



## Article

# When Psychology Meets Pedagogy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Moral Extremism and Emotional Trauma in the Film *Se7en* by David Fincher

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## Abstract

This study addresses the representation of moral extremism and emotional trauma in David Fincher's *Se7en*, situating the film not merely as a cinematic spectacle but as a discursive arena that engages forensic psychology, moral pedagogy, and ethical philosophy. The primary aim is to analyze how psychological and pedagogical dimensions frame the phenomenon of moral extremism embodied by the antagonist, while also tracing the traumatic repercussions for other characters and the wider



social context. Using a literature-based methodology, this research integrates theories of emotional psychology, critical pedagogy, and moral thought with film analysis as a cultural text. The findings reveal that *Se7en* not only exposes the destructive face of absolute morality but also highlights the emotional scars left by radical ethical claims, thereby creating a subtle pedagogical space for audiences to reflect on the urgency of humanistic and inclusive moral education. This study recommends the integration of forensic psychology and moral pedagogy into curricular design and public discourse to strengthen awareness of the dangers of ethical absolutism and to foster emotional resilience. Its novelty lies in the interdisciplinary approach that bridges film studies, psychology, pedagogy, and philosophy, opening new horizons in understanding cinema as a medium of moral and educational reflection.

### **Keyword**

Ethical philosophy, forensic psychology, moral extremism, moral pedagogy, *Se7en* film

### **Abstrak**

*Kajian ini membahas representasi ekstremisme moral dan trauma emosional dalam film Se7en karya David Fincher, dengan menempatkan film tersebut bukan sekadar sebagai tontonan sinematik, melainkan sebagai arena diskursif yang melibatkan psikologi forensik, pedagogi moral, dan filsafat etika. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah menganalisis bagaimana dimensi psikologis dan pedagogis membongkar fenomena ekstremisme moral yang diwujudkan oleh tokoh antagonis, sekaligus menelusuri dampak traumatis yang dialami karakter lain maupun konteks sosial yang lebih luas. Dengan menggunakan metode kajian pustaka, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan teori psikologi emosional, pedagogi kritis, dan pemikiran moral dengan analisis film sebagai teks budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Se7en tidak hanya menyingkap wajah destruktif dari moralitas absolut, tetapi juga menyoroti luka emosional yang ditinggalkan klaim etis yang radikal, sehingga membuka ruang pedagogis yang halus bagi audiens untuk merenungkan urgensi pendidikan moral yang humanis dan inklusif. Studi ini merekomendasikan integrasi psikologi forensik dan pedagogi moral ke dalam desain kurikulum maupun wacana publik guna memperkuat kesadaran terhadap bahaya absolutisme etis sekaligus menumbuhkan ketahanan emosional. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pendekatan interdisipliner yang menghubungkan kajian film, psikologi, pedagogi, dan filsafat, sehingga membuka cakrawala baru dalam memahami sinema sebagai medium refleksi moral dan Pendidikan.*

### **Kata Kunci**

*Ekstremisme moral, filsafat etika, film Se7en, pedagogi moral, psikologi forensik*

## **INTRODUCTION**

David Fincher's *Se7en* is not merely a crime thriller laden with intrigue; it inaugurates a multidimensional discourse on the intersections of psychology, pedagogy, and moral philosophy in apprehending moral extremism and emotional trauma. Cinema, in this regard, may be treated as a cultural text encoding discursive structures of morality, violence, and human emotional response (Mulvey, 2006). Thus, an analysis of *Se7en* must transcend the realm of aesthetics and venture into philosophical, psychological, and pedagogical interpretation.

The urgency of this theme lies in its contemporary resonance. In an era marked by rising ideological radicalization, acts of moral absolutism, and widespread emotional trauma induced by violence and social unrest, *Se7en* offers more than cinematic entertainment. It functions as a cultural “laboratory” where the anatomy of extremism and trauma can be interrogated. John Doe’s narrative of moral terror mirrors the ethical crises of the modern world, where rigid dogmas and uncompromising convictions frequently give rise to destructive behaviors. The film’s relevance, therefore, extends beyond its fictional boundaries, speaking directly to the global challenges of radical extremism and the psychological costs of violence.

The story of Detectives Somerset and Mills, ensnared in a spiral of psychological terror by the serial killer John Doe, demonstrates how morality can be manipulated through extreme strategies rooted in dogmatic ethical reasoning (Prince, 2009). Doe is not merely an antagonist but a “dark educator” who compels society to confront its collective sins through brutal suffering (Hanich, 2010). This phenomenon opens a provocative window for examining what might be termed “pedagogy in extremis”—a radical form of moral teaching through violence and trauma.

From the perspective of forensic psychology, Doe exhibits symptoms of complex psychopathology, marked by obsessions with control, dogmatism, and the moral justification of violence (Hare, 1999). His extremism reflects a rigid cognitive style, typical of pathological narcissism combined with empathic dysfunction (Meloy, 2000). The emotional trauma he inflicts—particularly upon Detective Mills—underscores how perpetrator and victim are inextricably bound within a psychologically entrapping cycle. Trauma analysis in the film reveals intense emotional dynamics, especially in how anger, fear, and despair shape the protagonists’ psychological experiences (Caruth, 1996). Trauma here is not merely an inner wound but also a pedagogical event that forces individuals to confront unsettling moral realities (LaCapra, 2001).

The novelty of this research lies precisely in its interdisciplinary ambition. Existing scholarship on *Se7en* has largely gravitated toward film aesthetics, criminological themes, or philosophical allegories. Yet few, if any, have systematically connected the film to moral pedagogy and emotional psychology within the discourse of education. This article thus positions itself as a unique contribution, demonstrating how forensic psychology, moral philosophy, pedagogy, and emotion studies can converge to illuminate the darker dimensions of moral instruction through cinema.

Accordingly, this study is guided by two central research questions: (1) how does *Se7en* construct moral extremism as a form of “dark pedagogy”? and (2) how can emotional trauma in the film be interpreted as a site of moral learning within the psychology of education? By foregrounding these questions, this article seeks to address a significant research gap. Much of the existing literature treats *Se7en* within the boundaries of film theory and cultural studies, but there remains a paucity of inquiry that situates the film in relation to moral pedagogy and emotional psychology—particularly within the broader discourse of educational thought.

As a scholarly endeavor, then, this study not only dissects *Se7en* as a cultural text but also proposes a new conceptual framework for interdisciplinary inquiry into moral

extremism and emotional trauma. By uniting psychology, pedagogy, philosophy, and film studies, it seeks to construct an epistemological bridge between theory and practice. More broadly, this research affirms that film analysis can serve as an academic site for responding to the ethical and emotional dilemmas of contemporary life. *Se7en* is but one example, yet behind it lies a vast discourse on how modern society negotiates extremism, trauma, and morality within an increasingly fractured cultural landscape (Žižek, 2001).

In this light, the introduction underscores the urgency of interdisciplinary research on *Se7en*—not merely as a film analysis but as a critical attempt to understand how psychology, pedagogy, and moral philosophy intertwine to reveal the shadowed contours of modern civilization.

## METHOD

The methodological orientation of this study is anchored in qualitative textual analysis, specifically employing a hermeneutic–narrative approach to film. Rather than conducting field-based inquiry, the research positions *Se7en* as a cultural text to be interpreted, where cinematic elements—dialogue, character actions, visual motifs, and symbolic structures—are treated as units of data. These textual fragments are analyzed to uncover the interconnections between moral extremism, emotional trauma, and the pedagogical possibilities embedded within Fincher’s work.

The narrative dimension of the analysis focuses on plot development and character trajectories, which reveal patterns of moral extremity and ethical struggle. This enables the study to investigate how antagonistic and protagonistic figures embody divergent moral pedagogies that speak to broader questions of human ethics and learning. Complementing this, hermeneutic interpretation, following Ricoeur (1976), provides the conceptual tools to examine the symbolic and ideological meanings that suffuse the film’s imagery, religious allusions, and moral discourse. The combination of these two frameworks allows the study to move beyond surface description toward a layered interpretation that is at once analytical, reflective, and normative.

In operational terms, the research adopts a simplified adaptation of Miles and Huberman’s (1994) interactive model—not as a fieldwork protocol, but as an analytic logic. Here, data reduction involves isolating scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs relevant to the themes of moral extremism and trauma; data display entails arranging these textual units into structured interpretive categories; and conclusion drawing consists of synthesizing these insights to map the interrelation of forensic psychology, moral pedagogy, and ethical philosophy. By reframing cinematic elements as qualitative data, this study maintains methodological coherence while also ensuring analytic rigor.

To establish validity, the research follows Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of trustworthiness. Credibility is pursued through sustained engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship; transferability is ensured by linking filmic analysis with broader socio-cultural discussions on extremism and trauma; dependability rests on methodological transparency; and confirmability is achieved through openness to theoretical critique. In this way, the study secures its interpretive claims within recognized standards of qualitative inquiry.

Ultimately, the chosen methodology positions film not merely as entertainment but as a pedagogical text that speaks to the formation of moral consciousness. Through hermeneutic–narrative analysis, the research situates forensic psychology and moral pedagogy within the dialectical interplay of symbolic representation, ethical reflection, and contemporary cultural realities.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

### *Moral Extremism as the Dark Face of Ethics: A Deconstruction of Antagonistic Representation in Se7en*

The antagonist in *Se7en*, John Doe, epitomizes the extreme manifestation of the dark face of ethics when morality is interpreted in absolutist terms and transfigured into a destructive personal project. John Doe situates himself as an instrument of moral truth, claiming legitimacy to punish society based on the seven deadly sins—a religious framework he employs as a rigid and non-relational ethical anchor (Katz, 2007). From the perspective of forensic psychology, this construction exemplifies an extreme form of moral disengagement, wherein the perpetrator justifies his crimes by cloaking them in exalted moral claims, thus reframing violence as an instrument of justice (Bandura, 1999).

This phenomenon may be read as moral absolutism: the conviction that there exists a singular, universal truth that admits no ethical compromise. Within moral philosophy, such absolutism often engenders paradoxes, for the aspiration to enforce goodness paradoxically yields massive and destructive violence (MacIntyre, 1984). Through his personal narrative, John Doe rejects moral relativism and fashions himself as a prophetic messenger within a modern urban landscape he deems steeped in decadence. A deconstructive reading of his position unveils how ethical absolutism can incubate moral radicalization, mirroring the logic of religious fundamentalism (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

In forensic psychology, moral extremism of this sort may be understood as a form of cognitive distortion rooted in mechanisms of self-justification. Individuals exhibiting moral cognitive distortions often construct personal narratives that cast themselves as legitimate agents of truth while simultaneously erasing empathy for their victims (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). John Doe embodies this pattern by refusing to perceive his victims as autonomous individuals; he reduces them to symbols of sin that must be eradicated. This reduction resonates with the mechanism of dehumanization in the psychology of violence, whereby victims are stripped of their status as full human beings (Haslam, 2006).

The deconstruction of antagonism in *Se7en* may also be approached through the lens of moral pedagogy. John Doe does not merely kill; he teaches through death. He designs each murder as a didactic message to the broader society—a form of pedagogical violence that interweaves moral ideology with the method of terror (Giroux, 2004). The film thus raises fundamental questions about the function of pedagogy: can moral education grounded in fear produce transformation, or does it deepen social wounds? In this sense, John Doe instrumentalizes pedagogy, transforming it into a vehicle of indoctrination that perpetuates violence.

From the standpoint of moral philosophy, this antagonistic construction recalls the classic Kantian problem of moral law applied without contextual consideration. John Doe

enacts his crimes with the conviction that he is fulfilling a categorical imperative—a moral law binding without exception and irrespective of consequences (Kant, 1785/1996). Yet Fincher's narrative reveals the internal contradiction: what is intended as the triumph of morality culminates in its very collapse. This exposes the perils of moral formalism when severed from empathy and ethical relationality.

The perspective of emotion psychology further enriches this analysis. John Doe manifests moral outrage—anger at perceived injustice transmuted into radical action (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). However, rather than serving as constructive energy, this anger devolves into a toxic moral emotion that legitimates violence. In this sense, *Se7en* portrays how moral emotions can become distorted into destructive mechanisms once divorced from empathic grounding.

John Doe also embodies pathological altruism, wherein actions claimed to serve the greater good inflict brutal harm on others (Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan, & Wilson, 2012). He believes that by killing, he awakens society to its sins. Yet, from a forensic standpoint, this is but rationalization masking narcissistic tendencies and a thirst for control. Thus, the antagonist of *Se7en* is not merely a killer but a self-fashioned moral architect of the world.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, John Doe can be interpreted as a “dark teacher” who inscribes moral lessons onto human bodies. The victims' bodies function as a coerced curriculum imposed upon the public—an education grounded in horror, guilt, and fear (Freire, 1970). Such a method inverts pedagogy's ideal function as a process of humanization into one of dehumanization. The film therefore provokes us to ask: can moral education rooted in violence ever yield genuine goodness?

Conversely, John Doe's representation underscores the inadequacy of utilitarian ethics in accounting for his actions. From a utilitarian perspective, deeds that generate massive suffering cannot be justified (Mill, 1863/1998). Yet John Doe dismisses the calculus of collective happiness, choosing instead the path of moral absolutism that transcends utilitarian principles. This contradiction underscores how moral extremism rejects ethical compromise rooted in collective welfare.

Within criminological psychology, moral extremism such as John Doe's often intersects with psychopathological dimensions, particularly a grandiose sense of self and absence of remorse (Hare, 1999). John Doe positions himself as superior to the law, even to God, by determining who deserves to live or die. This dynamic reveals the forensic narcissism that often undergirds morally motivated crimes.

Through its antagonist, *Se7en* also surfaces existential dilemmas. John Doe compels the world to confront moral absurdity: that in seeking meaning and truth, humans may plunge into an ethical void rife with violence (Camus, 1942/1991). In this light, moral extremism is not an antidote to nihilism but another expression of its emptiness.

Further, deconstructing this antagonist reveals the phenomenon of moral narcissism—a psychological need to present oneself as a moral hero before the world (Lammers, 2017). John Doe does not kill in secrecy; he orchestrates his acts to be seen, interpreted, and granted a public stage. This is the narcissistic face of moral extremism, cloaking atrocity in ethical claims.



From the standpoint of trauma psychology, John Doe's actions also generate secondary trauma for the wider society and law enforcement. When violence is packaged as a moral message, trauma is not confined to direct victims but diffuses culturally as pervasive fear and helplessness (Herman, 1992). Thus, the antagonist of *Se7en* is not only an individual perpetrator but also an architect of collective trauma.

In the field of moral pedagogy, John Doe's case illuminates the dangers of education detached from dialogue. Paulo Freire emphasizes the necessity of dialogical pedagogy as a means of humanization (Freire, 1970). John Doe forecloses dialogue, replacing it with the monologue of violence. *Se7en*, therefore, becomes a cinematic reflection on the failure of moral education severed from intersubjective relations.

Forensically, John Doe's moral extremism may be classified as ideologically motivated violence, in which aggression arises not from instrumental gain but from moral and ideological conviction (Borum, 2011). This model frequently emerges among terrorists and fundamentalists, where moral claims provide justification for systematic violence.

The deconstruction of antagonism in *Se7en* also opens discourse on the boundary between sanity and insanity in morally motivated criminality. Forensic psychology highlights that perpetrators like John Doe often retain full awareness of their actions, meticulously planning them, such that the legal category of insanity cannot be easily ascribed (Meloy, 2000). This is the complexity of moral extremism: conscious, deliberate, yet profoundly destructive.

From the standpoint of contemporary moral philosophy, this phenomenon may be construed as a form of dark virtue ethics. John Doe believes himself to embody virtues such as honesty, discipline, and commitment to truth, but these virtues are twisted into a lethal dark visage (Hursthouse, 1999). The film thus challenges us to reconsider how virtues can be distorted within the context of absolutism.

Pedagogically, the antagonist illustrates how moral extremism constructs a "curriculum of fear." Society is compelled to learn through suffering, a pedagogy that produces alienation and never genuine enlightenment (hooks, 1994). Consequently, *Se7en* underscores the necessity of moral education grounded in empathy and dialogue rather than violence.

Ultimately, John Doe represents the dark face of ethics: morality seized by absolutism, stripped of empathy, and recast into a destructive pedagogical narrative. Through *Se7en*, Fincher demonstrates how moral claims may become the most terrifying instrument of power, operating not through law or economics but through a distorted conscience (Bauman, 1993). In this sense, moral extremism is a paradox: it seeks to uphold ethics yet annihilates them.

### ***Emotional Trauma and Psychological Wounds: Tracing Affective Imprints in Cinematic Narratives***

In *Se7en*, emotional trauma does not merely adhere to the protagonists but also seeps into the psychological landscape of the audience, transforming cinema into a medium that produces layered affective wounds. Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth (1996), is not simply a painful event of the past but a lingering "psychic imprint" that continues to haunt

subjectivity even after the incident has receded into history. Within the context of *Se7en*, Mills and Somerset embody figures burdened with inner wounds, while the viewers themselves are compelled to partake in the traumatic atmosphere conjured by John Doe's crimes (Caruth, 1996).

The dimension of trauma in this film may further be understood through Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework of *repetition compulsion*, the unconscious drive to re-enact traumatic experiences in symbolic form (Freud, 1920/2010). John Doe, as the antagonist, does not simply kill but stages a "theater of trauma," where each act constitutes a repetitive violence designed to etch a collective memory of moral devastation. For Mills, trauma becomes compounded in the climactic moment of his wife's death, a tragic repetition that resonates with the preceding sequence of sins (Freud, 1920/2010).

Moreover, Mills' trauma can be analyzed through the lens of *emotional dysregulation theory*, wherein the intensity of negative emotions strips the individual of behavioral control (Gross, 2015). His inability to restrain his rage in the final scene is not a mere impulsive act but the culmination of an emotional spiral aggravated by repeated exposure to Doe's atrocities. This illustrates how trauma undermines not only psychological stability but also corrodes moral conduct itself (Gross, 2015).

Somerset, in contrast, represents a subtler form of trauma—*vicarious trauma*, the suffering borne by those continually exposed to the anguish of others (Figley, 1995). As a seasoned detective, Somerset attempts to preserve emotional detachment, yet chronic exposure to human cruelty results in moral fatigue, dulling his hope for life. His trauma is quieter, yet more insidious, gnawing at the existential meaning of his vocation (Figley, 1995).

From a pedagogical perspective, the film can be read as an "affective classroom," in which audiences are forced to learn through the suffering of its characters. Martha Nussbaum (2001) posits that emotional experience in art functions as an effective moral pedagogy because it evokes empathy and ethical awareness more profoundly than normative discourse. Thus, the trauma depicted in *Se7en* operates not merely as entertainment, but as a *lesson in affect*, a visceral education in moral boundaries and the psychological consequences of extreme evil (Nussbaum, 2001).

From the standpoint of forensic psychology, the trauma experienced by the characters also mirrors the real-world impact of brutal crimes on law enforcement officers. Studies reveal that legal practitioners engaged in investigating sadistic crimes are highly susceptible to secondary traumatic stress that erodes their emotional integrity (Perez et al., 2010). Somerset is a vivid reflection of this phenomenon, where devotion to law is inversely proportional to the erosion of faith in human goodness (Perez et al., 2010).

From a moral-philosophical angle, the psychological wounds in *Se7en* reveal the paradox between justice and suffering. John Doe seeks to "teach" the world through violence, yet this pedagogy of extremity only engenders collective trauma for characters and spectators alike. Hannah Arendt (1963), in her discourse on the *banality of evil*, asserts that evil can emerge as a rational instrument cloaked in moral claims. Doe embodies this thesis, wielding crime as a tool of "moral education" that ravages the soul and leaves existential scars (Arendt, 1963).



Emotional trauma in the film can also be examined through the concept of *affective resonance*—the manner in which emotions portrayed in artistic media reverberate and transmit to audiences (Ahmed, 2004). The final scene, with Tracy's head in a box, though never visually shown, produces a cinematic trauma that is even more harrowing precisely because it operates through the imagination of the viewer. This resonance proves that trauma does not always emerge through explicit depictions of violence but often through implied violence, which embeds itself more deeply into consciousness (Ahmed, 2004).

Pedagogically, this underscores cinema as a moral laboratory where audiences are trained to grapple with ethical ambiguity through intense emotional encounters. Paulo Freire (1970/2005) insists that true education is not the transmission of knowledge but the transformation of consciousness through critical experience. *Se7en* enacts this mechanism, compelling viewers not merely to observe but to become "affective participants" in a classroom of justice wrought with suffering (Freire, 1970/2005).

From the standpoint of contemporary trauma psychology, the experiences of *Se7en*'s characters evoke the notion of moral injury—a psychological wound that emerges when individuals perceive betrayal by the very moral values, they hold sacred (Litz et al., 2009). Mills undergoes moral injury when his faith in justice is shattered by the bitter reality that the system cannot protect his wife. His trauma thus transcends personal anguish, morphing into an ontological collapse of meaning itself (Litz et al., 2009).

The film also dramatizes Judith Herman's (1992) notion of *complex trauma*, a condition arising from prolonged exposure to repeated traumatic events. Both Mills and Somerset exhibit its symptoms: Mills with his explosive emotions, Somerset with his apathy and withdrawal. Their portrayals reveal trauma not as a singular entity but as a spectrum of suffering that perpetually evolves (Herman, 1992).

It is equally crucial to recognize that trauma in *Se7en* extends beyond characters to encompass the audience. The theory of *viewer trauma* suggests that intense exposure to violent narratives in media may provoke emotional responses resembling actual trauma—anxiety, fear, nightmares (Plantinga, 2009). With its bleak atmosphere, the film places audiences in the position of "secondary victims," rendering cinema a medium of trauma distribution (Plantinga, 2009).

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this traumatic resonance may be reframed as an opportunity to cultivate moral literacy. According to bell hooks (1994), liberatory education involves emotions and affective experiences as integral components of learning. Thus, though traumatic, the experience of watching *Se7en* becomes a reflective space in which viewers can grasp the consequences of extreme crime in lived reality (hooks, 1994).

The presence of trauma in *Se7en* also illustrates how cinematic aesthetics themselves can embody *trauma aesthetics*—a visual and narrative strategy designed to deliberately evoke affective discomfort in audiences (Kaplan, 2005). Fincher's somber visual style, his sparse use of light, and the rain-soaked cityscape all forge an aesthetic environment that expresses trauma itself. Hence, cinema does not merely narrate trauma but reproduces it at the aesthetic level (Kaplan, 2005).

One of the most significant implications of trauma in *Se7en* is the recognition that

extreme evil never leaves behind only physical scars but inflicts deeper psychological wounds. As van der Kolk (2014) explains, trauma imprints itself not only in the mind but also in the body, altering how individuals feel and engage with the world. The climactic scene of Mills' body erupting with rage exemplifies this, providing a cinematic illustration of the theory that the body itself preserves traumatic memory (van der Kolk, 2014).

From an ethical perspective, Fincher's portrayal of emotional trauma underscores the lesson that human suffering cannot be reduced to mere spectacle. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) reminds us that the face of the Other always summons ethical responsibility, and their suffering demands a moral response. The film forces viewers to confront the shattered faces of victims, compelling them to bear the ethical weight of witnessed evil (Levinas, 1969).

Thus, *Se7en* may be read as a cinematic text that operates a *pedagogy of trauma*—a mode of teaching in which audiences are educated through emotional wounding. Trauma is not confined to the characters but is distributed to viewers through aesthetic and narrative strategies. This transforms cinema into more than fictional representation; it becomes an affective laboratory where moral boundaries and emotional experiences are rigorously tested (Kaplan, 2005).

Ultimately, the narrative of trauma in *Se7en* reminds us that extreme evil is not merely a matter of violating law but of leaving indelible psychological scars that redirect the course of both individual and collective existence. The film offers a profound reflection that moral pedagogy does not always arrive in the guise of normative teachings but can also emerge from wounds, suffering, and trauma that shake human consciousness to its core (Nussbaum, 2001).

### ***Moral Pedagogy in the Shadow of Violence: A Critical Reflection on the Educational Potential of Cinematic Representation***

David Fincher's *Se7en* stands as an artistic representation laden with moral reflection, wherein violence emerges not merely as a spectacle of horror but as a piercing critique of ethical radicalism that holds humanity hostage. The violence in this film cannot be superficially reduced to sadism; rather, it must be interpreted within the problematic horizon of moral pedagogy: how extreme violence paradoxically opens a contemplative space on the urgency of a moral education that is humanistic, dialogical, and inclusive (Giroux, 2001).

At this juncture, cinema becomes an unconventional pedagogical arena—an experiential space where moral values are questioned, doubted, and negotiated. Fincher situates his audience in an educative emotional tension, orchestrated through shock, fear, and guilt. Such tension, when critically examined, functions as a reflective mirror revealing that morality enforced through absolutism inevitably generates a paradox of humanity (hooks, 1994).

The violence orchestrated by John Doe illustrates how moral claims can metamorphose into tyranny, where ethical dogmatism denies both dialogue and interpretative plurality. This resonates with critiques from critical pedagogy, which argue that hegemonic moral education tends to breed exclusivity, repression, and even destruction (Freire, 1998). Within this framework, *Se7en* operates as a cinematic case study unveiling the grim visage of morality once it loses its dialogical essence.

Fincher's cinematography underscores the moral distortion that arises when individuals presume absolute authority in determining right and wrong. This highlights that moral education cannot be approached dogmatically but must instead be dialectically constructed, recognizing the pluralism of values. Should moral education fail to accommodate human complexity, it risks devolving into violence legitimized in the name of truth (Nussbaum, 1997).

The pedagogical dimension of *Se7en* does not lie in explicit moral instruction, but in the interpretative space pried open by the viewing experience itself. The film's visualization of violence and suffering induces a pedagogical shock capable of triggering critical moral awareness. Here, Fincher demonstrates how cinema may function as a *moral laboratory*, an experimental arena for probing the fragile boundaries of human morality (Zimbardo, 2007).

From a forensic psychological standpoint, the violence in *Se7en* underscores that extreme morality often stems from trauma, repression, and an obsessive-compulsive attachment to order. John Doe projects his moral anxieties through ritualized killings, affirming the interconnection between emotional distortion and ethical radicalism. This nexus delivers a crucial lesson: moral education must take into account the emotional dimensions of human life, lest it regress into arid rationalism that breeds symbolic violence (Ekman, 2003).

A humanistic pedagogical approach asserts that moral education should be rooted in empathy rather than dogma. The film vividly exposes the absence of empathy in John Doe's moral project, which reduces other human beings to mere objects of ideological justification. *Se7en*, thus, reminds us of the urgency of cultivating a moral education that internalizes emotional sensitivity as its foundational core (Noddings, 2002).

Equally vital is the dialogical dimension of moral education, for without dialogue, morality collapses into hegemonic monologue. The film juxtaposes John Doe's monologic moral imposition with the critical exchanges between Detectives Somerset and Mills. Their conflicting dialogues enact a pedagogical dynamic, disclosing that moral truth is always open to questioning (Habermas, 1990).

Fincher deftly illustrates the failure of social systems to instill inclusive moral values. The city depicted in the film is permeated by corruption, apathy, and decadence. John Doe exploits this moral vacuum to justify his atrocities. Such realities parallel the thesis of critical pedagogy, which contends that the failure of social institutions to nurture democratic morality fosters the emergence of radicalized subjects (Giroux, 2004).

Philosophically, the film dramatizes the tension between rigid deontological ethics and more fluid dialogical ethics. John Doe embodies absolute ethics that reject relativism, whereas Somerset strives to articulate a reflective and contextual morality. This confrontation signals the necessity for moral pedagogy to transcend simplistic dichotomies of right and wrong and instead move toward dialogical and deliberative ethical horizons (Taylor, 1989).

It is also noteworthy that the film's aesthetic dimension functions as a pedagogical instrument. The suffocating cinematographic framing, the perpetual rainfall, and the grim atmosphere collectively intensify the viewer's emotional engagement. These emotions are

not merely artistic effects, but epistemological devices that reveal moral realities more profoundly (Plantinga, 2009).

From the vantage of moral pedagogy, *Se7en* may be read as a cautionary tale: that education which fails to engage morality dialogically risks producing fundamentalism. The film implicitly underscores the necessity of pedagogical approaches that cultivate openness, multiplicity of perspectives, and the humility to recognize one's limitations in judging others (Biesta, 2006).

Mills' failure to regulate his emotions in the film's climax demonstrates how the absence of emotional regulation can dismantle one's moral principles. From the perspective of emotional psychology, this highlights that moral education cannot be disentangled from emotional education. Emotional regulation must be integrated within moral pedagogy to prevent individuals from succumbing to impulsive violence (Gross, 2007).

The film thereby delivers a dual lesson: first, a critique of destructive extremist morality; second, the urgency of constructing an alternative morality grounded in dialogue, empathy, and emotional awareness. Fincher refrains from prescribing explicit solutions, entrusting instead the space of contemplation to his viewers, transforming the act of viewing into a process of reflective moral education (Pratt, 1992).

More broadly, *Se7en* demonstrates that violence can serve as a pedagogical point of departure—not by normalizing it, but by exposing its absurdity and horror. In this sense, cinema becomes a critical educational medium that dismantles absolutist moral illusions while fostering awareness of the necessity of a more humanistic ethic (Cavell, 1979).

The implications of this analysis suggest that contemporary moral education can no longer rely solely on normative indoctrination. Rather, it must cultivate reflective, dialogical, and empathetic capacities. Films such as *Se7en* may thus serve as valuable pedagogical resources within critical education, enabling learners to interrogate complex moral representations and, in turn, develop critical awareness of the dangers posed by moral radicalism (Giroux, 2001).

In conclusion, moral pedagogy in the shadow of violence, as portrayed in *Se7en*, constitutes a critical reflection on the educational potential of cinematic representation. The film is not merely entertainment but a cultural text that offers a reflective space for envisioning a more contextual and humanistic moral education (hooks, 1994).

Ultimately, *Se7en* compels its viewers to confront the tension between extreme morality and fragile humanity. From this tension arises the urgency to reconstruct moral education away from value hegemony, toward an ethical foundation grounded in pluralism, dialogue, and emotional sensitivity (Nussbaum, 1997).

Hence, this study underscores that the educational potential of cinematic representation must be continually explored within the framework of critical pedagogy. Cinema can serve as a vehicle of emancipatory moral learning—one that not only repudiates radicalism but also nurtures an inclusive, reflective, and deeply human ethical consciousness (Freire, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that David Fincher's *Se7en* offers more than a narrative of crime; it functions as a cultural text that reveals the destructive potential of moral extremism and its entanglement with emotional trauma. The film illustrates how ethical principles, when distorted into rigid dogma, can legitimize violence and dehumanization. From a psychological perspective, the characters' suffering underscores that trauma is not limited to physical violence but also emerges from the collapse of existential meaning and the inability to regulate emotions in moments of crisis. Pedagogically, the film highlights the limitations of moral instruction confined to rigid norms. It calls for a reflective pedagogy that integrates emotional psychology, enabling learners to cultivate empathy, resilience, and a humanistic moral orientation. On this basis, the study recommends that films such as *Se7en* be used as interdisciplinary pedagogical tools in higher education to foster critical reflection on extremism and to strengthen emotional sensitivity in responding to human vulnerability. Incorporating film analysis into moral education curricula can provide students with both cognitive and affective resources to resist ethical absolutism and engage with moral complexity. By situating *Se7en* within the discourse of moral pedagogy and emotional psychology, this study contributes to expanding the role of film analysis beyond cultural critique toward educational thought. Ultimately, it highlights the broader significance of cinema as a medium that not only reflects but also shapes human understandings of morality, trauma, and the possibilities of humane learning in an age marked by moral absolutism.

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