



Ethical Experience and Narrative Ambiguity in Contemporary Turkish Cinema: *Hesitation Line*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine how ethical hesitation is produced in modern Turkish cinema through cinematographic and narrative strategies and to discuss the meaning of cinematic ethical experience within the framework of film philosophy. Based on the assumption that art functions not only as an aesthetic discourse but also as an ethical one, the study investigates how cinema reveals its potential to foster ethical reflection and critical thinking. It has been observed that studies addressing ethical questions in contemporary Turkish cinema remain relatively limited. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study analyzes the ethical ambiguities emerging from the film's narrative structure, the moral dilemmas confronted by the characters, and the cinematographic choices that shape these processes within the framework of narrative analysis. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that ethical experience in cinema is generated not merely through representation but through form and narrative, and it argues that modern cinematic narration opens up new possibilities for the development of ethical thought.

Keywords: cinematic ethics; modern narrative; Turkish cinema; film criticism; film studies



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Introduction

The concept of ethics has established its presence across a wide range of domains, from the decisions individuals make in everyday life to the creation and interpretation of artworks. In various subfields—such as scientific ethics, professional ethics, and art ethics—ethical concepts have been examined through classifications including good and evil, virtuous behavior, beauty, and ugliness, thereby revealing both individual and social dimensions of meaning. Ethics is a field of philosophical inquiry concerned with evaluating human actions through normative distinctions such as right and wrong, good and bad, and just and unjust (Singer, 1994).

Since Ancient Greek philosophy, ethics has been shaped around the question of which principles should guide individual actions. Within this framework, moral behavior has largely been associated with concepts such as character, virtue, and habit (Aristotle, 2009). Aristotle's virtue ethics, as developed in *Nicomachean Ethics*, defines moral action not through universal rules but through character traits cultivated by the individual through practical wisdom (phronesis). In modern philosophy, however, ethics has been reconceptualized less in terms of

individual virtues and more in relation to universal moral principles and obligations. Kant's deontological approach grounds moral action in maxims that can be universalized independently of their consequences, placing the moral responsibility of the rational subject at the center of ethical reasoning (Kant, 1993).

Postmodern ethics adopts a critical stance toward modern ethical frameworks that define morality through universal, fixed, and universally applicable principles. It has been argued that the regulatory structures of modernity transfer ethical responsibility to bureaucratic systems, thereby eroding the individual's capacity for moral judgment (Bauman, 1993). Within postmodern ethical thought, uncertainty, the plurality and fluidity of meaning, and individual responsibility come to the forefront. Consequently, the concept of ethics is not confined to a single framework; rather, it is approached from multiple perspectives encompassing personal, social, cultural, and political dimensions and is evaluated within diverse classificatory frameworks.

Ethical and aesthetic judgments are not formed in a vacuum; rather, they emerge through socially learned norms, cultural practices, and historically shaped value systems that influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and evaluate artistic expressions. Decisions about what is considered aesthetic, beautiful, or wrong are often shaped by unwritten rules acquired from

early childhood (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Cultural elements such as traditions, customs, idioms, proverbs, and norms of social behavior constitute established structures transmitted through families, communities, and educational institutions. Over time, various approaches to art have emerged, each defining a particular ethical domain. The long-standing debate over whether art exists for its own sake or for society has significantly influenced the ethical and aesthetic values attributed to artistic production. The theory of radical autonomism argues that works of art possess intrinsic meaning, should not be subjected to ethical evaluation, and ought to exist independently of moral considerations (Gaut, 2007, p. 68). Proponents of this position often cite abstract art and absolute music as exemplary cases. Avant-garde art, characterized by abstraction and symbolism, is frequently perceived as distant from collective ethical evaluation. However, this distance does not imply that such works are beyond ethical consideration. Carroll (2000) challenges radical autonomism by arguing that the primary function of art is not to communicate explicit ethical propositions, but rather to enable individuals to experience particular situations and engage with them affectively and imaginatively. Consequently, art cannot be separated from its audience, social context, or collective meanings. Through their engagement with artworks, individuals are able to develop ethical reflections and judgments. Narratives, in particular, bear witness to the past, foster empathy, and offer new perspectives through alternative modes of storytelling (Kearney & Williams, 1996, p. 33). In discussing the

ethical dimension of narrative and the process of identification, Kearney and Williams (1996, p. 36) emphasize its intersubjective nature. Drawing on Proust's perspective, they suggest that individuals can become both readers and authors of their own lives by interpreting the lives of others. Narratives are inherently transsubjective, as they evoke emotions and reflections in viewers through diverse stories and characters.

The relationship that cinema establishes with philosophical concepts lies at the core of film philosophy. In this context, cinematic ethics focuses on the intellectual and emotional interaction between the audience and the film. Modern and contemporary ethical debates have increasingly questioned the positioning of the subject as a rational and coherent moral agent; instead, ethical thought has been reshaped around notions of ambiguity, vulnerability, and contextuality. Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethical responsibility, grounded in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, approaches morality not as a system of abstract principles but as a relational necessity that precedes rational judgment. Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the regulatory structures of modernity have transferred ethical responsibility to bureaucratic systems, thereby eroding the individual's capacity for moral decision-making (Levinas, 1985; Bauman, 1993). These approaches make it possible to conceptualize ethical action not through definitive judgments but within a terrain of ambiguity and moral dilemma. Within this

framework, cinematic ethics emerges not as a normative structure that offers ready-made moral conclusions to the viewer, but as an experiential space in which ethical decision-making is deferred, suspended, and problematized. Through its narrative construction, character development, and particularly its audiovisual strategies, cinema resists directing the spectator toward a clear judgment of right or wrong; instead, it renders visible the fragile and indeterminate nature of ethical responsibility. Consequently, ethics in cinema operates less through the production of moral decisions than through its capacity to generate ethical hesitation. It positions the viewer not as a judging authority, but within the unsettling responsibility of encountering the Other. In this sense, modern cinema constructs ethics, in Levinasian terms, not as representational content but as a relational and open-ended process produced through the viewer's experience.

Although cinematic ethical experience is often discussed alongside the concept of empathy, these two processes are qualitatively distinct. Empathy is associated with the viewer's emotional identification with a character and the capacity to understand or share the character's inner state. Cinematic ethical experience, by contrast, invites the viewer into a sphere of responsibility that exceeds identification. From a Levinasian ethical perspective, empathy refers to a cognitive and affective proximity aimed at understanding the Other, whereas ethical experience emerges as a disturbing encounter with the irreducibility of the Other—an encounter

that renders definitive moral judgment impossible. For this reason, ethical experience in cinema does not facilitate a comfortable identification with characters; rather, it situates the viewer within a state of hesitation in which ethical decision-making is suspended. Through facial images, silences, and narrative gaps, modern cinema foregrounds not empathic affect but the fragile and indeterminate nature of ethical responsibility, leaving the viewer confronted with the unsettling demands of ethical encounter. In this study, the concept of ambiguity is examined from a Levinasian perspective in relation to cinematic ethical experience.

Through empathy with the characters or events depicted on screen, viewers cognitively engage with multiple possibilities through imagination. Cinematic ethics can confront audiences with ethical experiences, challenge established modes of thinking, and encourage reflection on sociocultural realities (Sinnerbrink & Trahair, 2016, p. 6). Its cognitive and reflective dimensions allow cinematic ethics to be examined through concepts such as reality, character construction, narrative, and representation. Furthermore, cinematic ethics generates meaning by foregrounding gestures and evoking ethical experiences through an emphasis on the non-verbal, bodily, and symbolic dimensions of human action (Sinnerbrink, 2016, p. 4). By confronting ethical dilemmas, the audience assumes a participatory role within the film's

narrative, thereby reinforcing cinema's profound connection with both philosophy and sociology.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the concept of cinematic ethics—an area that has received relatively limited scholarly attention within Turkish cinema—from both theoretical and practical perspectives. In this context, Selman Nacar's *Hesitation Line* (2023) is examined as a case study in order to analyze how cinematic ethics are constructed through narrative structures and character Dynamics. As a significant example of contemporary Turkish cinema, the film engages with ethical issues at narrative, cinematic, and structural levels. This study focuses on the relationship between ethics and art, the intersection of cinema and philosophy, and the ethical interaction between the film and its audience. It is grounded in the assumption that cinema functions not only as a medium of aesthetic expression but also as a space for ethical reflection. Accordingly, the ethical dilemmas articulated within the film's narrative universe are analyzed in relation to character construction, plot development, cinematography, and key conceptual frameworks. Ultimately, this study aims to investigate the images of ambiguity produced through the narrative structures and cinematographic choices of modern cinema by employing narrative analysis within a qualitative research framework.

Theoretical Framework: The Process of Creating Cinematic Ethical Experience

Films, which occupy a significant place in our daily lives, represent a technological and

phenomenological force closely linked to the field of ethics (Gronstad, 2016, p. 85). Cinematic ethics manifests itself in multiple dimensions, including the audience, emotion, and the film industry. Cinema is inherently connected to emotion, stimulating the viewer's interpretive and affective engagement. Films aim to foster empathy by encouraging viewers to connect with characters and storylines, thereby evoking emotional responses such as joy, grief, anger, curiosity, fear, and moral judgment (Deleuze, 2014, p. 84). However, there are important differences between empathy and ethical experience. While empathy is a fundamental affect of being human, ethical experience points to the paradoxical operation of these emotions within situations of moral dilemma. Contemporary art cinema often stimulates more ambiguous emotional states—such as curiosity, uncertainty, and the search for meaning—by placing viewers in ethically ambivalent situations rather than directly promoting emotional identification. In this context, moral concepts such as right and wrong, judgment, and responsibility come to the fore in the relationship between the audience and the film. For instance, Saxton (2008) argues that Holocaust images are not closed or completed representations belonging solely to the past; rather, they are images that disturb the present, persistently return, and unsettle the spectator. In this sense, cinema does not operate through complete representation but through absence and silence. Saxton approaches Holocaust films within the framework of testimonial cinema, in which testimony involves silence,

fragmentation, and narrative gaps. She therefore positions the spectator not as a passive consumer but as an ethical subject. In this study, empathy is approached not as an ethical value in itself, but as a cinematic mechanism that can either give rise to ethical experience or render it ineffective. Forms of empathy commonly employed in mainstream cinema, which provide the spectator with emotional satisfaction, may suspend responsibility by closing down ethical inquiry. By contrast, a disturbing form of empathy produced through narrative ambiguity and aesthetic distance has the potential to position the spectator within a space of ethical uncertainty and responsibility.

Mainstream popular films present a classical model of ethical representation through a clear distinction between protagonist and antagonist, the definition of good and evil, and the articulation of explicit moral judgments (Downing & Saxton, 2009, p. 18). By contrast, contemporary cinema emphasizes uncertainty when presenting images and narratives that encourage audiences to think, a condition that Deleuze describes as the deterioration of the sensorimotor mechanism (Deleuze, 2000, p. 3). While confronting such ethical dilemmas, viewers attempt to decipher the meanings embedded within the film. Cinematic ethics is therefore less concerned with what a film explicitly says than with what it enables the viewer to experience. By witnessing the dilemmas and circumstances faced by the characters, the audience begins to develop ethical reflections. According to Grønstad (2016), cinema possesses

a capacity that can be described as “ethical imagination.” This perspective suggests that cinematic images are not merely means of representation but also generate a space for ethical thought. By inviting the viewer to interpret visual and auditory images, cinema allows ethical meaning to emerge through the process of interpretation. The ambiguity, opacity, and narrative openness characteristic of modern and independent cinema present characters within complex human situations rather than rigid moral categories. This invites viewers to consider alternative forms of existence and to form their own ethical assessments, rather than guiding them toward predetermined judgments. Furthermore, cinema establishes a critical relationship between aesthetics and ethics by disrupting visual norms and established viewer expectations (Grønstad, 2016).

Cinematic ethics, as a subfield of film philosophy, contributes to questioning our moral assumptions, dogmatic beliefs, and ideological frameworks (Sinnerbrink, 2016, p. 10). According to Choi and Frey (2014, p. 2), cinema’s potential to generate cognitive responses is closely related to the emotional reactions of audiences to the film. Even when viewers are aware that what they are watching is fictional, they empathize with, rejoice with, or mourn alongside the characters. In this model, emotion does not stand in opposition to cognition; rather, the emotional engagement produced by fictional narratives is integral to the film’s ethical

questioning (Choi & Frey, 2014, p. 8). This dynamic reveals how individuals relate to others and form moral perspectives. Noël Carroll (2014, pp. 44–45) argues that films can bring about moral change by transforming the viewer’s judgments. Film does not merely render trauma as a narrative object; rather, it positions the spectator within shifting relational roles. At times, it offers consolatory narratives that frame trauma as a resolved and contained experience; at others, it exposes the viewer to secondary or vicarious traumatization through affectively charged images and sensory intensity. In some cases, trauma is rendered consumable through a voyeuristic mode that allows suffering to be observed from a safe distance. Alternatively, film may withhold closure through gaps, silences, and narrative ruptures, thereby situating the spectator in a position of ethical witnessing.

The construction of a cinematic ethical experience can be shared, particularly through the making and analysis of a film. How audiences engage with this experience varies according to the film’s genre, narrative structure (movement-image or time-image), and industrial form. Decisions regarding what is shown within the frame and what is excluded constitute inherently ethical choices. Quaranta (2023, p. 115) describes this as ethical invisibility, suggesting that both on-screen and off-screen elements are deliberately shaped through processes of selection and omission. Ethical themes and positions influence the director’s visual narrative. Images possess a right not to be shown, and cinema exists as much through what it conceals and evokes

as through what it explicitly represents. For example, in Derek Jarman's *Blue*, the director adopts an experimental approach to depicting the experience of a character living with AIDS. Although the film consists entirely of a monochromatic blue screen, the narrative unfolds through voice-over narration. This stylistic choice reflects both an ethical decision and an experimental narrative strategy—one that resists the imperative to visualize everything explicitly. In this context, ethical experience emerges not as a representational moral message but as a space of encounter constituted through visual omission, narrative gaps, and sensory suspension.

In contrast, some films choose to portray events in a clear and unfiltered manner. Flaxman (2016, p. 182) defines cinema's capacity to evoke emotional responses as cinematic autonomy, emphasizing that psycho-aesthetic images can sometimes produce a challenging and even disturbing viewing experience. Such images confront viewers with moral dilemmas in a direct and unsettling way. Flaxman cites *A Clockwork Orange* (1971, directed by Stanley Kubrick) as a prime example—a controversial film that explicitly depicts violence, sexuality, and deviant behavior, thereby presenting psycho-aesthetic imagery that disregards traditional moral boundaries. This approach is particularly evident in films associated with the cinematic trend known as the New Extremity. In these works, directors depict themes such as violence,

sexuality, blood, and the human body with little or no ethical mediation. The intensified gaze and the extreme pursuit of visual pleasure in these films often result in works described as disturbing, excessive, or subversive (Frey, 2014, p. 145). These productions are typically low-budget and independent, frequently adopting avant-garde aesthetics. Notable directors associated with extreme cinema include Gaspar No , Claire Denis, and Lars von Trier. The ethical debate in this context centers on the prolonged and intense representation of ethically sensitive content—such as violence, sexuality, and horror—in ways that can deeply unsettle viewers. Some critics interpret this approach as an emerging cinematic style, while others consider it excessive and disturbing (Frey, 2014, p. 145). In this sense, iconoclastic images dismantle traditional representations and visual codes, forcing viewers into states of discomfort and confrontation (Quaranta, 2023, p. 124). These images can be both destructive and productive.

To understand how ethical experience is produced in cinema, attention to the use of images reveals the central role of facial imagery and close-up shots. Cinematic narrative does not function as a domain that produces ethical decisions; rather, it operates as a space that generates ethical hesitation. One of the key elements that gives rise to this ethical dilemma is the cinematic image of the face. In Deleuze’s terms, the cinematic face is not merely a representational surface but a site where intensities, affects, and internal movements become

visible (Deleuze, 2014). For Levinas, the face is not simply a physical appearance but an ethical encounter that reveals the vulnerability and irreducibility of the Other, calling the subject to an infinite responsibility prior to any rational judgment or moral law (Levinas, 1969, 1985). Levinas's concept of the face therefore defines ethics not as a system grounded in universal principles, but as a relation of responsibility that emerges in the moment of encounter with the Other. When these perspectives are taken into account, it can be argued that cinematic ethical experience is constructed through the aesthetic, sensory, and intellectual relationship established with the spectator. This experience is shaped not only by what cinema chooses to show but also by what it deliberately withholds; not only by which images are rendered visible but also by the gaps and silences it produces. In this context, drawing on the works of Levinas, Deleuze, and Grønstad, this study approaches art as a field that stimulates reflection and emotional engagement with ethical and aesthetic dilemmas through film. From this perspective, film studies become a subject of inquiry not only in relation to what is visible but also to an invisible yet thought-provoking realm. Modern cinema invites viewers on a distinctive journey, freeing them from predetermined patterns of emotion and thought. During this journey, viewers interpret the film not only through the cinematic world it presents but also through their own ideas, ethical values, emotions, and cultural capital, thereby adopting an ethical stance. This study argues that modern cinema, by withholding clear and definitive moral judgments, creates

a space of ethical hesitation and ambiguity for the viewer, thereby opening an important field of debate within the philosophy of cinema. Ethical experience in cinema does not facilitate comfortable identification with characters; rather, it situates the viewer in a state of hesitation in which ethical decision-making is suspended. Modern cinematic narratives construct this ambiguity through character development, plot progression, and cinematographic elements such as camera angles, mise-en-scène, framing, sound, lighting, and editing. In other words, the narrative is often more concerned with what is withheld than with what is explicitly shown. Consequently, ethical experience emerges less from representational content than from a space of encounter generated through the formal and visual strategies of cinematic representation. This mode of ethical construction becomes particularly evident in modern cinema.

Modern Turkish Cinema and Ethics

The period referred to as Modern Turkish cinema or New Turkish cinema encompasses the era from the post-1990s to the present, and this study focuses on this timeframe (Saydam, 2020, p. 54). However, the relationship between Turkish cinema and ethics became more pronounced earlier, particularly through the social realist perspective of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, issues such as rural-to-urban migration, unemployment, economic hardship, and the ethical dilemmas arising from these conditions were prominently depicted, often alongside arabesque culture and melodramatic narrative structures (Onaran, 1994, p. 188;

Akbulut, 2012). From the 1990s onward, a departure from arabesque culture and Yeşilçam conventions, coupled with a growing emphasis on art cinema, auteur filmmaking, and the emergence of a younger generation of directors, led to the conceptualization of New Turkish cinema. An examination of independent films produced after the 1990s reveals recurring themes such as provincial struggles, the impasses of modern urban life, existential anxiety, ethical dilemmas, conflicts between tradition and modernity, the challenges of womanhood, and crises of identity (Suner, 2006, p. 23). In particular, post-1990 New Turkish cinema constructs ethics not as a set of normative moral codes but rather through experience, hesitation, witnessing, and responsibility.

Ethical concerns in Modern Turkish cinema are closely linked to the extent to which directors challenge the boundaries of representing social reality and the conceptual frameworks they employ. Since the late 1990s, directors such as Zeki Demirkubuz, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Emin Alper, Ceylan Özgün Özçelik, and Yeşim Ustaoglu have confronted audiences with unsettling scenes that expose both individuals' inner struggles and the fractures within society, thereby opening spaces for ethical reflection. These auteur filmmakers have produced critical and philosophical works that interrogate value systems related to modernization, alienation, nihilism, and belief (Ateş, 2023). In doing so, they have frequently drawn on the aesthetics of

slow cinema, enabling spectators to experience an immanent sense of time and the ambiguity of ethical dilemmas. The cinematic ethical experience examined in this study is thus constructed through the narrative structures of independent cinema, in which ethical meaning emerges not through resolution but through uncertainty and duration. These characteristics include open-ended conclusions, marginalized characters, alienation effects, moral conflict, and themes of collective trauma (Akser, 2018, p. 164). Such films position the spectator not merely as a passive viewer but as a witness to moral and emotional complexities. Lisa Downing (2010) argues that cinema should not only reinforce moral values but also interrogate them, thereby introducing a critical dimension to ethical film theory. Similarly, Thomas Wartenberg (2007) maintains that films can function as philosophical instruments that actively encourage ethical reasoning. In Turkish cinema, this approach becomes particularly evident in the treatment of challenging themes such as trauma, violence, and sexuality. As Akser (2018, p. 165) notes, “the classical problems of Turkish modernization—nation-state formation (historical adventure films), technological development (science fiction), and migration/women’s new roles in the public sphere (melodramas)—have largely been addressed in thematic and generalized terms.” These concerns find a more nuanced and forceful articulation within the framework of modern cinema.

Ethical ambiguity in Modern Turkish cinema is reflected in the construction of both

characters and narrative progression. Characters are neither entirely virtuous nor entirely villainous, and events unfold at a deliberately slower pace rather than through rapid causal development. As Orr (1997, p. 117) observes, “modern film goes beyond consciousness, clearly revealing how presence and absence, reality and imagination coexist within the cinematic frame.” Within this framework, Modern Turkish cinema constructs ethical meaning not through definitive moral judgments but through experiential ambiguity, narrative suspension, and the spectator’s phenomenological engagement with uncertainty.

*Cinematic Forms of Ethical Experience: A Reading of *Hesitation Line**

Fictional arts such as cinema involve the viewer or reader in an ongoing process of ethical judgment and encourage them to make evaluative assessments (Carroll, 2000, p. 366). The philosophical orientation of independent cinema brings the discussion closer to the concept of cinematic ethics. The primary aim of this study is to examine the system of film ethics—an area that has received limited attention in Turkish cinema—from both theoretical and applied perspectives. In the film studies literature, ethical debates have long been addressed primarily within the framework of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of cinema, whereas the ways in which cinema functions as a site of ethical experience have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Particularly in the context of Turkish cinema, there remains a notable lack of studies examining how ethical issues are constructed through narrative

structures, character formation, and cinematographic choices. While mainstream cinema typically offers moral clarity through binary oppositions such as good/evil and guilty/innocent, contemporary and independent cinema tends to suspend these certainties, confronting the spectator with ethical ambiguity. Within this context, the central research problem of this study concerns the narrative and visual strategies through which ethical experience is constructed in contemporary Turkish cinema and how these strategies invite the viewer into a space of ethical hesitation. Focusing specifically on Selman Nacar's *Hesitation Line* (2023), the study examines how cinema functions not as a medium that produces definitive ethical judgments but rather as an experiential field in which ethical responsibility is suspended and problematized.

Methodologically, this study adopts narrative analysis as its primary approach. Narrative consists of the story, the presentation of events, and stylistic or technical elements (Bordwell, 1985, p. 50). Within this framework, the study examines cinematic ethical experience by focusing on narrative components such as plot progression and character development, as well as cinematographic elements including set design, framing, camera angles, sound, lighting, and editing. The sense of uncertainty and hesitation is conveyed formally through spatial claustrophobia, close-up shots, and the use of silence. In addition, cinematographic elements such as close-ups, facial imagery, spatial organization, and camera movement are interpreted through the theoretical lens of Levinasian ethical encounter and the concept of ethical

witnessing. Notes were taken during the viewing process, both regarding the film as a whole and with particular attention to individual sequences. Each scene was analyzed in terms of both narrative structure and formal composition. These notes were subsequently interpreted within the theoretical framework of ethical experience, uncertainty, and indecision. Accordingly, ethics in cinema is approached not as the transmission of normative moral judgments but as an experiential and relational process. Within this framework, the analysis is structured around the concepts of ethical experience, ethical hesitation, and ethical witnessing in cinematic ethics.

Hesitation Line (2023), directed by Selman Nacar, is a Turkish film that stands out as a legal drama addressing profound themes such as justice, conscience, morality, and human relationships. The narrative centers on Canan, a successful criminal lawyer who finds herself undergoing an intense process of moral reckoning. Working in a small provincial town, Canan is assigned to defend Musa, a factory worker accused of murder following a conflict between employer and employee. While managing legal proceedings during the day, Canan spends her evenings visiting her brain-dead mother in the hospital. This case compels her to question her own ethical values and profoundly affects her relationships with those around her. Through this narrative, the film explores the complexities of the justice system, the internal conflicts of the individual, and the far-reaching consequences of a single verdict. Ultimately, *Hesitation Line*

functions as a reflective cinematic work that invites viewers to confront a persistent ethical question: what is right and what is wrong?

By aligning with the concept of ethical witnessing (Kaplan & Wang, 2008), the film does not seek to explain or resolve the ethical dilemma; rather, it generates a sense of responsibility through gaps, silences, and narrative ruptures. According to Kaplan and Wang (2008), ethical witnessing enables the spectator to approach traumatic events with emotional proximity while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance. The viewer is neither drawn into a state of total identification that risks secondary traumatization nor positioned as a detached observer who voyeuristically consumes suffering. Instead, the film situates the spectator within a space of witnessing in which meaning remains unresolved, compelling the viewer to confront trauma as an ethical demand rather than as a narrative to be explained, mastered, or closed. Ethical witnessing emerges both in Canan's professional ethical dilemmas and in the tensions of her private life. Through its narrative construction and cinematographic strategies, the film generates a cinematic ethical experience grounded in ethical witnessing and ethical ambiguity rather than in moral resolution.

One of the most prominent domains of ethical inquiry is the field of professional practice. Professional ethics encompass both written and unwritten rules that guide appropriate conduct

within a particular profession. In general, professionals are expected to demonstrate honesty, integrity, reliability, and competence in their field. In this context, legal ethics—central to the film’s narrative—play a crucial role in shaping both the protagonist’s character and the development of cinematic ethics. In the film, Canan is portrayed as a criminal lawyer working in a small provincial town. As both a woman and a legal professional, she confronts various ethical dilemmas that intersect with gendered expectations and professional challenges. The difficulties she faces in her personal and professional life further complicate her ethical decision-making processes. For instance, a male lawyer attempts to undermine Canan’s credibility by repeatedly emphasizing that she studied abroad. From his perspective, Canan is disconnected from the local Turkish way of life and therefore incapable of fully understanding the realities of the cases she handles. Canan also encounters judgmental attitudes from the judge and the prosecutor. Although their verbal responses appear confident and decisive, hesitation and anxiety are often visible in their facial expressions. This dynamic becomes particularly evident through the film’s use of facial imagery and close-up shots. Close-ups focusing on Canan’s face suspend psychological explanation and instead position the spectator within an ethical encounter. This cinematic strategy resonates with Levinas’s conception of the face as the source of ethical responsibility and with Deleuze’s understanding of the close-up as an affective intensity rather than merely a vehicle for narrative explanation (Levinas, 1969;

Deleuze, 2014). Canan's struggle to maintain her position within an authoritarian legal structure is translated into cinematic language through limited dialogue and extended silences. The film presents ethical dilemmas from the perspective of a female protagonist, thereby providing both a social and an individual framework for ethical reflection. As a defense attorney, Canan attempts to defend her client Musa, whose guilt or innocence regarding the alleged murder is never definitively confirmed for the audience. In the courtroom scenes, Canan's strong rhetoric and ethical convictions become particularly visible. However, through the alternating arguments between the two lawyers, the spectator is deliberately left in a state of uncertainty. This ambiguity prompts viewers to ask: who is truly right? In this context, cinematic ethics emerges as a form of interpretive practice (Grønstad, 2016, p. 87).

Canan argues that Musa is innocent, suggesting that the evidence has been manipulated and that a young worker has been made a scapegoat. However, the opposing lawyer presents security footage of Musa entering the factory and emphasizes his guilt. At this point, the narrative position of the film becomes critical. In the courtroom scenes, the audience is not provided with sufficient information to take a definitive side. Examples of modern cinema discussed within the framework of cinematic ethics often position the spectator as an ethical witness by employing strategies of ambiguity and suspension rather than offering narrative closure or moral certainty (Saxton, 2008; Sinnerbrink, 2016). *Hesitation Line* constructs ethical

ambiguity precisely through this modern narrative approach. In this context, ethical witnessing emerges through encounters rather than through the articulation of explicit moral judgments. The film unfolds from Canan's perspective, and viewers observe her fragmented life between the courthouse and the hospital. In doing so, *Hesitation Line* involves the viewer in the ethical dilemmas it portrays; it encourages reflection through the use of ambiguity and silence rather than offering moral resolutions. The film establishes a narrative economy by deliberately distributing information in a fragmented and incomplete manner. This strategy prevents the spectator from reaching moral certainty, while structuring ethical responsibility as an experience grounded not in knowledge but in encounter. Consequently, the ethical question emerges not through the discovery of factual truth but through the experience of positioning oneself within uncertainty. The spectator remains unaware of what actually occurred and is compelled to follow the clues available through Canan's limited perspective.

The courtroom scenes leave the audience in a state of uncertainty and hesitation. Canan's convictions, Musa's concealment of the truth, the absence of the witness, and the judge's decision to delay the verdict compel the viewer to grapple with questions of right and wrong, as well as with the issue of who, if anyone, is truly justified. Through the character of a defense lawyer caught between professional responsibilities and personal ethics, the film interrogates

how cultural codes, moral conscience, and societal values intersect and conflict. Rather than offering moral clarity, the film situates both its characters and its audience within a space of uncertainty and reflection, challenging simplistic dichotomies such as guilt and innocence or right and wrong. Canan believes in Musa's innocence and strives to win the case. As the narrative progresses, she discovers that security camera footage from the factory has been deleted and attempts to locate a witness. One of the workers claims that the factory owner's son visited the factory on the day of the incident and left the country a week later. During the trial, Canan presents this information and suggests that the factory owner's son may also be a suspect. The opposing lawyer disputes this claim, stating that his client's son left the country for educational purposes. In these courtroom scenes, the viewer occupies a position similar to that of a judge—listening, evaluating, yet unable to determine who is telling the truth. This ambiguity creates a palpable tension that directly affects the audience. Although security cameras show Musa entering the factory, no further footage is available. In one pivotal scene, the camera moves into a close-up of Canan's phone screen as she examines the video, allowing the viewer to observe the events from her perspective. Despite the limited evidence, Canan remains determined to defend her client. The narrative reaches a turning point when Canan receives a letter from Musa containing crucial information that could alter the outcome of the case—details he had previously concealed. However, the director does not fully reveal the

contents of the letter, and the narrative remains ambiguous. Later, during a conversation between Canan and Musa, the viewer learns more about the situation: Musa reveals that the factory owner is having an affair with his mother and that she is subjected to mistreatment by her son. This revelation destabilizes the moral certainties upon which Canan had constructed her defense. Musa also confesses that he would attempt suicide if he were sent back to prison. The scars on his wrists indicate that he has already made such an attempt.



Figure 1: Musa and Canan.

The prolonged silences and pauses in the film intensify ethical tension by creating narrative gaps. These silences prevent moral positions from being articulated explicitly, thereby situating the spectator within a space of ethical witnessing in which meaning remains unresolved. In this sense, silence functions not as a weakness of the narrative but as a constitutive element of ethical experience. In the film, visual and narrative elements such as the collapse of the courthouse wall, Canan's nosebleeds caused by stress and illness, prolonged

waiting times in public institutions, the unnecessary delay by the postal clerk, her broken-down car and the lengthy repair process, and her financial debts emphasize the dysfunctional aspects of everyday life and reinforce Canan's sense of entrapment. Collectively, these scenes create a suffocating and gloomy atmosphere, reflecting her exhaustion and ongoing inner turmoil across multiple aspects of her life. The film's settings primarily consist of public institutions such as post offices, hospitals, and courthouses. Through these spaces, the viewer observes Canan in a variety of social roles: as a professional, as a daughter, as an individual citizen, as a client, and as a patient. In *Hesitation Line*, the articulation of cinematic ethics emerges through the film's narrative structure and the emotional engagement it establishes with the audience. By adopting the perspective of a lawyer navigating conflicting identities, the film allows the spectator to experience events from her point of view. As Sinnerbrink (2016, p. 17) argues, cinema is an important art form for developing moral awareness and for questioning our beliefs in embodied and experiential ways. *Hesitation Line*, with its focus on the ethical dimensions of the legal system, therefore serves as a valuable case study within the field of cinematic ethics. Rather than adhering to the conventions of a classical courtroom drama, the film constructs a narrative that foregrounds the individual's sense of justice. Canan's decisions continually return viewers to their own ethical considerations, positioning the film as a compelling exploration of law, morality, and subjectivity.



Figure 2: Trial scene.

Our social roles in everyday life cannot be reduced to a single classification. In this respect, the film moves beyond the conventions of the courtroom drama to explore deeply personal narratives. Another ethical dilemma presented by the film emerges through Canan's role as a daughter. Canan and her sister take turns visiting their mother. Faced with the decision of whether to prolong their mother's life in an unresponsive state or consent to organ donation, Canan encounters a profound ethical dilemma. Some of the most pressing ethical decisions in her life arise not from her professional role but from the responsibilities associated with illness and family obligations. The emotional burden gradually begins to affect Canan physically, and her condition deteriorates. While her sister believes that life support should be terminated, Canan resists this decision until the very end. Eventually, she agrees to organ donation. However, torn between her personal life and professional responsibilities, Canan makes a

morally questionable suggestion: she implies to the judge that one of her mother's organs could be donated to the judge's nephew. As Canan becomes increasingly cornered by ethical and professional pressures, she begins to take riskier steps. The judge ultimately rejects the offer, thereby reinforcing the tension between ethical integrity and personal desperation.



Figure 3: Cinematography of the Film.

The cinematography of *Hesitation Line* creates a somber and ambiguous atmosphere that reflects the protagonist's moral uncertainty. In the film, close-up shots and facial imagery can be interpreted as expressions of ethical encounter, positioning the viewer within a space of moral uncertainty rather than moral resolution. From a Levinasian ethical perspective, *Hesitation Line* constructs cinema not as a narrative space that produces ethical decisions but as an experiential field that draws the spectator into a state of ethical hesitation. For Levinas, ethics is not a system of judgment determined by universal principles or rational moral laws; rather, it emerges in the face-to-face encounter with the Other as an uncoded and pre-

reflective relation of responsibility (Levinas, 1969, 1985). In this sense, ethics is associated less with certainty than with ambiguity, and less with judgment than with a state of suspension. The narrative structure and cinematographic choices of *Hesitation Line* render this suspended condition visible as an aesthetic strategy. Within the film, facial imagery exceeds the conventional function of physical representation or the expression of character psychology. Through the use of close-up shots, the face becomes not a sign that explains an inner state but a field of intensity that compels the spectator into an ethical encounter in Levinas's sense. The hesitation, fear, and sense of insecurity reflected in Canan's eyes are evident both in the courtroom scenes and in her interactions with her brother. As Canan searches for the truth, she simultaneously calls into question the mechanisms of the judicial system, thereby situating ethical responsibility not within institutional judgment but within the unresolved space of ethical encounter itself. Director Selman Nacar aligns the film's aesthetics with the ethical dilemmas faced by the protagonist, integrating visual design as a key element of the dramatic structure. Close-up and medium close-up shots are frequently employed to emphasize Canan's hesitation and inner tension. As Deleuze (2014, p. 84) notes, the close-up functions as an affective image, capturing emotional intensity and inner struggle. In contrast, spatial context is often conveyed through wide shots that emphasize the confined and oppressive nature of the spaces. The frame frequently offers a restricted and claustrophobic gaze, intensifying the

emotional weight of these environments. In terms of camera movement, the film relies on long, static shots and a slow pace, highlighting the psychological states of the characters. This deliberate pacing holds the audience within moments of silence and uncertainty, reflecting the protagonist's mental exhaustion. The color palette is dominated by cool tones such as blue, navy, and gray, which visually reinforce emotional distance and ethical contemplation. These aesthetic choices constitute a deliberate visual design aligned with the film's ethical inquiries. *Hesitation Line* employs cinematography not merely as a stylistic device but as a narrative strategy that visualizes the protagonist's psychological turmoil and ethical conflict. Through the use of long takes, static framing, confined spaces, and silence, the director distinguishes the film from conventional courtroom dramas, offering instead a philosophical and contemplative cinematic experience. In this respect, the film stands out as a compelling example of cinematic ethics in contemporary Turkish cinema.

The film's open-ended conclusion, which leaves the ethical decision to the viewer, is closely related to the way modern narrative produces a cinematic ethical experience. The ending does not provide the clear resolution that viewers might expect. Instead, certain questions remain unanswered, inviting the audience to complete them through their own interpretation. This ambiguity within the cinematic ethical experience is produced both formally and narratively. On the day of the verdict, Canan undergoes a profound moral and ethical reckoning.

The boundaries between Canan’s professional identity as a lawyer and her role as a daughter gradually begin to blur. In an attempt to influence the outcome of the case, Canan has a brief conversation with the judge. During this exchange, she refers to her mother’s decision to donate her organs and suggests that one of them could be allocated to the judge’s ill nephew. Although framed as an act of compassion, this proposal symbolically functions as a form of bribery that diverges from professional ethics. Canan thus finds herself torn between remaining faithful to her moral convictions and fulfilling her legal responsibilities. The judge ultimately rejects the offer. The film concludes ambiguously, offering no definitive resolution as to who is truly guilty or innocent. This open-ended conclusion reinforces the film’s broader engagement with ethical ambiguity and the complex interplay between personal conscience and institutional justice.

Conclusion

Art is not only an expression of the creator’s experiences but also a medium through which emotions and ideas are articulated and communicated to the viewer. Artistic works resonate with collective sensibilities, reflecting socially and culturally shaped ways of thinking and feeling. As a visual art form grounded in image-based expression, cinema—often referred to as the “seventh art”—enables identification with characters while simultaneously employing strategies of alienation that encourage critical reflection. Beyond its entertaining function, cinema possesses the capacity to question the audience’s value systems and ethical

assumptions. Through cinematic narratives, viewers may reassess their ethical positions, develop empathy, and gain a deeper awareness of social issues. Given the limited number of studies addressing ethical dilemmas in Turkish cinema, and considering the potential of cinematic ethical experience within the field of film philosophy, this study contributes to the literature by focusing not only on visible images but also on the invisible layers of meaning they generate. Contemporary film studies have increasingly moved beyond classical approaches and have become open to new research questions and analytical perspectives. This shift also highlights the role of modern narrative forms and emerging practices within the field of film philosophy. The study is developed on the assumption that ethical witnessing, ethical experience, and ethical dilemmas can be examined both narratively and cinematographically through the theoretical perspectives of Levinas, Deleuze, and Grønstad within the framework of cinematic ethical experience. In this respect, the analysis demonstrates that recent examples of modern Turkish cinema tend to produce such ambiguity within their narrative structures.

This study examines the concept of cinematic ethics through an analysis of *Hesitation Line*, focusing on the ethical dilemmas embedded within its narrative structure. Drawing on concepts such as ethical witnessing and ethical ambiguity, the study explores how ethical dilemmas are constructed in contemporary Turkish cinema. In this context, ethics is approached not as the articulation of normative moral judgments but as an experiential field that situates

the viewer within conditions of uncertainty, responsibility, and witnessing. Through its narrative construction and aesthetic choices, *Hesitation Line* creates a cinematic space in which moral decision-making is deliberately suspended for both the characters and the spectator rather than resolved through definitive conclusions. In this respect, the film offers an approach that does not reduce ethics to outcomes but instead frames ethical experience as a cognitive and affective process unfolding through ambiguity, encounter, and reflection. Unlike conventional narrative structures, the film avoids compelling the audience to take sides and instead foregrounds open-ended moral ambiguities. The analysis demonstrates that the film deepens ethical dilemmas through its cinematographic strategies, presenting characters beyond the simplistic dichotomy of good and evil and encouraging ethical reflection rather than moral judgment. Cinematic ethics thus emerges not only through character actions but also through atmosphere, spatial design, and narrative form. By employing a fragmented narrative structure, deliberately withholding information, and resisting narrative closure, *Hesitation Line* constructs an ethical experience grounded in uncertainty and responsibility. Cinematic narrative presents ethical hesitation not only as a thematic element but also as an experiential dimension for the spectator through devices such as close-ups, silence, and spatial claustrophobia within the frame. In conclusion, *Hesitation Line* can be considered a significant example of ethical reflection in contemporary Turkish cinema. Rather than offering moral solutions, the film

encourages critical ethical thinking by situating the spectator within unresolved dilemmas. By foregrounding formal and experiential strategies over representational content, this approach contributes to the literature by reframing the relationship between cinema and ethics as a matter of experience rather than moral instruction. Future research could broaden the theoretical framework for exploring the aesthetic dimensions of ethical experience in cinema by examining how concepts such as ethical hesitation and ethical witnessing are produced across different national cinemas, genre traditions, or narrative forms. In addition, empirical research could be conducted to investigate the effects of cinematic ethical experience on audiences, their interpretations, and the meanings they derive from films. This perspective is significant for film philosophy, as it opens a discussion on how ethical experience is produced not only through narrative representation but also through cinematographic form and the viewing experience itself.

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