

Black Lives Matter, The Silence of the Lambs and the Rhetoric of Empathy

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Abstract

Many aspects of contemporary society and culture—including politics, interpersonal communications, and the dissemination of information—have taken a turn for the absurd. Has this been happening for a significant period of time? Probably. Yet, in the last five years or so, unexpected public events and tragedies have escalated to an unprecedented point. This begs for explanations, and more importantly, for solutions. How can society, and the individuals who make up societies, begin to remedy the many ills that plague us? One answer to why institutions have fallen apart, and one potential remedy for how we, as individuals, can rescue many of our failing institutions may lie in the important spiritual practice of empathy. Defining empathy, and citing examples of empathy from an exploration of the sociopolitical movement Black Lives Matter can serve as inspirational; additionally, a close examination of a scene from the film *The Silence of the Lambs* can demonstrate the application of empathy as a theoretical, critical model.

The purpose of the paper is to establish an original, pragmatic definition of empathy, in order to establish this spiritual principal as both a critical concept for film and literature, and to remind us all that practicing empathy, according to the model established within, can serve to elevate our discourse and relations generally.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; The Silence of the Lambs; Empathy; Film Scholarship.

Introduction

On April 28, 2015, my cellphone rang—the phone call interrupted a final I administered to a freshman writing class. I usually do not bring my phone to class, but for some reason, this day was an exception. The call was from my brother—I decided to take it. I briefly stepped outside the classroom, and answered the call. My brother shared some concerning news—my mother

was in the hospital having fluid drained from her lungs. I did not think too much of the news, but I was still concerned, as I wrapped up the final. Later that day, I chopped wood in my backyard, to relieve some of the stress of finals week, and to get my mind off the news my brother relayed to me earlier in the day. At around 4:00pm that afternoon, I was sitting on the edge of my bed, and my cellphone rang again. My brother shared the news that floored me then, and I'll never forget for the rest of my life: my mother was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

I emailed my colleagues, jumped in my car that night, and drove from southeast Arkansas, to St. Louis. I met my brother and his family at the hospital—I then saw my mother lying in the hospital bed. She asked me “How long are you going to stay in St. Louis, Andy?” I replied, without hesitation, “As long as it takes, Mom.” That began a year and a half of spending two summers at my mother’s side, as her primary care giver. I taught in the fall and spring, and in-between, I dedicated two summers to aiding my mother. The first summer—2015—she slowly recovered, and by the time the summer ended, we were taking walks together regularly. I pushed her when I felt she needed to be pushed, I challenged her when I felt she needed to be challenged, and I gave her gentle reassurance when I felt she needed that too. Prayer and meditation revealed the answers to me.

Beginning late in the summer of 2015, and culminating in the middle of the summer of 2016, something began to change within me. Very simply, I began to see the world differently. I looked *deeply* at others. I thought deeply about people, even strangers. When I would run errands for my mother, to obtain medication, or set appointments for her, I found myself observing people in a much deeper, substantive way. “What is that person’s life like?” “Have they lost a loved one recently?” “Do they have a satisfying life?”

As the summer of 2015 ended, my mother’s health improved. I have a career at the University of Arkansas @ Monticello, and my mother understood my returning to teaching. My mother earned her Ph.D. from St. Louis University in the early 1990’s, so she knew I had to leave her, and get back to work. When the 2015-2016 school year ended, I returned to St. Louis, and my mother’s health continued to be strong. In fact, we played golf together twice—once on Mother’s Day, and once on Memorial Day. In mid June, her health began to decline a bit—she couldn’t shake a cough. At this point, I remember being stuck between an emotional Scylla and Charybdis—I had to take little breaks from my mother’s side; however, I would feel incredibly guilty about leaving her for more than an hour or so. I would take a drive, meditate for my usual 20 minutes at a time, or run a couple of miles to relieve the tension. My thoughts and feelings in the summer of 2016 were with my mother completely. Something was growing within me. At that time,

I did not know what it was, but I know now—a deep sense of empathy awoke within me.

My scholarship, my writing, my teaching, my view of the world—all the things that are most important to me will forever be changed after the experience of watching my mother battle lung cancer. I began to ask myself larger questions, “What am I doing?” “Who am I helping?” “What purpose am I serving?” “If I’m not attempting to deliver a message, through my writing and research, which involves, peace, love, compassion, and understanding, then why the hell even bother doing research at all?” The answers to these questions have slowly revealed themselves to me, and inform the purpose of this work. So, in order to establish a definition of empathy that can be placed into practice, two key researchers need to be discussed. Once a definition of empathy has been established, and an example of a sociopolitical group that adheres to empathy has been acknowledged, then a demonstration of empathy as a critical strategy in film is possible.

I.: Individual empathy, codependency, and defining empathy

Psychology has been the discipline most concerned with empathy; therefore, two psychologists, writing and researching in stark contrast with each other, will help define empathy, and establish empathy, when appropriate, as a critical strategy. In Simon Baron-Cohen’s *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty* the mission is summarized here: “We are going to take a close look at people in the population who desperately need empathy, but who, for various reasons, don’t have it, and probably never will” (Baron-Cohen 2011). Baron-Cohen seems to have a fairly pessimistic view of some who may lack the ability to empathize. His research indicates everyone—I would expand his argument beyond the individual level, to include institutions—lies on an empathetic bell curve. Interestingly, Baron-Cohen believes empathy is a substance, and this claim informs the first part of his definition of empathy, “Empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention, and instead, adopt a double-minded focus of attention” (2011). According to Baron-Cohen’s research, our brains contain an empathy circuit, which begins in the medial prefrontal cortex, continues to the frontal operculum, which sits on top of the inferior frontal gyrus, passes through other regions in the brain, ending with the amygdala.

The second part of Baron-Cohen’s definition of empathy delves deeper into his notion of “Double-mindedness,” “Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion” (2011). Baron-Cohen uses a simple, everyday example to illustrate *individual empathy*. If an individual is on a train, and sees a stranger struggling to lift a suitcase onto the overhead rack, then that should elicit an appropriate, empathetic emotion. This is a

helpful example, which needs further examination. Baron-Cohen is correct when he suggests an empathic emotion should be triggered in this instance. He also points out that immediately preceding this emotional response, is the simple recognition of an empathetic situation; hence, his notion of situational empathy consisting of two parts: recognition, and response. But what *is* an appropriate, empathetic response? Baron-Cohen does not explore an appropriate, empathetic response to the person struggling with luggage in the overhead compartment in the train, but a suggestion for an empathetic reaction to this situation is imperative for two reasons. One, an empathetic reaction to this situation will demonstrate an appropriate response to someone in need of help; and two, the suggestion for an appropriate reaction will provide an opportunity to make an important differentiation.

How should an individual, practicing empathy, respond in the train scenario? Very simply, the empathizer should *ask* the empathized if he or she needs help, before any action is taken. That may sound like a simple notion; however, some empathizers may want to jump right in, and take immediate action without asking first. For instance, the empathizer may grab a hold of the suitcase, maybe even while in the act of asking the empathized if he or she needs help, and then take action without asking the empathized for permission. I've seen this happen so many times in public—this always frustrates me. I suggest this is not an example of proper situational empathy at all. In fact, this “empathizing” is much closer to the notion of co-dependency, than genuine empathy. The distinction between empathy, and codependency cannot be underestimated: co-dependency creates power inequities—due to selfishness on behalf of the codependent—and is often mistaken for empathy.

The study of *codependency* deserves more attention. In the 1980's, and 1990's, codependency received some attention, but since then, not much research on the topic exists. Judy G. Yeats, and Janet L. McDaniel coauthored an article in 1994 titled “Are You Losing Yourself in Codependency?” At the time, Yeats was a Charge Nurse in the surgical department at Roanoke Memorial Hospital, and McDaniel was an Associate Professor of Nursing at the Radford University School of Nursing. The two researchers cite three different definitions of codependency, from three different sources: “A pattern of painful dependency on compulsive behaviors and on approval from others in an attempt to find safety, self-worth, and identity” (Wegscheider-Cruse and Joseph Cruse 1990); “Self-Defeating behaviors that diminish an individual's capacity to initiate or participate in loving relationships (Larsen 1985); “A primary disease of lost self-hood” (Whitfield 1991). These three definitions will be a key component to an original definition of empathy, and the discussion of empathy as a critique—mistaking codependency for empathy diminishes the power of the later, and can confuse the later, for the former.

Contrasting sharply with Baron-Cohen's groundbreaking research into empathy, Paul Bloom argues in, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, the world could do much better without empathy. Bloom wants "...to make a case for the value of conscious, deliberative reasoning in everyday life...we should strive to use our heads rather than our hearts" (Bloom 2016). Bloom would like to remove empathy, and adopt a more Cartesian perspective, void of passion. He argues for a rational approach to human interaction, and institutional policy making, which does not involve empathy. What Bloom argues against is actually not empathy at all. In a sense, he "straw-mans" empathy, in his book-length argument against empathy, by presenting a weaker, flimsier version of empathy—codependency—and he argues against that. For example, Bloom argues, "It (empathy) grounds foolish judgements, and often motivates indifference and cruelty. It can lead to irrational and unfair political decisions, it can corrode certain important relationships, such as between a doctor and a patient, and make us worse at being friends, parents, husbands, and wives" (2016). Larson's definition of codependency, provided by Yeats and McDaniel, contextualizes Bloom's failure to distinguish empathy from codependency.

Feeling someone else's anger, pain, frustration, joy, sorrow, and the rest of the full spectrum of emotions not only informs empathy, but makes us human. Empathy separates us from the natural world, and is *supposed* to be proof that we have developed to the point where we transcend nature. Bloom goes on to suggest "The problems we face as a society and as individuals are rarely due to a lack of empathy. Actually, they are often due to too much of it" (Bloom). This is a staggering claim, when one considers the recently "elected" President of the United States openly mocked a disabled reporter while on the campaign trail, and bragged on video, while well into his 60's, that a person of his power can get away with sexually assaulting women "Grabbing them by the pussy." Additionally, the President allied the US government with only two other countries on the planet—Syria, and Nicaragua—in pulling the country out of the Paris agreement: a pact entered into by most of the planet's nations to lower the earth's temperature by 2 degrees. So not only is the US the largest carbon polluter in the Earth's history, the President essentially sent a message to the rest of the world: "Not only is the United States the world's largest contributor to global warming, we are not going to do anything about it." Maybe this points to the President's stupefying ignorance on this issue; for example, when he Tweeted out on November 6, 2012 that global warming is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese. This position not only demonstrates a dangerous lack of knowledge about one of the most urgent crises of our time, the pulling out of the Paris agreement shows a lack of *environmental empathy* that endangers us all.

One wonders what planet Bloom inhabits? In the last several years, acts of hatred, and sociopathy—the polar opposite of genuine empathy—continue to dominate news cycles. In a three month period—spring of 2017—the NBA superstar, and global icon LeBron James had his LA residence spray painted with a racial epithet, in Portland, Oregon, a white supremacist stabbed two men, and injured a third as they defended a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, and a white supremacist traveled from Baltimore to New York City with the goal of finding a random black person to kill. Whether it's the unacceptable trend of police shootings of unarmed, young Black men, bombings such as the LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida, the mass murder of children in Newton, Conn., the racially motivated massacre at a church in Charleston, SC, attacks at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, or bombings in Paris, and Brussels, the problem is not too much empathy. On the contrary, the problem is not enough empathy.

Bloom defines empathy as "...the act of coming to experience the world as you think someone else does" (2016). This definition closely resembles the second part of Baron-Cohen's definition. Both definitions seem to miss two key components, which are key to a definition of empathy as *practicing the balance of thinking and feeling about others a little bit more, and thinking and feeling about ourselves a little bit less*. First, by practice, I mean a spiritual practice. Practicing empathy is no different than practicing any other virtue: charity, kindness, generosity, accountability, community service, humility, or honesty—virtues that have unfortunately gone by the wayside. These spiritual qualities—principals—need to be practiced. Somedays, and some moments, I fail to be an empath, but that does not mean I give up on the practice. For the better part of two years, my empathetic practice ascended to new heights, as the result of being my mother's primary caregiver. Of course, I'm only human, and sometimes I fail. For instance, I recently watched a favorite television show of mine on MSNBC, called *Lockup*. On this particular episode, four young men pled guilty to a horrible crime—they gang-raped a college student. The producers of the show filmed the sentencing phase of the trial, and the judge threw the proverbial book at the defendants. The four received a combination of several hundred years in prison. I wavered back and forth between pumping my fist in the air, and feeling dejection for the defendants. I pondered further—this is where practice comes into play—and I realized "I'm empathizing for the wrong people!" "It's the victim of this horrible crime, I should feel empathy toward!" The victim actually addressed the attackers, and demonstrated grace, and yes, empathy, as she expressed the hope that these attackers will one day become better people. I could only imagine having the ability to forgive at this level. This way of discussing empathy, as a spiritual practice, seems like a practical way to communicate to the world this powerful spiritual principal.

Second, not only does empathy need to be practiced, and implemented daily within an individual's life—and an institution's policies—but striking a *balance* between empathizing with others, making sure to not go overboard, plays a vital role in understanding empathy, and putting empathy into practice. An inquiry into this balancing act requires constant questioning, scrutiny, and even self-inventory. Many who over-empathize fall into the self-defeating, codependent trap Wegschieder-Cruse and Cruse warn against. This trap involves defining oneself, or establishing institutional policy, through the compulsive need for approval. Listening, supporting, thinking and feeling others' struggles—and successes—can certainly be done without the empathizer losing identity. Actually, all three definitions of codependency contain a common thread—codependency contributes to a loss of self. Practicing healthy empathy—thinking of others a little bit more, and thinking of oneself a little bit less—can be a way for the empathizer to avoid codependency. Keeping that working definition of empathy in mind—*practicing the balance between thinking and feeling others a little bit more, and thinking of oneself a little bit less*—empathy can become a useful critique in examining several examples of *political empathy*, and one example of *cinematic empathy*.

Political Empathy

Which political organizations currently exemplify the most inspirational examples of empathy, that can inspire us to practice empathy regularly? Users who navigate their way to the homepage of the Black Lives Matter website encounter a link which identifies the organization. Through this “Who we are” link, an explicit statement on empathy exists. Including an official statement on empathy sets the BLM movement apart from most other political organizations, and movements currently operating. Black Lives Matter's official statement on empathy reads “We are committed to practicing empathy; we engage comrades with the intent to learn about, and connect with their contexts” (Black Lives Matter 2012).

In discussing the Black Lives Matter Movement, the cofounder Alicia Garza asks anyone referencing the movement “...to credit the lineage from which your adapted work derived” (2012). Garza relates the movements' herstory (sic):

“I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously (sic) placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements” (2012).

In addition to Garza's request for the movement to be placed in the proper political context, she also warns others against adopting the movement, and changing Black Lives Matter into something else. With the current climate of white/hetero/patriarchy, identities almost necessarily lacking in empathy, seen most clearly in "All Lives Matter," Garza's request makes complete sense. The attempt here is not to co-opt BLM in any other way, but to point out how admirably the BLM movement has appropriated empathy into their mission.

Black Lives Matter's diversity statement couldn't be more crystal clear, and empathetic: "We are committed to acknowledging, respecting, and celebrating difference(s) and commonalities." (2012). Empathy challenges us to practice balance between thinking and feeling others a little bit more, and thinking of ourselves a little bit less. We jump out of our biases, our ideological commitments, and our religious beliefs in order to experience what life might be like for groups different than ourselves. Practicing empathy in this way—accepting and embracing diversity—can begin to restore something to our political landscape that has vanished in the last ten years or so: discourse. The free exchange of ideas between individuals and groups has to exist for political discourse to work. Very simply, individuals and groups have to listen to each other with the spirit of empathy.

Engaging others with the spiritual principals of empathy and diversity defines the movement, yet, Black Lives Matter identifies quite possibly the most spiritual principal of all, with which, they reach others: love. Through the "Loving Engagement" link, Black Lives Matter is "...committed to embodying and practicing justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another" (2012). The organizations' presence on social media, and community protests merely affirm this commitment. The ugliest aspects of patriarchal, masculine violence involve explicit violence. Love undercuts violence—so does empathy. Even in the face of racial oppression, and race-related violence, BLM continues to adhere to this high, spiritual principal. Suspending one's own position—thinking and feeling about the plight of others—demonstrates an acknowledgment of the high virtue of empathy. Aligning oneself with political organizations who demonstrate a commitment to empathy ensures a political dedication to empathy, and inspires us to strive toward that reality. Cinema also inspires individuals to think of others a little bit more, and think of ourselves a little less. An unlikely film, not necessarily known on the surface for empathy, serves as a powerful example of this virtue. A close look at a climatic scene will reveal a powerful example of empathy—an often overlooked major meaning in the film. Now that a working definition of empathy exists, and an example of empathy from the political sphere has aided in the understanding of empathy in practice, a demonstration of empathy as a critical film strategy is possible.

Cinematic empathy

Written by Ted Tally, and directed by Jonathan Demme, *The Silence of the Lambs*, debuted in theaters 13 February 1991. The film won all of the “Big Five” Oscars—Best picture, actor, actress, director and screenplay. Among reactions to the film in the academy, Linda Mizejewski’s “Dressed to Kill: Postfeminist Noir” focuses on the way female detectives are presented stylistically, through dress and appearance. She uses style as an entry point into discussing female, cinematic detectives, and how they are situated within popular notions of postfeminism. Mizejewski notes Hannibal Lecter’s (Anthony Hopkins) comments on Clarice Starling’s rather unstylish shoes. Mizejewski sees Starling’s appearance in *Silence of the Lamb* as part of a “grimmer, less fun feminist phase” occupied by other cinematic female detectives in the early 1990’s.

Piggybacking on this feminist perspective, Noah Berlatsky’s “The Feminist Failure of the Silence of the Lambs” sees the protagonist as attempting “...to shed her femininity in the workplace and model herself after her deceased policeman father” (Berlatsky 2016). Berlatsky complains that Lecter wields power over Starling, and while she eventually destroys Buffalo Bill, “the real monster of the film escapes...and so it gives him continued power over its heroine.” Berlatsky discusses the final scene of the film, as Starling repeats “Dr. Lecter, Dr., Lecter, Dr. Lecter” (*Silence of the Lambs* 1991). Lecter literally has the last word, according to Berlatsky, and this demonstrates her subservience. Does Hannibal the Cannibal actually have the last word? A close examination of a pivotal, earlier scene in the film, using empathy as a critical strategy to reveal a complex relationship between the two characters, undercuts a feminist/patriarchy binary reading of the film; thus, revealing the protagonists’ agency.

Mid-way through the film, Agent Starling is reunited with Lecter, as he is caged in a make-shift jail in Memphis. The FBI has made a deal with Lecter to help find and capture the serial killer Buffalo Bill. The scene is memorable for close up shots, framing only faces of both Starling and Lecter, which reveal deep psychological insight into these two characters. While Lecter does direct and control the conversation between the two, he is quite literally at a power disadvantage—after all, he’s in jail. Starling attempts to initiate a dialogue leading to Buffalo Bill’s capture, but Lecter is having none of that. Lecter’s interests involve insight into Starling’s state of mind. Lecter wants to know what makes Starling tick. He guides Starling back through her childhood, after her father—a policeman—was murdered. Starling was sent to a ranch in Montana, after her father’s death. A traumatic incident occurred at this ranch. Starling empathized with a lamb that she heard screaming—the lamb was being prepped for slaughter. The young Starling attempted to save the lamb, ran several miles with the lamb under her arm, and was later

apprehended by the local sheriff. Lecter is able to infer, from the story, that Starling wakes up every so often to that “Awful screaming of the lambs” (1991).

The scene’s importance cannot be underestimated—the title of the film directly relates to the scene. A complete sociopath, a cannibal no less, is able to gain deep, psychological insight into a character by tapping into an empathetic event. Starling lost her father—this triggered the empathy switch within her. She followed up on that event by attempting to save the lamb, although this attempt was unsuccessful. So these two events—Starling’s father’s murder, and her attempt to save the screaming lamb—will influence the rest of her life. Starling dedicated her professional life, helping the FBI capture serial killers, with empathy framing her choices. The direction Starling chose for her career makes sense when empathy is taken into consideration. Her decision is much more than just replicating her father; and thus, shedding her femininity, as Berlatsky asserts. Starling commits her life to apprehending the worst of the worst, and more importantly, displays a gender specific tendency toward empathy. In Baron-Cohen’s text, he cites research conducted by Zurich neuroscientist Tania Singer. When male and female subjects were presented with images of someone else in pain, men show less activity in the two parts of the brain—the Caudal Anterior Cingulate Cortex, and the Anterior Insula. These parts of the brain are significant for empathy, because they are active when subjects either experience pain firsthand, or witness others experiencing pain. So Starling does not shed her femininity by replicating her father—on the contrary, she displays one the most crucial aspects of the female gender: empathy.

Starling kills Buffalo Bill, and in the process, she rescues a young girl from a certain, hideous death. This interpretation of the last scene emphasizes Starling’s triumph over her adversary, Buffalo Bill, and reminds us that Starling’s commitment to empathy has saved a young girl from certain death. Starling now knows her place in the universe—her challenge will be to honor her father, and to continue to silence her own lambs through a dedication to practicing empathy. This demonstrates the power of empathy, and shows how Starling comes to terms with herself; thus demonstrating her agency.

Conclusion

I have rediscovered my own agency, at 49, after dedicating two years of my life to helping my mother through cancer. My mother won her battle with lung cancer, and passed away from the disease on August 2, 2016. My scholarship will be forever transformed by this experience. Mainly, I am honoring my mother by arguing for human virtues that will make our world a better place, one individual at a time. Whether I agree with others, or disagree with others, I have a principal, by which, I live: *I practice the*

balance of thinking and feeling about others a little bit more, and thinking and feeling about myself a little bit less.

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