

# CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT AND MORAL UNDERSTANDING IN SCREEN STORIES.

CARL PLANTINGA,  
CALVIN UNIVERSITY

ALLISON EDEN,  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

DAN LEVIN,  
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

MURRAY SMITH,  
VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Stories on screens—via film, television, and streaming—are central to our lives. They allow us to experience complex moral situations from multiple perspectives on screen. Cognitive science, philosophy, and film studies are coming together to better understand how character engagement, reflection, the powerful experience of a film, and moral understanding are connected.

## CHARACTERS ARE KEY

Characters are a key to the meaningful experience of stories. We enter stories through characters, and this imaginary interaction with characters can lead to moral understanding.

Images from *The Social Network*, and *The Truman Show*.



## FILM AS EXPERIENCE MACHINE

Film functions as an attentional engine that can move and fascinate audiences. We unconsciously mimic the emotions we see on screen, leading us to experience stories with our whole bodies, not just our minds.

## REFLECTIVE AFTERLIFE

Reflection on morally complex situations can occur while we watch a film, but a great deal of meaningful reflection can happen later while thinking or talking about it. This is called the "reflective afterlife" of a film.



### MORALLY SIMPLE

Morally simple films are straightforward, and the narratives tend to resolve neatly.

VS.

### MORALLY COMPLEX

Morally complex films are ones where the stories—and the moral quandaries they pose—are left open for interpretation.

BEFORE WATCHING THE MORALLY SIMPLE FILM, THE TRUMAN SHOW

57%

of viewers determined that Truman escaping was the most important scene

WHEREAS BY TWO WEEKS AFTER VIEWING...

↑77%

of viewers named that scene.

FOR THE MORE COMPLICATED FILM, THE SOCIAL NETWORK, DIRECTLY AFTER VIEWING...

68%

of viewers named the confrontation between Facebook founders as the most important scene

WHEREAS TWO WEEKS LATER...

↓50%

of viewers named this the most important scene.

Over time, conclusions about morally simple films become more confident, while morally complex films lead to more complicated reflection.

## A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The study is multidisciplinary, incorporating the fields of media psychology, film and media studies, literary studies, cognitive neuroscience, and philosophical aesthetics. The study is led by four academics, two scientists and two from the humanities.



CARL PLANTINGA



ALLISON EDEN



DAN LEVIN



MURRAY SMITH

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