

THE LIMITS OF THE IMAGE: ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY AND FILM EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical limits of cinematic representation when portraying vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBT communities, and people living with life-threatening illnesses. Drawing on theories of *the ethics of the gaze* (Levinas, Mulvey, Nichols), *the limits of representation* (Lyotard, LaCapra), and contemporary debates on digital and AI ethics, the paper argues that filmmakers and film students must recognise both the power and dangers of images in the twenty-first century.

Through case studies ranging from Diễm's *Children of the Mist* (2021) to Thảo and Dubus's *Finding Phong* (2015), as well as contemporary documentary practices on illness representation, the article highlights the tensions between artistic creativity and ethical responsibility. The discussion extends to the digital environment, where AI-generated images and deepfakes further complicate questions of consent, authenticity, and social impact.

In the context of film and media schools, particularly within CILECT member institutions, this article emphasises the urgent need to integrate visual ethics into film curricula. It proposes pedagogical strategies such as case-based debates, inclusive storytelling practices, and the systematic use of consent and dialogue with participants. The article advocates for a redefinition of film education as a moral as well as artistic practice, where students are encouraged to balance creativity with compassion, and representation with responsibility, in an era when images can so easily be manipulated or misused.

Keywords: *Ethics in Film education; Limits of images; Vulnerable communities; Digital and AI ethics; Inclusive storytelling; Critical pedagogy.*

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the power of images has become both unprecedented and deeply ambivalent. Film and media remain potent tools for storytelling and social engagement, yet they now operate within a complex landscape shaped by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic visibility. This new ecology of images invites renewed ethical scrutiny: How can filmmakers represent marginalised lives without reproducing structures of exploitation or voyeurism? What does it mean to “bear witness” to suffering in an age when images can be easily fabricated, circulated, and consumed without context? And, crucially, how should film education respond to these dilemmas?

Contemporary documentary cinema, especially in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, has emerged as a powerful medium for giving voice to the voiceless - from ethnic minority children in *Children of the Mist* (Diễm, 2021), to transgender individuals in *Finding Phong* (Thảo & Dubus, 2015), to patients and victims of social trauma in medical or humanitarian films. Yet these works simultaneously expose the ethical fault lines inherent in cinematic representation: the risk of aestheticising pain, appropriating cultural otherness, or rendering personal suffering as spectacle. Such tensions between artistic creativity and social responsibility have long preoccupied documentary theorists (Nichols, 1991; Renov, 2004) but they acquire new urgency in the digital age where the boundaries between truth and simulation, testimony and manipulation are increasingly blurred.

The question of image ethics thus extends beyond the camera to encompass the entire ecosystem of production, circulation, and reception. Technologies such as deepfakes, algorithmic editing, and AI-generated visual synthesis have destabilised traditional notions of authenticity and consent. When an image can be artificially generated, modified, or recombined without the subject’s awareness, the filmmaker’s ethical responsibility is no longer confined to the act of

filming but extends to post-production and distribution. The very ontology of the image - its claim to “the real” - becomes precarious. As Levinas reminds us, the ethical relation begins with the face of the Other yet in the era of AI, the “face” itself can be simulated, raising unsettling questions about the moral foundations of visual empathy.

This article begins from the premise that film education, particularly within institutions affiliated with the *Centre International de Liaison des Écoles de Cinéma et de Télévision* (CILECT), must respond to these shifting conditions with renewed ethical vigilance. Teaching film today requires more than technical proficiency or aesthetic sensibility; it demands a critical understanding of the image as both an artistic construct and an ethical encounter. The task of the educator is to cultivate filmmakers who can recognise not only the power but also the potential violence of images - their capacity to objectify, distort, or silence the subjects they seek to illuminate.

Building on the theoretical frameworks of the *ethics of the gaze* (Levinas, Mulvey, Nichols) and the *limits of representation* (Lyotard, LaCapra), this study interrogates how filmic representation negotiates the tension between visibility and vulnerability. These perspectives illuminate why the ethics of filmmaking cannot be reduced to rules of consent alone but must involve an ongoing negotiation of proximity, distance, and respect.

By examining selected documentary cases, this article seeks to address four interrelated questions. First, how can filmmakers capture lived realities without compromising the dignity or agency of their subjects? Second, how do directors confront the *outsider’s gaze* when filming communities to which they do not belong? Third, how are the “limits of representation” and the *unspeakable* rendered cinematically - through framing, sound, or silence - in contemporary films? Finally, in the age of digital reproduction and AI-generated imagery, how can educators and institutions safeguard ethical

awareness among emerging filmmakers and prevent the normalisation of manipulation or exploitation?

These questions are not merely theoretical; they have direct pedagogical implications. As the visual world becomes increasingly mediated by algorithms and synthetic images, film schools face the urgent task of integrating image ethics into curricula - not as an optional subject but as a core component of creative training. This article argues that ethical literacy must be cultivated alongside technical and narrative skills through methods such as case study analysis, reflective practice, and inclusive storytelling workshops. Exercises involving informed consent, collaborative authorship, and critical engagement with vulnerable subjects can help students internalise ethical reflexivity as a creative habit rather than an external constraint.

The discussion extends beyond individual morality to institutional responsibility. Universities and production schools must establish transparent protocols regarding the filming of sensitive subjects, data storage, and the use of AI tools in post-production. Without such frameworks, the pedagogical environment risks reproducing the very asymmetries of power that ethical education seeks to dismantle.

Ultimately, this article contends that film education in the twenty-first century must be redefined as an *ethical art practice* - one that recognises the inseparability of aesthetics, technology, and responsibility. In an era when images can be endlessly manipulated, reproduced, and weaponised, to teach filmmaking is to teach ethics: the ethics of seeing, of listening, and of co-existing with the Other through the mediated world of images.

Theoretical Framework

The ethical challenges of cinematic representation cannot be disentangled from the theoretical debates surrounding the

gaze, the *Other*, and the *limits of representation*. This section outlines the conceptual framework through which this article approaches the question of image ethics in film education, drawing upon Levinas's phenomenology of the Other, Mulvey's theory of the gaze, Nichols's ethics of documentary representation, and postmodern inquiries into the unrepresentable by Lyotard and LaCapra. These classical frameworks are then extended to address the contemporary dilemmas raised by digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

The Ethics of the Gaze: Levinas, Mulvey, and Nichols

Levinas's philosophy of ethics, grounded in the primacy of the face-to-face encounter, offers a foundational premise for reconsidering visual representation. For Levinas (1969), the "face of the Other" is not a surface to be seen but an ethical demand that resists totalisation. To encounter the Other is to be called into responsibility prior to any knowledge or depiction. In the context of filmmaking, this implies that the act of looking - of framing, recording, or editing - must be understood as an ethical relation rather than merely an aesthetic or epistemological one. The camera, rather than revealing the truth of the subject, becomes a site where the filmmaker's responsibility is tested: how to see without reducing, and how to reveal without possessing.

Mulvey's (1989) seminal critique of the "male gaze" further complicates this ethical relation by exposing the power structures embedded in visual pleasure. Mulvey argues that classical cinema constructs spectatorship through a masculinised gaze that objectifies women and reproduces patriarchal desire. Her intervention, while rooted in feminist theory, remains crucial for broader discussions of image ethics because it demonstrates that looking is never neutral. It is always mediated by ideology, privilege, and desire. In documentary or ethnographic contexts, this insight invites scrutiny of what might be called the *outsider's gaze* - the position of the filmmaker who approaches a community from a standpoint of difference, whether cultural, gendered,

or socioeconomic. The question is not whether to look but how to look *ethically*.

Nichols's (1991, 2017) contributions to documentary theory bring these ethical concerns into the field of practice. Nichols emphasises that every documentary involves a "contract of trust" between filmmaker, subject, and spectator, a contract grounded in representation, consent, and accountability. The ethics of documentary, he argues, lies not in moral correctness but in relational honesty. How the filmmaker acknowledges the asymmetry of power inherent in representation and how the film's form - its voice, narration, and visual rhetoric - embodies or subverts that asymmetry. For students and educators in film schools, this approach underscores that ethical awareness must inform creative decision-making at every stage of production.

The Limits of Representation: Lyotard and LaCapra

If Levinas, Mulvey, and Nichols focus on the ethics of looking, Jean-François Lyotard and Dominick LaCapra push the discussion toward the ethics of *not looking* or rather, the recognition that some experiences defy representation. Lyotard (1988) famously conceptualised the *differend* - the event or trauma that cannot be adequately expressed within existing discursive frameworks. To represent the unrepresentable, he warns, risks either trivialising suffering or aestheticising it into spectacle. LaCapra (2001) extends this argument to the representation of historical trauma, distinguishing between *acting out* and *working through*, between reproducing trauma and engaging it critically. Both theorists remind us that the limits of representation are not merely technical but ethical. The filmmaker must decide when silence, ellipsis, or absence speaks more truthfully than images themselves.

Within the context of documentary cinema, these ideas illuminate why films such as *Children of the Mist* or *Finding Phong* resonate ethically - not because they fully capture the experiences of their subjects, but because they gesture toward

what remains incommensurable. The filmmaker's task, as Lyotard would argue, is not to *speak for* the Other but to *create space* where the unspeakable may be approached without appropriation. This tension between representation and restraint should be central to film pedagogy, teaching students to acknowledge that ethical filmmaking sometimes means embracing ambiguity, withholding judgment, or resisting the impulse to make the invisible visible at any cost.

Extending the Debate: Digital Ethics and AI

In the digital age, the notion of the "limit of representation" acquires new urgency. Artificial intelligence, generative imagery, and deepfake technologies have expanded the possibilities of visual creation while simultaneously destabilising the ontological status of the image. When faces, voices, and bodies can be synthesised without human presence, the Levinasian "face of the Other" becomes a site of profound ethical uncertainty. The viewer may be moved by empathy toward a face that never existed, or manipulated by an image that simulates authenticity. These conditions challenge the very foundation of documentary truth and call for a new vocabulary of *digital ethics* (Floridi, 2013; Rini, 2020).

Within film education, this raises critical questions: How should students navigate AI-assisted storytelling while maintaining transparency and respect for their subjects? To what extent can synthetic or composite imagery be ethically justified in representing real communities or events? As Braidotti (2019) suggests, posthuman subjectivity invites us to rethink the relational ethics beyond the humanist frame, recognising our entanglement with technologies that both empower and endanger us. In this light, film pedagogy must evolve toward *techno-ethical literacy* - the capacity to understand, critique, and ethically engage with algorithmic tools of image production.

Toward an Ethical Pedagogy of the Image

Integrating these theoretical insights, this study proposes an ethical pedagogy that situates filmmaking as both an

aesthetic and moral practice. Levinas reminds students to see filming as a form of encounter; Mulvey teaches them to interrogate the power of their gaze; Nichols provides a relational model of accountability; Lyotard and LaCapra teach humility before the unspeakable; and AI ethics introduces the imperative of technological awareness. Together, these perspectives form a multi-layered framework for reimagining film education, and one that encourages students to develop *ethical reflexivity* as an integral part of their creative identity.

Such a framework does not aim to prescribe rigid moral codes but to foster critical sensibility - the ability to recognise when representation risks turning into exploitation, when empathy becomes voyeurism, or when innovation crosses into manipulation. In short, it equips future filmmakers to navigate what this paper calls the *limits of the image*: the thresholds where aesthetics, ethics, and technology intersect, and where the responsibility of the filmmaker must be most alert.

Case Studies and Analysis

Witnessing and the Ethics of the Unspeakable: The Boundary (2021)

Tư's *The Boundary* (2021) is emblematic of the ethical paradox of documentary cinema: the simultaneous necessity and danger of looking. Filmed during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City's Hùng Vương Hospital, the film confronts death and human fragility with unsettling proximity. While praised for its raw authenticity, it also sparked public debate over the morality of showing patients gasping for life, the extended close-ups of dying bodies, and the emotional burden placed on viewers.

From Lyotard's perspective of *the unspeakable*, *The Boundary* illustrates the dilemma between witnessing and violation. The ethical question is not simply whether one should film, but *how* one looks at suffering. In several sequences, the camera's unflinching gaze crosses into what LaCapra might

call "acting out" rather than "working through", reproducing trauma rather than enabling reflection. The film's intense visual proximity collapses the space of mourning and empathy, turning the spectator into both witness and intruder.

A comparison with Krauss's *Extremis* (2016) highlights the role of aesthetic restraint in shaping ethical perception. In *Extremis*, the filmmaker maintains a controlled distance, prioritising informed consent and human dignity. The difference lies not in the subject matter but in the *grammar of seeing*. *Extremis* transforms the ICU into a moral space, while *The Boundary* risks turning the hospital into a theatre of suffering.

The case of *The Boundary* underscores the necessity of integrating ethical reflection into film training. Students must learn not only what to shoot but when to look away. The unspeakable is not a void to be filled by images, but a space where silence itself becomes an ethical gesture.

The Outsider's Gaze and Cultural Mediation: Children of the Mist (2021)

In *Children of the Mist*, Diễm - a female filmmaker working within a H'Mông community - captures the life of Di, a teenage girl caught between tradition and modernity. The film's international acclaim (Sundance, IDFA) testifies its authenticity and emotional depth, yet its method raises profound ethical questions. Where does empathy end and intrusion begin?

Diễm's position as what she calls a "one-person crew" accentuates both intimacy and vulnerability. Living among her subjects for years, she formed deep emotional bonds. "They grow rice, I grow rice with them", she recounts.

This embedded approach enabled trust but also blurred the line between observer and participant. The director herself admits moments of doubt: "I sometimes wondered if I was exploiting Di to make my film."

Drawing from Minh-ha's concept of *speaking nearby*, Diễm's camera oscillates between nearness and restraint. When Di confronts the camera, resists filming, or looks directly into the lens, the film achieves its most ethical moments - the subject reclaims her right to visibility and silence. This aligns with Levinas's ethics of the face: the encounter with the Other demands respect, not possession.

As postcolonial critics like Ponzanesi (2020) remind us, ethnographic documentaries often risk "exoticising" difference. *Children of the Mist*, like *Honeyland* (2019), balances precariously between witness and aestheticisation. Both films frame minority lives within breathtaking natural landscapes, an aesthetic that may unconsciously reproduce the colonial gaze, turning cultural otherness into spectacle for cosmopolitan audiences. The ethical filmmaker must remain self-aware, as authenticity alone does not absolve the politics of representation.

The Aestheticisation of Suffering: Documentaries on Agent Orange Victims

Few cinematic subjects demand as much ethical sensitivity as the representation of trauma. The documentaries of Sakata (*Agent Orange: A Personal Requiem*, 2007; *Living in the Silent Spring*, 2011; *Long Time Passing*, 2022) and Nga (*Inside This Peace*, 2019) reveal how female directors negotiate empathy without exploitation. Both women, though from different cultural backgrounds, share a feminist ethic of care. They depict pain not as spectacle but as endurance.

Sakata's films, shaped by her personal loss of a husband who died from exposure to Agent Orange, are meditations on mourning and transnational responsibility. Her restrained camera - minimal movement, natural lighting, elliptical editing - echoes LaCapra's *working through*, a cinematic process of witnessing that allows space for dignity and silence. As she notes, "In the barren land of despair, somewhere deep beneath, a seed of hope begins to sprout."

Nga's *Inside This Peace* adopts an equally ascetic approach. Eschewing music and narration, she lets the subject, Thoa - a young woman living with disfigurement - tell her own story. The film's power lies in its refusal to aestheticise pain. The dim light, the quiet rhythm, and the absence of sentimentality create an ethical atmosphere of humility. What emerges is not voyeurism but relational solidarity.

These films exemplify an ethically grounded form of realism, privileging emotional truth over visual sensationalism (Nichols, 1991). They demonstrate how ethical filmmaking transforms the camera from an instrument of exposure into one of care. Within film education, they provide model cases for teaching students how to depict vulnerability with integrity, turning empathy into ethical practice rather than aesthetic effect.

Queer Visibility and the Risk of Exploitation: Finding Phong (2015)

Finding Phong (Thảo & Dubus, 2015) documents a young Vietnamese transgender man's journey toward self-realisation. The film is groundbreaking for its candid portrayal of gender identity within a conservative society, yet it also raises complex questions about the ethics of visibility.

The directors' gaze - sympathetic yet external - invites reflection on what Levinas might term *the violence of exposure*. When personal suffering becomes public narrative, the line between empowerment and spectacle becomes precarious. Certain sequences, such as prolonged scenes of rejection or medical vulnerability, risk eliciting voyeuristic empathy rather than critical understanding. The camera's intimate proximity, while emotionally powerful, occasionally blurs the distinction between witnessing and intrusion, especially when moments of pain are extended through close framing and prolonged duration. In such instances, vulnerability risks becoming not only represented but also aesthetically consumed.

The film's confessional structure gives Phong an important degree of narrative presence and emotional agency. Rather than being reduced to a symbolic figure of transgender identity, Phong emerges as a complex subject negotiating family expectations, bodily transformation, and social belonging. This tension between self-expression and mediated exposure constitutes the film's central ethical ambiguity. The documentary's value lies precisely in this instability. It reveals how visibility can function simultaneously as liberation and as a form of vulnerability within contemporary media culture.

Comparatively, Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990) offers a counter-model of queer representation. By integrating the voices and performances of her subjects within the film's form, Livingston transforms documentary spectatorship into a participatory experience. *Finding Phong*, while intimate, could further benefit from this dialogical structure, allowing the protagonist greater authorship over their own narrative.

Within film pedagogy, the case of *Finding Phong* reinforces the importance of consent, collaborative authorship, and reflexive editing. Students must learn to distinguish between *representation* and *exposure*: to show is not always to reveal, and to reveal is not always to respect.

Digital Ethics and the Future of Image Education

The rise of AI-generated imagery and deepfake technologies has radically altered the moral terrain of visual culture. When synthetic faces and fabricated voices can simulate reality with uncanny precision, the Levinasian ethics of the face confronts a new paradox: what if the face we respond to does not belong to anyone? This question is no longer merely theoretical. In 2023, AI-generated images related to the Gaza conflict began circulating widely online, including fabricated scenes of destruction and injured civilians. Their rapid spread showed how synthetic visuals can enter humanitarian discourse almost immediately, blurring the boundary between evidence and fabrication before any verification takes place.

These images do not only mislead; they also shape emotional responses in ways that detach empathy from the lived experience, making the act of witnessing itself more ethically unstable.

In digital environments, images can be endlessly replicated, remixed, and weaponised, turning human suffering into consumable data. For younger audiences, such exposure breeds desensitisation, confusion, and moral fatigue. Hence, ethical film education must now include *digital literacy* and *AI ethics* to understand the ontological instability of images, the politics of algorithmic visibility, and the social implications of synthetic realism.

Pedagogical strategies might include critical analysis of deepfake-based artworks, reflective assignments on consent and simulation, and collaborative storytelling exercises emphasising transparency. In this sense, ethical filmmaking becomes not only a question of *representation* but of *responsible mediation* - teaching students to navigate the porous boundary between truth and fabrication in an age where images no longer guarantee authenticity (Rini, 2020).

Synthesis: The Pedagogical Imperative

Across these case studies, a pattern emerges: ethical filmmaking is less about adherence to universal codes than about cultivating *ethical reflexivity*. From *The Boundary's* confrontation with death to *Children of the Mist's* negotiation of cultural otherness, from *Inside This Peace's* restraint to *Finding Phong's* exposure of identity, each film tests the filmmaker's capacity for empathy without appropriation.

In the context of film education, these examples illustrate how aesthetic decisions - framing, duration, editing, and silence - are inherently moral choices. Teaching visual ethics thus means training the perception to see not only what is visible but what should remain unseen. Following Nichols (2017), every image carries ethical implications. The challenge for

contemporary film schools is to ensure that the filmmaker's gaze remains both artistically sensitive and ethically responsible.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

Reframing Ethics as a Pedagogical Core

The cases discussed above illuminate a recurring paradox at the heart of cinematic practice: the image's dual capacity to reveal and to wound. Each film - from *Children of the Mist* to *Finding Phong* - demonstrates that visual storytelling involves an encounter with vulnerability, not merely its aestheticisation. This recognition demands a fundamental shift in film education. Ethics must move from the periphery of professional training to its very centre.

Traditionally, film schools - including members of CILECT - have emphasised the triad of *artistic vision, technical proficiency, and narrative craft*. However, in the twenty-first century, these pillars are incomplete without a fourth: *ethical literacy*. To teach filmmaking today is not simply to train visual technicians but to nurture moral agents capable of reflecting on the implications of their gaze. As Levinas (1969) would suggest, ethics precedes aesthetics. It is not what we add to filmmaking after the fact but what makes the creative act itself possible.

Within this redefined framework, the filmmaker's responsibility extends beyond truth-telling to include *care, consent, and contextual awareness*. Ethical filmmaking does not mean self-censorship or the avoidance of difficult subjects. Rather, it entails an ongoing process of negotiation - a dialogical ethics that respects the agency of both subjects and audiences. Film educators must teach ethics not as a set of rules but as a *mode of perception* - an awareness of how every aesthetic choice (a close-up, a cut, a silence) shapes the moral field of the film.

From Codes to Reflexivity: Teaching Ethics Through Practice

Teaching ethics in film education is not simply a matter of codifying professional behaviour or enforcing external norms. To reduce ethics to a checklist of 'do's and don'ts' risks transforming it into bureaucratic compliance rather than a living, reflexive practice. What is required is a pedagogy that cultivates *ethical reflexivity* - a form of self-awareness that emerges through practice, dialogue, and embodied experience. In other words, ethics in cinema should not be taught as a static body of knowledge but as a dynamic mode of perceiving and responding to the Other.

Film pedagogy that foregrounds ethical reflexivity begins with the recognition that every creative decision is also a moral one. The placement of the camera, the choice of shot duration, and the act of editing a sequence are not merely aesthetic operations; they determine how subjects are seen, remembered, and judged. In *Children of the Mist*, Diễm's patient observation of Di's coming-of-age process exemplifies this awareness. Her decision to film from within the domestic space rather than from above or afar transforms the film's gaze from ethnographic surveillance into empathetic witnessing. This kind of attentiveness cannot be learned through abstract lectures on ethics. It must be experienced through mistakes, revisions, and reflection on one's own positionality.

Reflexive pedagogy invites students to engage in the dual process of *making* and *thinking*. During production exercises, they are encouraged to record moments of uncertainty - when the camera felt intrusive, when consent felt ambiguous, when empathy slid toward pity. These affective moments are then examined in critical discussions, allowing students to confront the emotional and epistemological limits of their practice. Rather than penalising ethical hesitation, educators should frame it as a productive space of inquiry, which is a sign that the student is beginning to see filmmaking as a moral encounter rather than a technical task.

This approach echoes the feminist and postcolonial turn in documentary theory, which privileges relational ethics over representational mastery. As Minh-ha (1991) proposes, to “speak nearby” rather than “about” is to acknowledge the otherness of the subject while resisting appropriation. For film students, this means learning to navigate between visibility and respect, and between testimony and intrusion. Collaborative storytelling, where subjects participate in shaping the narrative, becomes an important pedagogical tool. It decentralises authorship and disrupts the hierarchical relation between filmmaker and filmed.

At an institutional level, film schools can create frameworks that support this reflexivity through ethical review discussions and mentorship, but these should be dialogical rather than punitive. The goal is to develop in students a *habit of questioning*, a willingness to interrogate their own gaze and to situate it within broader social, cultural, and technological contexts.

The true measure of ethical education lies not in the student's ability to follow a code but in their capacity to ask the right questions about power, consent, vulnerability, and representation and to translate these questions into responsible artistic form.

Digital and AI Literacy as Ethical Foundations

In the era of artificial intelligence, deepfake technologies, and algorithmic content generation, the ethical landscape of filmmaking has shifted dramatically. The ontological status of the image - once tied to the indexical trace of reality - has been destabilised. When AI can synthesise a human face indistinguishable from an authentic one, or when generative models can create entire scenes without a camera, the relationship between truth, representation, and responsibility is radically redefined. For film educators, this is not only a technical issue but an urgent ethical frontier.

Digital and AI literacy must be understood as integral to ethical education. It is no longer sufficient for students to know *how* to use technology; they must also understand *what it does*, epistemologically, culturally, and morally. Algorithms are not neutral tools but agents of mediation that structure visibility and invisibility. They decide whose stories circulate, whose bodies are rendered desirable, and whose faces are erased. An ethically literate filmmaker must learn to decode this algorithmic gaze, recognising how power is embedded in data-driven aesthetics.

Students should be encouraged to experiment with AI tools, not as aesthetic novelties but as ethical provocations. Classroom discussions can revolve around speculative scenarios: What does authorship mean in a film co-created by AI? How does one ensure informed consent when depicting the digital likenesses of real people? How might AI-generated media perpetuate or subvert social biases? These questions cultivate a form of *techno-ethical literacy*, enabling future filmmakers to engage with technology reflexively rather than passively.

Digital ethics requires a shift from anthropocentric to *post-humanist* perspectives. As Braidotti (2019) argues, posthuman ethics recognises our entanglement with nonhuman agencies - technologies, networks, ecologies - that shape perception and representation. Within this framework, filmmaking becomes an act of co-existence rather than domination. Teaching students to see the camera, the algorithm, and the image as co-participants in meaning-making opens new pathways for ethical creativity.

Ultimately, the challenge is not to resist technological change but to inhabit it responsibly. The goal of digital and AI literacy in film education should be to empower students to use these tools with transparency, humility, and awareness of their social consequences. In an age when images can no longer guarantee authenticity, ethics becomes the last remaining

ground of trust. To cultivate that trust is to reaffirm the moral core of cinematic art - to ensure that, even in a world of synthetic visions, the human capacity for care, empathy, and accountability endures.

Global Standards, Local Contexts

While the ethical principles underpinning filmmaking - consent, transparency, and accountability - may appear universal, their interpretation is always culturally situated. The dynamics of representation, power, and vulnerability are refracted differently across contexts marked by divergent histories, belief systems, and social structures. For this reason, a globally informed yet locally grounded ethics of filmmaking is not only desirable but indispensable.

In Southeast Asia, and particularly in Vietnam, the filmmaker's relationship with their subject is often embedded within communal and kinship networks rather than individual contracts. The Western model of informed consent, typically understood as a signed document ensuring a subject's legal autonomy, fails to capture the subtleties of social negotiation and trust that underpin community-based storytelling. In many cases, ethical legitimacy derives not from written agreement but from relational reciprocity: living with, sharing meals, and working alongside the community, as Diễm did during her three-year immersion in Sa Pa.

Such practices challenge the dominance of Euro-American ethical paradigms that prioritise the autonomous individual as the moral subject. In collectivist cultures, where personhood is defined through social interdependence, ethics operate less as a matter of personal rights than of relational balance. For film educators in Vietnam and other postcolonial contexts, this entails reframing ethics not as a legalistic framework imported from the West but as a culturally responsive dialogue between global standards and local values.

Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives remind us that ethics is never neutral: it is entangled with histories of representation and power. The "outsider's gaze" that Minh-ha (1991) critiques in ethnographic cinema persists in subtle forms even within contemporary documentary practice, where Western festivals and funding agencies continue to shape the aesthetics of "authenticity" expected from the Global South. Films like *Children of the Mist* risk being celebrated for their "raw" depiction of ethnic difference precisely because they satisfy global desires for visual access to the Other. To teach ethics in this context is also to teach students to be critically aware of the global economy of images in which their work circulates - who their audiences are, whose expectations they fulfil, and what power dynamics are reinscribed through global recognition.

A localised ethics of filmmaking must thus be dialogical: it must listen as much as it teaches. Pedagogically, this involves encouraging students to engage with indigenous knowledge systems, community protocols, and local philosophies of care. Integrating such values into film education not only aligns with cultural realities but also expands the moral vocabulary of global media ethics.

The goal, then, is not to reject international norms but to pluralise them. Film schools in Vietnam and Southeast Asia should position themselves as contributors to, rather than passive recipients of, global ethical discourse. By foregrounding relational, communal, and intercultural understandings of responsibility, they can help redefine what ethical filmmaking means in an age of transnational production and digital connectivity. This pluralism does not dilute ethics; it enriches it, transforming film education into a space where universal principles meet situated practices, where the global and the local illuminate one another.

Ethics as Aesthetic Praxis

If ethics are to take root in film education, it must not remain an abstract framework imposed from outside artistic creation. Rather, it should be recognised as intrinsic to the very process of making - a form of *aesthetic praxis* where moral awareness and artistic imagination converge. To speak of ethics as aesthetic praxis is to understand that the act of representation is never ethically innocent, and that aesthetic form, referring to composition, duration, rhythm, and silence, is itself a moral language.

In this sense, cinematic ethics is not only about *what* we show but *how* we show it. The ethical dimension lies in form, not just in content. Consider the temporal patience in *Inside This Peace* (Nga, 2019), where the camera lingers without intrusion, allowing silence to articulate what words cannot. The film's austerity in its absence of music and its subdued palette embodies an ethics of humility, mirroring LaCapra's call for "working through" trauma rather than "acting out" its spectacle. Similarly, in Diễm's *Children of the Mist*, the camera's oscillation between closeness and withdrawal mirrors a moral rhythm of intimacy and restraint. The visual form becomes an enactment of care.

In this understanding, aesthetics and ethics are not oppositional but co-constitutive. Ethical awareness deepens artistic sensitivity, while aesthetic insight refines ethical response. For film educators, this convergence demands a pedagogical shift from "ethics as regulation" to "ethics as creation." Students should be encouraged to view ethical questioning as a generative force in their art - a challenge that expands, rather than restricts, creative possibilities. Restraint, hesitation, and self-doubt, traditionally treated as obstacles, can be reframed as moments of ethical insight that shape narrative structure and visual language.

The aesthetic dimension of ethics extends to spectatorship. The filmmaker's moral responsibility continues beyond

production into how the film solicits and shapes viewer response. An ethical film does not manipulate empathy through sentimental excess; instead, it cultivates what Sontag (2001) called "an education of the emotions" - a mode of seeing that resists both indifference and domination. Within the classroom, this means teaching students to analyze not only what their images represent but also how they invite audiences to feel, judge, and act.

The integration of ethics as aesthetic praxis also aligns with the challenges posed by the digital and AI-driven visual culture discussed earlier. As the material basis of the image becomes increasingly synthetic, aesthetic discernment becomes an ethical necessity to recognise the difference between empathy and simulation, between witnessing and consumption. The ability to embed moral intelligence into cinematic form is what will distinguish human creativity from algorithmic production. The filmmaker's conscience, articulated through style, becomes the last frontier of authenticity in an age of synthetic vision.

Ultimately, to teach ethics as aesthetic praxis is to reclaim the moral vocation of cinema itself. Film, at its best, has always been an art of relation between self and other, image and world, seeing and being seen. When filmmakers internalise this relational consciousness, ethics ceases to be an external constraint and becomes the very texture of creativity. The camera, then, is not merely an instrument of recording but an instrument of care - a means of being responsibly present in the world.

In this vision, the film school transforms into a moral atelier, a place where artistic form and ethical reflection coalesce, and where each image becomes an act of attention and compassion. Film education must ensure that when it does, we listen, not as masters of vision but as witnesses bound by responsibility.

Conclusion

The transformations of the twenty-first century have reshaped the production of images as well as the very ways people perceive, represent, and respond to the world. Cinema, once grounded in the physical trace of the real, now inhabits a landscape of mediated realities, algorithmic visions, and synthetic presences. In this shifting terrain, the question of ethics is no longer peripheral to artistic creation; it is its very condition of possibility. The ethical act begins the moment the filmmaker decides to look and continues through every frame, cut, and silence that follows.

Through the preceding analysis, this study has argued that the ethical challenges of filmmaking cannot be resolved by universal codes or technical regulation alone. Rather, they demand the cultivation of *ethical reflexivity*, a form of critical self-awareness that emerges from the encounter between filmmaker, subject, and technology. The case studies discussed - *The Boundary*, *Children of the Mist*, *Inside This Peace*, and *Finding Phong* - illuminate how this reflexivity manifests in practice through hesitation, restraint, and the filmmaker's willingness to confront their own gaze. These films reveal the fragile boundary between empathy and exploitation, witnessing and intrusion, care and control, showing that ethical filmmaking is inseparable from aesthetic form.

In this sense, ethics in film education must be understood as a mode of *aesthetic praxis*. To teach ethics is to teach a way of seeing, to train the eye and the conscience simultaneously. The camera, far from being a neutral instrument, becomes an extension of the filmmaker's moral vision. When students learn to perceive the Other not as an object of representation but as a presence that calls for respect, their art acquires a new depth. Ethics ceases to function as a constraint; it becomes a generative force and a source of creative integrity and emotional truth. This shift from rule-based to relational

ethics transforms the film school into a site of dialogue, where artistic freedom and social accountability coexist.

Equally crucial is the integration of digital and AI literacy as ethical foundations. As images become increasingly detached from human referents, the ability to discern the difference between truth and simulation, empathy and automation, becomes a moral imperative. Film education must prepare students not only to navigate but to interrogate these new realities. Ethical imagination - the capacity to foresee the human consequences of technological creation - is what distinguishes the filmmaker from the machine. In an age when algorithms can replicate vision, ethics remains the last frontier of the human.

At the same time, the universality of ethical principles must be tempered by cultural and historical specificity. In Vietnam and Southeast Asia, where relationality and community shape moral life, ethical filmmaking is grounded less in individual autonomy than in collective trust and reciprocity. This study has emphasised the need for film pedagogy to incorporate local epistemologies, not as exotic deviations from Western norms but as vital contributions to the plural and decolonial ethics of cinema. By bringing together Levinas's philosophy of the Other, Mulvey's critique of the gaze, Nichols's relational documentary ethics, and indigenous notions of care, film education can position itself as a distinctive voice in the global conversation on cinematic responsibility.

Ultimately, the redefinition of film ethics in the twenty-first century calls for a reimagining of film education itself as both an artistic and moral enterprise. The task of educators is not only to produce competent filmmakers but to nurture *ethical authors*: artists who understand that every image they create enters into a social contract with the world. In a time when AI blurs the boundary between reality and fabrication, the filmmaker's responsibility is to preserve what technology cannot

generate - empathy, accountability, and the courage to face the Other without possession.

The future of cinema depends not on how perfectly we master technology but on how deeply we honour the relationship between image and world, self and other, art and life. In this convergence lies the enduring power of film education: to shape not only the images we see, but the moral imagination with which we see them.

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