter in mirroring the characters’ actions, emotions and even their intentions. We do not believe in a character for their being like reality. We believe in a character for their being like us, and in any case such a similarity is a quasi-analogy, in which the distance is preserved. Moreover, the “analogy” is not an “inference by analogy,” but rather, a “familiarity.” “In order to understand a movement […] I must first ‘link’ it to other similar movements.

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familiar to me. According to our interpretation, this means that I must find a familiar type in it.” In other words, the quality of our present experience (to make experience) depends on the range of our past experience (to have experience).

What is re-presented in the empathetic filmic experience is not a spectator’s subjective past or future impression, but a “vital movement” belonging to a primordial otherness that is not contiguous with the spectator’s subjectivity and cannot be reduced to his/her life. “I put myself into the perceived body, as if I was his vital centre, and I perform an impulse quasi of the same type of that that could cause a movement – quasi perceived from the inside – that can coincide with the one externally perceived.” The quasi does not need to be conceived as a quantitative decrease in the realness of the experience. Rather, it is a necessary condition of the experience, because it offers a margin of freedom, a limit in identification that is a bulwark of otherness. At the same time, such a quasi describes the distance between the spectator’s subjectivity and the character’s quasi-subjectivity, the inerasable partiality and duplicity in the filmic impression of reality/illusion.

In brief, the phenomenological structure of Einfühlung seems to describe the relation with the otherness in the filmic experience in two ways: to be (re-)present(ed) in another World, that is, to feel as real something that we know to be fictional, the inevitable diversity implied in the peculiar relationship between the spectator and the empathisable objects on the screen, even if such objects are human types; and to be (re-)present(ed) in the experience of the Other: the paradoxical relationship between spectators and characters as empathisable subjects on the screen. even if they are mere images.

3. I will now argue that the structure of empathy can explain the psychological dynamic of filmic experience. Since the end of the 1980s, cognitivist film theory has studied emotions as a key cognitive process that enables the spectator to understand the film. Nevertheless, the notions of assimilation, central imagining, sympathy, genre, or interest have been preferred to the vague notion of empathy, which has been mostly rejected: the spectator does not need empathy to access the character’s emotional experience; rather, it is enough to make an inference of his/her inner state in the narrative situation to comprehend him/her. The difficulties of a cognitive approach to conceiving empathy as a clear and effective model to explain the filmic experience are due to the fact that emotions and the process of sharing them are reduced to deliberate inferential acts that consist in beliefs of other’s beliefs or imagining to be the Other and to feel a emotion congruent to what we imagine the Other is feeling. On the contrary, assuming the phenomenological frame, empathy is not a purely cognitive act: it is not linked to information, because the emotion of the Other remains extraneous to the empathising subject (the spectator). Rather – as Stein would argue – empathy is a feeling composed of different levels, namely a perceptual, an emotional, and a cognitive level. My idea is that the structure of Einfühlung proposed by Stein is complete and complex enough to explain the psychological dynamic of filmic experience. Finally, we are ready to read Stein’s description of the empathic process:

[A] When [empathy] arises before me all at once, it faces me as an object (such as the sadness I “read in another’s face”).

[B] But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (try to bring another’s mood to clear givenness to myself), the content, having pulled me into it, is no longer really an object. I am now no longer turned to the content but to the object of it. I am at the subject of the content in the original subject’s place.

[C] And only after successfully executed clarification, does the content again face me as an object.57

Stein describes Einfühlung as a kind of awareness based on perceptual activity: to empathise means to try to be aware of the joy or sadness I see on your face. Nevertheless, this kind of awareness does not depend neither on an only cognitive nor an only perceptual act. Rather, empathy is a composite process, one that has at least three
grades or modalities of accomplishment: [A] the first is the emergence of the experience: suddenly, I see sadness on the character's face; [B] the second – the very empathetic moment – is the fulfilling explication: I am involved in his/her inner state. I experience the sadness s/he lives by moving “at” him/her, “with” him/her in front of the same object; [C] the third is the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience: at the end, I understand the character's sadness. In brief, at the starting stage, we are in front of the object, and we perceive it with our senses. In the middle stage, a fulfilling explication drives us to the Subject and drives us back. At the final stage, we are again in front of the object, and we cognitively receive it into our experience, we internalise it. The three levels seem to be the same levels of filmic experience: a perceptual act, lived as an emotional act, and objectified by a cognitive act. However, the three stages are not to be conceived as spread over time: rather, they are grades of a unitary intentionale Akte or intentionale Erlebnisse, three psychological stages of an “experienceable whole.”

In filmological and phenomenological terms, we are in front of a circle movement that concerns distance and proximity. In the empathetic process, A) first I perceptually face a filmic object (emotion) that attracts my attention and my senses; B) then I move closer and place myself “at” the Other, on the “Other’s side,” in front of the origin of his/her emotion; C) then I exit, I move back and detach myself to face the object again, to cognitively perform a new objectification. This seems to be very interesting with respect to Michotte's conception of empathetic participation and distance. Before empathy, I am too far, and the initial distance must be filled. After the empathetic fulfilling, I am too close and I need again to set myself at a distance to better understand. Distance, proximity, and distance again: Einfühlung allows this psychological “round-trip” of approaching, fulfilling and detaching. The distance moments correspond respectively to an optical and mental stage (emergence and interiorisation of the illusion), whereas the core of the process is a “rapture” in which incredulity is temporarily suspended and the spectator is fully immersed in the illusion and has the impression of living a real experience. As Stein states: “The world I glimpse empathetically is an existing world, posited as having being like the world primordially perceived.” The oxymoronic structure of filmic experience consists in an e-motional moment embedded – or, embodied – in an optical-cognitive frame. The act of filmic empathy consists in the fulfilling of the quasi-intersubjective structure of filmic relation.

Notes


Adriano D’Aloia


7 Idem, p. 115 (my translation).

8 H. Loewy, “Space, Time, and ‘Rites de Passage’: Béla Balázs’s Paths to Film,” in October, no. 115, Winter 2006, p. 70.


12 On the community nature of empathy, see M. Scheler, Zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Sympathiegefühle von Liebe und Hab, Niemeyer, Halle 1913; then Id., Wissen und Formen der Sympathie, Cohen, Bonn 1923.


14 Idem, p. 209.


17 The paradox of belief has been previously outlined by Rudolf Arnheim as the phenomenon of “partial illusion”: “The illusion is only partial and film gives simultaneously the effect of an actual happening and of a picture,” R. Arnheim, Film als Kunst, Ernst Rowohlt, Berlin 1932; reviewed version Film as Art, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1997, p. 27; and “every object that is reproduced appears simultaneously in two different frames of reference; […] as one identical object it fulfills two different functions in the two contexts,” Idem, p. 59.


19 E. Stein, On the Problem of Empathy, cit., p. 8.
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20 Ibidem.
21 Ibidem.
22 Ibidem.
23 Idem, p. 9.
24 Idem, pp. 10-11.
25 Idem, p. 11.
26 Idem, p. 10.
27 Idem, p. 9.
28 Idem, p. 11.
29 Idem, p. 10.
30 Ibidem.
31 Ibidem.
32 Idem, p. 66.
37 E. Stein, On the Problem of Empathy, cit. 10.
38 Ibidem.
39 Idem, p. 72.