

Central Station (1998, W Salles director)

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In an entertaining [2011 article](#), the *Guardian* listed “The movie plots that technology killed.” Amongst them is the Hitchcock classic *Psycho*: today, a quick glance on TripAdvisor would be enough to put anyone off a weekend break at the Bates Motel: “*Smelly, dirty, really creepy owner, constantly talks to a mother no one ever sees’...So Leigh doesn’t check into the hotel, there is no horrific shower scene, and Psycho does not become a classic.*”

The same game could be played with director Walter Salles’ award-winning 1998 film *Central Station*, which helped to usher in a revival in Brazilian cinema (Sadler, 2007). We meet the film’s female lead Dora in the opening scenes as an untrustworthy retired schoolteacher, earning money writing letters for illiterate individuals at Rio’s Central Station. But Dora does not post the letters, instead tearing them up or placing them in “purgatory” in a drawer, while mocking her clients’ concerns after hours with her friend Irene.

Today, Dora’s ruse either wouldn’t arise at all or would quickly unravel, the near-ubiquity of mobiles and smartphones making communication much simpler today than in 1998. Indeed, it is a measure of the transformations wrought by technology that less than 20 years after *Central Station*’s release, Dora’s letter writing seems somewhat archaic.

If our relationship to a film’s plot can be impacted by technological advances and the passage of time in this way, is the same true of shifts in ethical or justice considerations? As Stanford’s Jamil Zaki [comments](#), “our ethical landscape is ever changing, and the actions we consider moral and immoral have shifted rapidly across the decades.”

One does not need to look far for films or portrayals which would be considered unacceptable by the vast majority today: e.g. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), “a gripping masterpiece...and a stain on history”:¹ once the most profitable film ever (a title it held for more than two decades), yet an “explicitly anti-African American work” (based on the novel and play *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*) which

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jul/29/birth-of-a-nation-dw-griffith-masterpiece>

“bears the stench of residing on the wrong side of history”;² or Mickey Rooney’s portrayal of Japanese man Mr Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), which, described as “broadly exotic” by the New York Times in 1961,³ today is “supremely racist”;⁴ or Disney’s *Dumbo* (1941), whose [“Song of the Roustabouts”](#) seems unlikely to feature on any future Disney compilation album: black circus workers singing, “We slave until we’re almost dead / We’re happy-hearted roustabout/... Keep on working / Stop that shirking / Grab that rope, you hairy ape!”

It seems likely, as Xan Brooks suggests, that “there are numerous elements that we blithely accept in today’s motion pictures that future generations will look upon with horror.”⁵ More generally, Zaki poses the interesting question, “what practices are banal today, but in 100 years will seem unspeakably immoral? This is always a fun (if somewhat disturbing) thought experiment to try, and one that brings our collective moral shiftiness to the surface.”⁶

This idea of “moral shiftiness” or an “expanding circle of justice”⁷ has given rise to a rich academic literature, including in law. For example, Martha Nussbaum’s 2006 work *Frontiers of Justice* considers “three unsolved problems of social justice whose neglect in existing theories seems particularly problematic”: namely, “doing justice to people with physical and mental impairments”; “extending justice to all world citizens...in which accidents of birth and national origin do not warp people’s life chances pervasively and from the start”; and “the issues of justice involved in our treatment of non-human animals.”

At the heart of the film *Central Station* is an additional frontier of justice: justice for those in extreme poverty. By which I mean the World Bank’s standard for extreme poverty: living on less than US \$1.90 per day.⁸ And let us not fall into the common trap of thinking that US \$1.90 goes further in developing countries, since the figure is of course

² <http://www.themovingarts.com/revered-and-reviled-d-w-griffiths-the-birth-of-a-nation/>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A05EED9173AE13ABC4E53DFB667838A679EDE>

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/what-to-watch/politically-incorrect-movies/>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jul/29/birth-of-a-nation-dw-griffith-masterpiece>

⁶ <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/moral-universe/our-shifting-moral-landscape/>

⁷ On which see Singer (2011).

⁸ Formerly US \$1, updated to US \$1.90 in 2015.

adjusted for purchasing power parity (i.e. a person living in extreme poverty in these terms has an amount to live on that is *equivalent to* living in the USA on US \$1.90 per day).

In *Central Station*, Dora is confronted suddenly and directly with extreme poverty so defined: a woman, Ana, and her 9-year old son Josué pay a visit to Dora's letter-writing desk in Rio's Central Station and dictate a letter to Ana's absent husband Jesus, Josué's father. A day or two later Ana and Josué return, with Ana asking Dora to tear up the original letter, to be replaced by a new dictated letter in which Ana, with inspiration from Dora, expresses her continuing love for her absent husband. Having dictated this second letter, Ana and Josué leave the station. On crossing the road outside the station, Ana is hit by a bus and killed.

Josué finds himself alone and takes to living on the streets, spending time in Central Station during the day. A fellow stall-owner in Central Station tells Dora about a couple who, the stall-owner says, will pay cash for street children and will find homes for them with wealthy foreign families looking to adopt. Dora takes Josué to this couple and receives \$1,000 in exchange. She uses the money to buy a television for her apartment, but her enjoyment of this new purchase is spoiled by her friend Irene, who tells Dora that Josué is too old to be adopted and will instead be killed for his organs.

Putting herself at risk, Dora returns to the apartment and rescues Josué. The two then flee Rio and embark on a road trip by bus and hitch-hiking through the backlands of the *sertão* in Brazil's north-east, seeking to reunite Josué with his father. While they do not ultimately manage to find Josué's father, Dora succeeds in uniting Josué with his two half-brothers, with whom – possibly – Josué could make a better life than the one he left behind in Rio.

Central Station has multiple themes at its heart, including the power the literate hold over the illiterate ("Dora is the lettered city which exploits the provinces of Brazil" (Hart, 2004, p.184)); the poverty of urban and rural Brazil; the search for an absent father; and the enduring power of religion and redemption. Interwoven through these themes is the

idea of a journey: both literally with Dora and Josué's road trip but also figuratively by way of Dora's personal journey⁹ and the audience's relationship with Dora.

That is, for the film to resonate emotionally it is necessary for the viewing audience first to judge Dora negatively for dishonestly failing to post her illiterate clients' letters, then more negatively still for (at best recklessly) selling Josué to the adoptive-agency-cum-organ-peddlers. From this low point Dora redeems herself by rescuing Josué and accompanying him halfway across Brazil in search of his father, during which time her affection for the boy grows, and with it the audience's affection for Dora. As an audience we are of course brought on this journey deliberately by the filmmaker, and our predictable responses raise challenging questions: e.g. is our emotional response to the plot of *Central Station* a product of our time? Will audiences 100 years hence view *Central Station* as morally archaic just as we today are shocked by, say, *The Birth of a Nation's* racism?

This turns to some extent on whether Dora's behaviour in helping Josué in *Central Station* is a commendable act of charity or instead simply the fulfilment of a basic moral duty. Princeton philosopher Peter Singer has written extensively in this area over the past 40+ years. In 1971, in his famous article *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*,¹⁰ Singer reasoned as follows:¹¹

"First premise: Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.

Second premise: If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.¹²

Third premise: By donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important.

⁹ Per Hart (2004), the road trip "forces [Dora] to open her eyes to the interior of Brazil" and it is "also a psychological journey inwards".

¹⁰ Also see Unger (1996), a detailed defence and development of the argument.

¹¹ The version presented here is the most recent iteration of the argument, taken from *The Life You Can Save* (Singer 2009, at pp.15-16); the only real difference from the argument made in *Famine, Affluence, and Morality* is in the second premise, which Singer simplifies for the purposes of *The Life You Can Save*.

¹² In *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*, Singer presents (Singer 1972, at p.230) two versions of the second premise: "if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it" (strong form) and "if it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it" (qualified form).

Conclusion: Therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.”

(Note that criticisms based on the (in)effectiveness of aid donations tend to miss the mark here because the third premise above is only one way of fulfilling the moral obligation Singer identifies. In the present case, for example, the third premise could be that by accompanying Josué on a journey to find his family Dora could prevent suffering from lack of food, shelter, etc., without sacrificing anything nearly as important.)

On the basis of these premises, Singer argues that we should transfer resources to those in need until we reach the point at which “I would cause as much suffering to myself or my dependents as I would relieve by my gift” (Singer 1972, p.241). Or, as he put it in [a 1999 New York Times piece](#), “each one of us with wealth surplus to his or her essential needs should be giving most of it to help people suffering from poverty so dire as to be life-threatening.”

Singer’s argument is stark and demanding, and it is unapologetically directed at practical action: “the whole way we look at moral issues...needs to be altered, and with it, the way of life that has come to be taken for granted in our society... The outcome of [my] argument is that our traditional moral categories are upset. The traditional distinction between duty and charity cannot be drawn, or at least, not in the place we normally draw it...” (Singer 1972, pp.230, 235 and 242).

Singer addresses the plot of *Central Station* directly in his 1999 New York Times piece, writing:

At the end of the movie, in cinemas in the affluent nations of the world, people who would have been quick to condemn Dora if she had not rescued the boy go home to places far more comfortable than her apartment. In fact, the average family in the United States spends almost one-third of its income on things that are no more necessary to them than Dora’s new TV was to her. Going out to nice restaurants, buying new clothes because the old ones are no longer stylish, vacationing at beach resorts —so much of our income is spent on things not essential to the preservation of our lives and health. Donated to one of a number of

charitable agencies, that money could mean the difference between life and death for children in need.

All of which raises a question: In the end, what is the ethical distinction between a Brazilian who sells a homeless child to organ peddlers and an American who already has a TV and upgrades to a better one —knowing that the money could be donated to an organization that would use it to save the lives of kids in need?

Of course, there are several differences between the two situations that could support different moral judgments about them. For one thing, to be able to consign a child to death when he is standing right in front of you takes a chilling kind of heartlessness; it is much easier to ignore an appeal for money to help children you will never meet. Yet for a utilitarian philosopher like myself —that is, one who judges whether acts are right or wrong by their consequences— if the upshot of the American's failure to donate the money is that one more kid dies on the streets of a Brazilian city, then it is, in some sense, just as bad as selling the kid to the organ peddlers. But one doesn't need to embrace my utilitarian ethic to see that, at the very least, there is a troubling incongruity in being so quick to condemn Dora for taking the child to the organ peddlers while, at the same time, not regarding the American consumer's behavior as raising a serious moral issue.

Singer focuses here on our judging Dora *negatively* for selling Josué to organ peddlers. But what should we make of our *positive* judgment of Dora when she helps Josué to escape Rio to find his family? In light of the “moral shiftiness” discussed above, could audiences of the future - having made the moral journey envisaged by Singer - perhaps view Dora's behavior in helping Josué in *Central Station* as the straightforward fulfilment of an ethical duty rather than as a singular act of charity? Whilst meeting our moral obligations is of course sometimes very challenging indeed, if the act of charity at the heart of *Central Station* were reframed as a duty in this way, the film could perhaps seem as outmoded to viewers of the future as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* Mr Yunioshi seems to us today.

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