

# Ethics in contemporary families: reflections on radical alterity from the film *Boyhood*

## *A ética nas famílias contemporâneas: reflexões sobre a alteridade radical a partir do filme Boyhood*

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates ethics in contemporary families based on the ideas of Emmanuel Lévinas and on the analysis of the film *Boyhood* (2014). It presents the changes experienced in contemporary societies as a problem, especially regarding trustfulness, with changes in the experiences of time and space and in the perspective of life administration. The film *Boyhood* allows visualizing moments of reproduction of social schemes usually accepted by the families, as well as moments of challenge of these schemes, showing an ethical sense as advocated by Lévinas.

**Keywords:** Ethics, family, contemporaneidade, film analysis, *Boyhood*

### RESUMO

O artigo investiga a ética nas famílias contemporâneas a partir das contribuições do pensamento de Emmanuel Lévinas, utilizando como suporte a análise do filme *Boyhood – da infância à juventude*, de 2014. Apresenta como problema de partida as mudanças experimentadas nas sociedades contemporâneas, principalmente no que diz respeito às relações de confiança, com alterações nas experiências de tempo e espaço, e na perspectiva de administração da vida. O filme *Boyhood* permite visualizar momentos de reprodução dos esquemas sociais mais abrangentes reiterados pela família, bem como os momentos de impugnação destes mesmos esquemas, apresentando um sentido ético tal como preconizado por Lévinas.

**Palavras-chave:** Ética, família, contemporaneidade, análise fílmica, *Boyhood*

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS STUDY ANNOUNCES our intention to reflect on alterity in contemporary families, considering the contributions of the French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. In this perspective, to think the Other in family is to think also its ethical sense. Thus, we started from the understanding that contemporary society and its form of organization assume specific characteristics in relation to other historical periods, allowing distinct and unique experiences that make it possible to think of how to show these transformations.

The relationship between family and society should not sound like a novelty since, throughout history, it is possible to note the articulating role of both in the construction of a reality that is objective and subjective. This construction must be considered in its dialectical and dynamic aspect, composed of moments of exteriorization, objectification and internalization, in which daily and routine relations confirm, reaffirm and continuously revalidate the outlines of social reality (Berger & Luckman, 1998).

We emphasize that we are not situated in any essentialist tradition of family, but we rather contemplate it in its transitional aspect, which has relations with broader social transformations. We also avoid any stratigraphic conception that proposes a progressive chaining between biological, psychological, social and cultural factors. Geertz (1989) criticizes this model of understanding, which considers man as a being composed of levels in superposition, as if it were possible, through an excavation, to find the fossilized elements of other levels in a sort of evolutionary deposit, which would lead to the meeting of universals in a *consensus gentium*, a consensus for all humanity.

It is not a question of trying to identify invariant points of reference within the family that serve as an anchor for a reflection on the relationships between its members and the place of alterity in them. Like Geertz (1989), we do not share the view that there are cultural universals based on underlying needs. The fact that a society needs members to exist does not necessarily ensure a direct link between the act of reproduction and a kind of institutional development like the family.

In the light of the above, we showed some points of transformation in the contemporary scenario, so that, from this configuration, we can think of questions concerning alterity. We highlight, mainly, the processes of industrialization, urbanization and technological development (Giddens, 1991) which, in their development and continuity, allowed a reflexive modernization (Giddens, 2012). Many others could be cited, such as the shift from primary (agriculture) to secondary (industrial) and tertiary (service) activities, and also social mobility

and the transformation of status and role of women in society, or even education levels (Beltrão, 1970).

As discussed by Fridman (2000), contemporaneity, or the contemporary experience, differs from the traditional or modern ones precisely by questioning notions, habits, and institutions previously taken as immutable. It is thus, for example, with the notions of time and space, as well as those of relationship, affection and family (Giddens, 1993). The main objective of this study is, therefore, to understand the place of alterity in families, in view of the new social order in force.

To reach our objectives, we proposed a methodology that used a movie as an empirical space and a privileged field of investigation. Thus, on the part of the researchers, there is an investment in analyzing aesthetic representations, namely cinematographic ones, as a matter of understanding the relations established between ethical principles and the familiar configurations that appear in it.

Taking movies as a field of research could initially imply an erroneous idea of maintaining the distinction between art and the social world, which are not the pretensions of this study. Here, cinema is taken as a product of a context and tributary of a referent. This contextuality and referentiality, therefore, lead a work of art to relate directly to the flow of social life, constituting itself as a possible analyzable document of culture. Following Clifford Geertz's (1989) thinking, we intended to consider the movie as a text in which the main referents are the familiar configurations.

In methodological terms, cinema is considered here as a cultural phenomenon that can be interpreted, since it reveals cultural traits, standards of conduct, modalities of explanation and signification of daily life. And in its representation on the family — situating itself in different cultural contexts and temporalities —, the work studied emerges as an empirical space, a field of investigation to be visited in order to reflect on the outlines of family experience in contemporary times.

## LÉVINAS AND THE ETHICS OF RADICAL ALTERITY

Before beginning the philosophical discussion pertinent to this study, we would like to emphasize that it is not our intention to consider the *Being* as a given conceptual field, or as if there were a substance *per se* and *a priori* that would designate it. Precisely for this reason, this study shows — both in its introduction and in the *incarnated* analysis of the movie — the place in which this shape, this idea of Being is always connected to a contextuality and referentiality. Our position on the Being, therefore, shares the understandings of



Lévinas, which considers it as a scheme of functioning, as a movement present primarily in the Western philosophical tradition.

Emmanuel Lévinas was a philosopher who proposed to revisit the history of Philosophy and of its categories, stressing it before his reflections on the Other. As is shown in the work *Entre nós* (2009) (in the United States, published as *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-other*), he uses the principle of alterity as a foundation to his reflections. The confrontation between an entire Western philosophical tradition shaped by the idea of Being became directly, or indirectly, its philosophical meaning. In this way, in his works, the Other is always present in the face of the nuances of Being. This interaction between Being and Other than Being manifests itself in its most central discussions, as in the idea of Totality and Infinity — which became the title of one of his main works — or in the notions of The said and The saying; Same (Self) and Other; Immanence and Transcendence; Objectivity and Subjectivity; Synchrony and Diachrony; Self-interest and Responsibility. Lévinas (2009) intended to discuss Ontology faced with ethics, which would assume a condition of first philosophy, promoting a severe analysis of human and institutional relations, with the first term of these relations always pointing to the meaning of Being, and the second, to the Ethical meaning.

In the discussion of these subjects, Lévinas struggles to enunciate his philosophy, which, as can be observed in *Entre nós* (2009), proposes to be diametrically opposed to solipsism. For him, the task of Philosophy is to speak the unspeakable, or, as he puts it in *Ética e infinito* (1982) (published in the United States as *Ethics and Infinity*), to bring into the categories of the said the signs of saying, which imprint traces in the discourse of what breaks with the discursive categories themselves. This discussion becomes powerful because it shows a turning point in traditional Western philosophy based on Being. In this way, new elements present in Levinasian philosophy are brought as tools with which we can think both the logic of tension between the Being and the Other than Being, or between the Self and the Other, as in analogy to the very movement made by Lévinas in an attempt to think the possibilities of bringing to the Being the traces of the Other and the conditions of the intersection of elements of transcendence along with the imperative of Being.

For Lévinas (1982), in the history of Western philosophy, the signifying<sup>1</sup> has always resided in knowledge and, as reported in *De outro modo que ser* (2011) (*Otherwise than Being* in the US), in the science that clarifies the possibility of accessing the reality built by itself. This enabled the development of a culture in which knowing and being were correlated and appropriate to one another.

That said, there is an important question: What problem can there be in a culture that develops under the foundations of Being? To Lévinas (1980), an

<sup>1</sup> In *Transcendência e inteligibilidade* (1991) (*Alterity and Transcendence* in the US), Lévinas points out that the signifying would be a kind of anchorage or fixation element that, in the history of philosophy, was taken as belonging and articulated exclusively to knowledge.

organized thought on the notion of Being shows the permanent possibility of war. War would then be a consequence of the way the Being manifests itself. According to Lévinas (2011), the manifestation of Being is intimately linked to the action of a self-interest that shows itself as permanent persistence in the maintenance of its condition of Being. The movement of Being as an interest is like a *conatus*, which expands toward what denies it, to what opposes it. This movement aims at the transformation and subordination of that capable of denying and opposing it. The Being in its interest turns what antagonized him into an integral part, acting according to it (Lévinas, 2011). However, another question can be asked: would not reason be the possibility of a peaceful articulation between beings?

The peace found from the reason operated by self-interest, that is, for the maintenance of the Being, is in fact a pacification occurred by actions of war, in which rationality overlapped the manifestations of conflicting difference, promoting the return of multiplicity to unity of the One — regulated by intelligibility — being put into practice as a function of Being. War suspends morality and reason, becoming the art of foreseeing and winning by all means. Individuals are reduced to the forms that govern them without them knowing (Lévinas, 1980).

The face of the Being that shows itself in this context of war is totality (Lévinas, 1980). Totality is shown as a universal attempt of synthesis that aims to comprehend everything outside it, in opposition to the notion of infinity. *Totalidade e infinito* (*Totality and Infinity* in the US) poses the problem of intersubjective relation (Lévinas, 1982). The relation between totality and infinity is, then, the very expression of the war promoted by the Being to remain being. In this way, it addresses the Other, who escapes it with attitudes of capture or annihilation, as well as defines, through the presence of the Other, the possibility of rupture with totality.

If *Totalidade e infinito* poses the question of intersubjective relation, it can be said that it shows, in Levinasian thought, the relation between the Self (Same) and the Other. Lévinas (1980) makes a series of reflections regarding this relation, assuming that the positioning of the Self can be directed to the suspension of alterity, acting on the Other from a relation of power and possession. The position of being a Self, beyond all possibilities of differentiation among the many “Selves”, is in the expression of an identity content. The Self need not always to be the same, but to present a dynamic that consists in rediscovering its identity when faced with everything that may happen to it. The self shows an identity even in its modifications, since it represents and thinks all the heterogeneity as reference to itself (Lévinas, 1980).

This articulation between Self (Same) and the Other, for Lévinas (1980), is made through language. In the book *De outro modo que ser* (2011), Lévinas



shows two ways in which language is expressed — the saying and the said — and, from these forms, the intersubjective relation emerges. The dynamics between these forms of language presentation, according to his analysis, points to a supremacy of the subordination of the saying to the said. The saying would be the downfall of transcendence in which the exteriority dynamics in flow of a saying is imprisoned by thematization.

This implies that the passage of externality by the logos produces a translation term. The experience with what is external to the Self is signified in a theme, this theme is the mark of the passage of a saying. The expansion of the Self denounces the capture of that which has already been external to it and today exists as a function of the Self. The new themes and thematization are the proof of transcendence, but which, already a theme, appears betrayed, as the dynamic flow of saying manifests itself in the formalization of the said; the saying in its continuity was limited and appears transmuted into said.

What Lévinas seems to try to emphasize is that our social relations are organized by language and, above all, that the exercise of this language can also be operated by a logic of interest. Language, in the movement of interest, acts in the contact with what is external to the Self and acts in the logic of transformation of that difference or of that distance between the Self and the Other. This transformation is the dismissal of the difference that fundamentally characterizes the Other; it is the subtraction of the distance between the Self and the Other, making them coincident; it is the deprivation of the sense of language flow (betrayal) and its fixation on a theme that promotes the aggregation of what differed between the Self and the Other through a reference made possible by a logical system of specific filters.

This form of fixation of what was once flow, this betrayal of the saying by the said, or, rather, this imperative action of the Self to stay Self over the Other, supports an experience of time. Time, as understood by Lévinas in *Ética e infinito* (1982), is not the event experienced by an isolated subject, but the very way of relating to others. That said, time, also a dimension of the intersubjective relation, does not maintain the freedom of its chaining in past and future. The distance from the past and the future is converted into a return to the present.

According to Lévinas (2011), the Self, in its interest, shows itself as synchrony or attempt to synchronize events. Time is thus shown as the recovery of all distances, either by the retention present in memory or history, articulating the relations in the present, or by propensity, in which, as shown in the book *Entre nós* (2009), the future is captured by the present by the expansion of this present towards the future through the anticipation of the possibilities of future

experiences from current experiences. In this sense, the systems of intelligibility that we create today expand their range of action to the future and, when predicting what may happen in the future from the extension of the present, act on the present itself — we include here, in the articulation of this current present in which we live, imagination, projections and predictions.

Ethics, then, within this perspective, would be the first philosophy to put the priority of the questioning of Being. Ethics is exercised with criticism and, thus, points out its meaning and destiny directed at the service of others, because, as a critique, it shows its positivity and its substantiality in the dethronement of the spontaneous ontological knowledge dogmatism. Ethics as a critique debunks the spontaneity of a solipsist Western tradition.

The form of manifestation, then, of this contradiction is that of an Other than Being that presents itself as a modality of Being, of the said that preserves the meanings of the saying, of a thought coming not from the capture, but from the criticism of an affirmative denial that would be responsibility. To Lévinas (2011), responsibility would be the way in which a denial of the positive itself instituted in the logic of Being would be positivized. Responsibility is the possibility of an Other than Being that is no longer Being, even though it shows itself as an exception through it, and it is neither Not-Being nor negativity. “The otherwise than being is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the otherwise than being from the said in which it already comes to signify but a being otherwise” (Lévinas, 2011, p. 29).

The social structure, as Lévinas (1982) tells us, cannot be based on knowledge, but on responsibility. Knowledge, as we have seen, brings together multiplicity in unity, depriving it of its absolute difference and transforming it into the Same. Responsibility would be the way in which the Other than Being, appearing as a form of Being, dismisses itself to welcome the Other in its alterity. Responsibility embodies the possibility of distinction between Being and Not-Being, it is related to the Other, therefore, without taking it for itself; without transforming it, it interacts with the Other from its absolute difference.

Responsibility, to Lévinas (2011), is the recognition of the Other in what makes him unique. We would say that it would be the way in which the distance between Self and Other is kept and by which a relation between both is possible through a type of closeness. In the paradox that allows the Other of the Being, the elimination of this distance is the subtraction of the characteristics of the Other that make it absolutely Other, and therefore would undo this relation and its proximity, since it is no longer possible to speak about distance in coincidence. What coincides does it by remaining under the signs of the presence, a kind of convergence between time and space in which the references are self-centered.



### A CIRCUIT OF INTIMATE SOCIABILITIES: *BOYHOOD*

The movie *Boyhood* is a North American production, directed by Richard Linklater, and has as peculiarity the fact of having been a longitudinal film, taking twelve years to be completed. This cinematographic work presents neither a clear plot nor a specific goal. The development of the movie trails the life situations of a regular boy, Mason Evans Junior, from his childhood up to his arrival in college.

In the course of the film, we can see the social plots of the Evans family throughout their life cycle, from childhood to youth. There are in the film neither very precise marks nor specific moments that can be marked as rites of passage from one phase of life to another. *Boyhood* follows a continuous flow in time, in which, throughout its history, we observe the facts of daily life, from the simplest, like Mason Junior playing video game, to the more complex, marked by individual and family conflicts, promoting new organizations and directions in the continuation of life.

*Boyhood* has a narrative about ordinary time, one in which life happens for the most part, and is shared. It is evident that, at times, the movie portrays milestones, such as birthdays or celebrations for specific events, such as Mason Junior's graduation in high school. However, they are not the most preponderant ones. Regular days are more striking and occupy a substantially larger room in the movie narrative.

Due to the way the movie is organized, there are many elements and many directions and ways to approach it. Therefore, as a way of organizing it and in order to achieve our goals, we selected the movie segment and the conflicts contained in the work from the variations in the intimate sociability that occur during the unfolding of the plot. These variations represent the many forms of association and socialization that took place during the film. So, we used them as an anchor point to give sequence on our way of organizing this story and as a starting point for our analyses.

The narrative begins focusing on the family relationship between Olivia, the mother; Mason Junior, the youngest sibling and central character; and Samantha, the eldest child. Together, they make up the Evans family. At this point, the film focuses on the relationship between the three, in which Samantha and Mason Junior are still very young. Samantha and Mason Junior's father, Mason, is initially absent from family relationships, as he is in Alaska. The reason for the estrangement between the father and the other members of the Evans family was due to conflicts between the way of understanding life and the required responsibilities for the good development of a family. It was precisely the difference between Olivia and Mason that led them to separation.

The financial situation makes Olivia rethink the directions of her family's life, taking them to Houston, where she has the support of her mother, Catherine, Samantha's and Mason Junior's grandmother. After some time in Houston, Mason returns from Alaska and tries to make himself more present in the daily lives of his children, who until then seemed to be centrally cared for by their maternal grandmother and mother.

Mason seems to still have the desire to go back to living with the mother of his children, Olivia, a desire apparently shared by the children, even though Samantha's memories are stronger regarding the misunderstanding between her parents than the good times lived together in family.

In another moment of the movie, we have a new stage, which can be marked by a new intimate association. This relationship constitutes the bond between the characters of Olivia and Bill. Initially, Olivia was a Psychology student and Bill was her professor. From this approach, the viewer can observe the emergence of a mutual interest that leads them to marriage. At that moment, another intimate association is established, and the children of Olivia's second husband, Randy and Mindy become part of the film. The configuration of this intimate association refers to the family of origin, the Evans, which is now composed of the mother, Olivia; the stepfather, Bill; the children, Samantha and Mason Junior; and stepchildren, Randy and Mindy.

In this new intimate association, other plots are made possible and emerge, coming from the different forms of organization built on the intimate sociability of origin, with new adaptation processes living new experiences. It is marked by rigidity and the imposition of rules. There is a change in the economic aspect of this family organization, and the presence of a striking element with which the whole new system of intimate sociability has to deal. This element is Bill's alcoholism and violence.

After recurring acts of violence from Bill, Olivia separates. Sometime after separating, she finishes her studies and becomes a Psychology professor. Amidst all these changes, Mason continues to try to make himself present in the children's lives, showing up periodically every weekend.

Olivia marries again, now with Jim, who was a student at the college where she taught. At that moment, a new cycle of relations between Mason Júnior, Samantha, Jim and Olivia begins. The father, Mason, also marries and has a baby, compounding even further the of Mason Junior's and Samantha's intimate sociability, who, on their father's side, have a new stepmother and a new brother.

Mason Junior and Jim, the third husband of his mother, have some arguments and, in time, Olivia separates again, remaining divorced until the end of the narrative. In the midst of these transformations in intimate sociability,



Mason Junior's relationships with the new cities where he lives, with friends, with different schools and girlfriends. These are experiences of his private life, but they are also the result of following his family cycle.

### **About Boyhood and the intimate sociability: between the neighborhood of the self and the hospitality of the other: from interest to responsibility**

At first, the Evans's intimate sociability presents itself as a female single-parent family, since the family conduction is taken by only one of the spouses; this spouse is female, and the other is completely absent from intra-family relations and decision making. In principle, although Mason is a member of the Evans family group, his distance and lack of communication do not bring direct intervention to the family group.

At this point in the family setting, some scenes are held dear to us. The first is when, at the beginning of the film, Olivia is in the car with Mason Junior, after picking him up at the school, and talks to him about a meeting she had with his teacher. According to the teacher, Mason Junior behaves differently from the other students and does not deliver the assignments, having as recurring behavior to spend the classes looking out the window.

In the same scene, Olivia says that she knows Mason Junior does his homework, he just does not deliver them; there is no mention of a possible learning disability. Apparently, Mason Junior is just not interested in the ordinary school activities. However, there seems to be a concern from the school with his different behavior, and Olivia is consequently summoned to account for this demand. Mason Junior seems to be much more interested by the dynamics of life, as he himself speaks, by the birth of flies, than by formal curricular activities.

We realize, then, that, through the request made for Olivia's appearance at the school and her action before Mason Junior, a partnership is formalized so that the family group can respond to behaviors that may be considered deviant from the expected in good school performance, based on the evaluation made by the school itself. Olivia's concern with Mason Junior at this time does not seem to be exactly with her son's situation in itself, but with his difference from the other students.

Being, then, the family's responsibility for the success of the children, the pressure on his differentiation, which could lead to some school impairment, begins to operate in a logic of interest, in which the family-school partnership works both for the maintenance of the place of the school itself and for the qualities of the family. Thus, the concern with Mason Junior seems to be more regarding the school and the family than to the proper reception or responsibility

towards Mason Junior as an Other. The mother's speech agrees with the school's one. School and family remain neighbors and walk towards the same goals.

In the following scenes, in the midst of the other relationships that Olivia establishes, we see her interaction with her boyfriend, Dan. He arrives at her house to take her out and she refuses, as she needs to stay with her children. Later, Olivia's decision puts her in conflict with the relation of dating and the relation of mother. At this moment, her choice is to be as a mother. During the discussion, Olivia reveals her own needs beyond being a mother, such as having time for herself, or going out to a bar, or even going out to dinner. It reveals her experience of being a daughter and, early in life, a mother, seemingly showing a sense of imprisonment.

Here, unlike the other scene, under this specific context of conflict between dating and the importance in the lives of her children, the emerging concern does not entangle her in the order of Interest, since her choice for the children takes the form of sacrifice and replacement. Olivia replaces the place of fragility of her children, putting herself in a spot of attack and risk. It is her position as a girlfriend and as a woman that is put on the line. She then assumes a position of responsibility and ethical sense. To keep being a mother, in this case, is to keep being a mother not for herself but for the children, not to be a good mother in the eyes of others, but to be good for her children, attending to their needs. The relationship between Dan and Olivia does not continue.

Following the movie, there is a scene in which Samantha and Mason Junior, still young, are notified they are moving out to Houston and that they will live next to their maternal grandmother, Catherine. The children argue, but their arguments are not considered. The main reason for them to move out is because Olivia needs to go back to study, so that they can improve their economic situation, not favorable and insufficient to their needs. In this scene, we see again how school capital has a central character, influencing choices and actions, in view of what its achievement represents, especially in what concerns the development of economic possibilities. The film suggests, from Olivia's concern, the relation between studying and having a better job, being a good student to have a better job.

### **An intimate sociability of the *extended family kind***

in Houston, after moving out, we find another set of important relationships, among them, Mason's return to family relations and the presence of grandmother Catherine. Mason spent a year and a half without giving news, and his return to family life reawakened old conflicts in the parental system regarding the conduct

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of the relationship with the children. The family, now, because of Catherine's position, can be classified as extended because it is no longer restricted to the unity of parents with their children.

Catherine assists her daughter, Olivia, in family care activities, being present at several times, such as volunteering at her grandchildren's school, helping with some financial needs, picking up her grandchildren at school, and taking care of them while their mother performs the activities of worker and student. In the scene at the grandmother's house, we can again see Mason Junior's difficulty in accounting for his school activities and assignments, while Samantha displays excellent performance, getting top marks on her school exams. At this point, we see the interest of grandmother Catherine and her closeness to Samantha, which again denotes the strength that school capital demarcates in family everyday life. Good student performance promotes attention and closeness.

The father, Mason, when meeting his children again, gives them gifts, but there seems to be a tension between him and Catherine regarding the decision to meet Olivia. He takes the kids out, when they eat and play bowling. Mason Junior seems again not very interested in these activities, while Samantha seems to be enjoying them. Throughout the movie, we see, when faced with little recurring daily life activities, how different Mason Junior is, which suggesting another look at life.

In the cafeteria scene, while they eat, the father reveals his desire to spend more time with his children, and he reveals that he left because he needed some time, due to conflicts between him and Olivia. Here again, an analysis of interest becomes possible. Mason's choice was made by himself, for himself, to himself in the face of the conflict with Olivia. Faced with family relationships, the father's reference at that moment was self-centered, not responding and being accountable for the situations that could occur with his children, or with the mother of his children on the condition of no longer being his wife.

His *time* from his family in Alaska represents a choice for the Self when faced with the frailty and responsibility that the Other summoned to him in family. Olivia was reduced only to the condition of his wife, and when she was no more, when the reference to herself is lost, Mason's actions fade, there is no care or maintenance of any kind of relationship other than the one that referred to him directly. He seems to behave as if Olivia only existed as his wife, and not as a woman, a mother and a person, for instance. The children were reduced to the products of a conjugal relationship, and when this was broken, the reference to the Being of the relationship is dismissed, as well as the bond, at least at the exact moment of the choice in which the conflict between the Self and the Other hierarchizes the permanence of the Self in detriment of the Other.

Following the story, we see that Mason, at the end of the trip, takes the children to Olivia's house. When they arrive, Mason Junior shows him his collection of snake vertebrae and other unusual things, and soon Samantha appears and *steals* their father's attention, talking about the basketball team in which she participates. The father asks about her performance and is surprised by it. The performance appears as cause of interest and satisfaction.

Olivia arrives and, upon entering the house, reports that Mason ruined her plans for not following her request for him to leave the children with their grandmother. In the scene, the two fight because he did not feed the children right, who only ate junk food, and did not help them with the school assignments. The conflict between Olivia and Mason seems to put into question how to lead a family. Olivia seems to be better suited to following the circuits of social consecration, such as good school/academic performance and the possibilities that allow for a good job, while Mason still wants to be a musician.

#### **An intimate sociability of the *reconstituted family kind***

Following the story, another intimate sociability emerges. In college classes, Olivia approaches Bill Welbrock, a Psychology professor. As said before, their approach ends in marriage, and a new family organization begins. The reconstituted family has as main characteristic the union of a couple that already has children of previous relations. In this case, the family composition presents, from the reference to the Evans family, the stepfather, Bill; the mother, Olivia; the children, Mason Junior and Samantha; and the stepchildren, Mindy and Randy.

Concern about school performance is again present and belongs to both Bill and Olivia; intimate sociability seem to be dedicated to ensuring school performance. Here, one can return to the same reflection made previously about Mason Junior's school performance. It is not a matter of concern for the child, but with what, in theory, must be the competence of the family.

Following this, it is possible to observe Bill's much more rigid and imposing position on the whole system of actions present in current intimate sociability, with criticisms towards Randy and Mason Junior for their liking for video games and trying to make them like sports such as golf. In another moment, Bill complains about the non-execution of the activities assigned to the fraternal subsystem, which is composed by Mindy, Randy, Mason Junior, and Samantha. Bill disregards other activities regarding affection and sympathy towards the children and stepchildren, such as when he criticizes Samantha for not having finished her domestic chores when she had time to do her Arts activities.

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The domestic chores assigned by the parental subsystem seem not to be open to dialogue, in addition to being imposed; they should be prioritized to other activities that may be taken as relevant by the filial subsystem. Bill, when fighting over unfinished activities, asks Olivia for help to reinforce the need to respect the attributions imposed by him, and she agrees. The agreement between the two shows the idea of maintaining the recomposed system. Here, there is an important element, the need for Olivia to be summoned before her children to make evident the agreement of the parental subsystem. In this way, an issue of reconstituted families seems clear, or, at least, of this one specific, which concerns the existence of a tension between the authority position of intimate sociability of origin and the configuration of the current intimate sociability.

The differences in behavior that could originally arise from the prior intimate sociability facing the currently composed intimate sociability are then reconfigured and engendered within the way of being of this new intimate sociability, brought about by the union of its earlier systems. This new system stabilizes its own identity by converting the two previous systems into a new one, which will function in a self-referential way as well. The stabilization of the Evans and Welbrock identities becomes the reference, in order to perpetuate the functioning of the Evans-Welbrock system. In other words, to stay Evans one must now also be a little Welbrock, and to be Welbrock one must be a little Evans as well.

We wager that, although the Evans and the Welbrock are a recomposed family and form a unity among themselves, respect and obedience seem to require the reinforcement summoned to the spouse linked to the originating intimate sociability. In this case, Olivia would be called upon to reaffirm the rules of the house and agreements of the parental subsystem with her children, and we can infer that the reverse could also happen. It is as if, when faced with the distinction between the two originating intimate ways of socialization, which formed this third one, the spouse needed to confirm that following those rules continues to keep them in their identity. In this sense, it continues in the logic of permanence by the summoned obedience. The circuit of the Same is established by the reaffirmation that to act according to the Welbrock family is still to act according to the Evans.

The tension seems to come from the difference of identities between the Evans and the Welbrock, so that obeying the Welbrock may mean jeopardizing the Evans' self-reference, and vice versa. In this way, the call of the spouse of originating intimate sociability may have the function of ratifying the stay in the Evans Being.

Between a renewed intimate sociability and another, which occurs throughout the narrative of the movie, we see the encounters between the father, Mason,

and their children, Mason Junior and Samantha. The narrative implies that these encounters are periodic and variable, but they follow more or less a weekly schedule, almost always happening on weekends.

In one of these encounters, there is an important scene regarding the relationship between the father and the children, in which, when talking inside the car going to a baseball game, it seems clear that there is some distance between them. The conversation is cold and the answers to the father's attempt at dialogue are brief and generic. Upon realizing this, he stops the car and intervenes strongly in the dynamics of dialogue. His intervention aims to claim another place for himself in the relationship with his children. Mason says: "You cannot put me in that category. . . the biological father that I spend every other week with, and I make polite conversation while he drives me places and buys me shit".

Mason's speech to us is representative of something that seems to be very important in contemporary family associations, affection. The affective dimension is, then, claimed as important and necessary for the father in relation to his children, and this affective dimension is built by intimacy through a relationship of exchange of information and interest in the life of one another. The film scene shows that it is not enough for the father to simply get information about the children's lives, but that they need to have an interest in telling about their lives.

Then, the intervention by Mason Junior, showing that the father also does not tell them about his life, leads us to reflect on another important aspect in the dynamics of contemporary family relations: exchange. The relationship seems to evolve from the gain of intimacy built by mutual revelation.

In the next scene, the father takes the children to his apartment, which he shares with a musician. Mason writes a song that reveals that the teacher contacted him to talk about Mason Junior's drawings, and how they always portrayed the whole family in a sad situation. Again, we observe how the school plays a central and narrow role in the family relationship. The school articulates and engages family members in what it takes as important.

After the weekend, Bill decides that Randy and Mason Junior should cut their hair. He does not consult them about the fact and simply orders and forces the two to do so. Mason Junior had long hair that was arbitrarily shaved according to Bill's desire. The words of the stepfather at the time of Mason Junior's haircut make us reflect on what representations he does not want his intimate sociability to have. He says, "This is going to look so much better. You're going to look like a man, instead of a little girl".

The clearer relation here is to the imposition of Bill's desire over Mason Junior's will, and this concerns the bond that unites them. They are now united by the intimate sociability that composes them, and Bill wants the identity of

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this intimate sociability to stay in a certain way. Being a man, in the Evans-Welbrock family, means having a specific appearance, such as having a short hair, for example, and so it should be.

In the next scene, Olivia sees her daughter, Samantha, and stepchildren, Randy and Mindy, go out to school. When asked about Mason Junior, Randy says that he is feeling ill and is not going to school. The concern about what happened with Mason Junior is due to the possibility that this could affect his school performance, because of decreased frequency. Again, the school element appears as the agent of actions and attitudes in the family, including the affective ones, as in the case of the emerging concern.

As they talk in the car on the way to school, Olivia and Mason Junior discuss Bill. Mason Junior says, “Why did you even marry him? He’s such a jerk!”. And Olivia replies, “Bill has his good qualities. You know, nobody’s perfect. And now we have a family”. It is interesting to think that, for Olivia, although she already had, as we established above, lived in several familiar models, her family representation seems to have a specific configuration. This configuration presents itself after her marriage with Bill.

This scene marks that, despite the multiple possibilities of family, the existence of an ideal family kind, or better, still runs in the imagination. The recomposition of Olivia’s family goes back to the nuclear family, in which there is a father, a mother and children. Within this composition, the father has the duty to provide and protect the family, while the mother provides care. This familiar model, present in the Olivia’s imaginary as the *true* family, seems to have been a path pursued by her, and she struggled to lead her children through it.

Following the story, we see the onset of Bill’s increasingly more violent actions, from screams, direct verbal offenses, and mockery to physical violence. With these continuing aggressive situations, Olivia decides to divorce and moves with Mason Junior and Samantha, after a tense and aggressive scene outside the house where they lived with Bill, Randy and Mindy.

Olivia is sheltered with her children at a friend’s house, and in this house a dialogue begins between Olivia and Samantha, in which the daughter worries about Randy and Mindy’s situation. Olivia tells her that she does not have the legal guardianship of the stepchildren, which makes it impossible for her to take some actions, such as taking them with her, as this could be seen as kidnapping. Olivia acts to the extent of legality with a responsibility of ethical sense towards the stepchildren.

Although Olivia had decided to sever links with the Welbrock family, to dissolve her associative ties with Bill, and was already safeguarded with her children, she acted, calling Randy and Mindy’s mother and the tutelary council,

seeking to protect in possible grounds her former stepchildren in their frailties to an abusive father. Olivia, who had also been the target of Bill's violent behavior, risks retaliation for her attitude to report her ex-husband, but does so for those who are no longer in unity with her, for the Others.

An important element to emphasize regarding the above moment is precisely the issue of the legal aspects around the family field. The new possibilities of family association raise new questions about the dynamics between their intimate sociability, for which the legislation seems to fail to account, in many cases precluding solutions from the family group itself, who had their conflicts remitted and mediated by legal dimension.

Then, another weekend arrives, and we see a new meeting between Mason, Mason Junior and Samantha. Again, the father complains about the lack of intimacy, saying he knows more about his daughter's life through Facebook than from their conversations. The father's constant demand in this respect shows that the intimacy and its development is a continuous process of achievement, that must be always worked. In this scene, Mason talks to Samantha about conception and contraception; their conversation is based on a scientific study on the subject.

This is also an important element for us; the influence of scientific knowledge in the most intimate and everyday relationships, being overlapped by this technical dimension in which parents act according to what they have learned through their reading and become powerful applicators and diffusers of these practices, by their direct access to everyday situations, with the people with whom they are intimately related. There seems to be an unspoken trust in the information read in articles and that these should be used for the improvement of conviviality.

After spending some time alone, Olivia becomes a Psychology professor and marries again, this time with Jim, a former student she met in her practice as a professor. Mason also gets married, with Annie, and a baby is born from that relationship. On the birthday of Mason Junior, the father picks him up to spend some time together and in one of the trips made on this day, a brief dialogue takes place between Samantha and Mason Junior in which she asks him: "Why are you such a stick-in-the-mud?", to which he replies: "What are you even talking about?"

This short dialogue between the siblings seems again to bring to the surface the idea that Mason Junior is a kind of odd man out; he seems to not see and live things like others do, and sees no problem in that. The fact that he is a stick-in-the-mud, as nominated by Samantha, seems to bother all those who, almost completely, signed up under a performance-based logic of contemporaneity. In

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opposition to the one who accommodates himself, is the one who moves out always looking for a better home, a better place.

Not by chance, in our understanding, the movie also narrates Mason Junior's passion for photography. There is a different writing in his way of seeing, a way of seeing that shows itself as a way of saying, as something difficult to capture, revealed in Samantha's misunderstanding of how Mason Junior conducts his life, for example.

Again, now, through the teacher figure, Mason Junior is questioned about his duties and assignments as a student. He replies that he has not yet finished his assignments. The teacher warns that talent is not enough to excel professionally and that it takes discipline and commitment, saying, "It's not gonna happen for you, Mason. The world is too competitive. There are too many talented people who are willing to work hard, and a buttload of morons who are untalented who are more than willing to surpass you. As a matter of fact, a lot of them are sitting in this classroom. . .".

In this scene, again, the centrality of school capital is shown, as well as the presence of open systems. Being in school is not so far from having a job, what is done in school and the performance obtained through the logic of best performance is already connected to the dimension of work. The logic of competition and performance is also present in this speech and it aims to reach Mason Junior. This is a speech addressed to him, since he seems distant from this logic, from this world and from that way of seeing it.

From the perspective of Mason Junior, he works hard, and this comes out when he says, "I feel like I work pretty hard. I spend the whole weekend taking pictures a lot of times". His dynamics are different from the hegemonic functioning of contemporary society, which seems to be a communion made of an autochthonous native neighborhood and Mason Junior seems to be the foreigner in this neighborhood.

In the subsequent scenes, his stepfather Jim mockingly praises Mason Junior's painted fingernails and continues to point other behaviors that he finds strange in his stepchild, as he did the previous summer, when he appeared in earrings, and continues: "You got a purse to go with all that?". The stepfather goes on to say that "When I was in high school, having a job, being responsible, being able to afford a car, that was cool". We see here Jim's self-reference and his annoyance with Mason Junior's difference. His mockery seeks to affect the young man, so that he feels bad from what bothers Jim. Then we see Jim himself presenting the model as giving the path to be followed.

In Jim's intervention, there is no concern of any kind directed to Mason Junior, other than the one that annoys Jim himself for the way the stepson

conducts his life. This discussion with his stepfather seems result in, in the party scene, Mason Junior talking about his annoyance in relation to not only Jim's attitudes but the people around him in general. He makes a very precious reading: "I find myself so furious at all these people that I'm in contact with just for controlling me or whatever, but, you know, they're not even aware they're doing it".

In this assertion, we can see the spontaneous character of control in its ontological form, in its permanence in being, the naturalized self-referencing that expands, trying to capture differences, which converges the several routes into a single one, or the multiple into unity. Mason Junior perceives this intuitively in his experiences, how much the people of his conviviality practice control behaviors, without even knowing what they do, but they pour them over him and, to some extent, this is effective. At the same party, he says there are many things he could and wanted to do, but he does not, because he is afraid of what people will think.

The affective dimension, in this case represented by fear, can at times be considered as one of the nuances of control, from the moment in which established social relations cause fear, and this fear, a feeling emerged from personal relationships, works by imprisoning and inhibiting possibilities.

After the party, Mason Junior returns to his house and finds Jim, who is waiting for him; in that moment, they argue. Jim refers to Samantha and says she obeys the rules. Amid Mason Junior's excuses, Jim complains about the way he speaks, almost inaudible, and the stepson retorts that he should stop bothering him. Then we see Jim say, "I'm up your ass? This is my house. If you want to live in my house, then you get home when you say you're going to be home".

This discussion reveals nonconformity by Mason Junior not doing things as Samantha does, which is the way the family does, which is how the *heads* of the family decide, a form of family identity that is intended to coincide with all. Jim gives the terms of coexistence and family identity: either Mason Junior does as the family does and remains as one of them and with them, or, in that house, in that household, there is no place for him. Jim does not seem willing to discuss the references, only giving the option of fitting in or leaving. In both ways, the references remained intact, the difference remaining in the vicinity of the Same.

As a result of this discussion, or not — this is not clear in the movie — Olivia separates again. It is Mason Junior's senior at school and Olivia asks about his school assignments, and he says they are almost finished. Olivia says: "11th grade is really important for college. Don't blow it". Again, the traces of need

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for education and development of school capital are apparent in the film, and here we already have the idea that its mark, when it appears, both represent the importance of this dimension in contemporary life and the attempt to make Mason Junior converge and get involved in this logic.

Toward the end of the narrative, three more links seem especially important to us and present a strong bond, so we will look at them together. The first link, between Mason Junior and Sheena, the second, between Mason and Mason Junior and the third, between Olivia and Mason Junior.

The first takes place on the road trip with Sheena, then Mason Junior's girlfriend. They are going to visit a college campus, which seems to be interesting for their purposes. Mason Junior tells her about his impressions of the world. They have a pleasant conversation, fun and light, however, he brings in his words quite significant elements. He tells, between jokes and real feelings, that it is as if the world had understood that it would be too expensive to produce robots and, from there, it decided to turn humans into machines, because it would be much easier. There is a large amount of humans, there are no construction costs and humans are good at reproducing and self-maintenance.

In the next cycle of dialogues with Sheena, he completes the subject by saying: "... We're already biologically programmed for our little cyborg updates . . . . Seriously, I read this thing the other day about how, when you hear that ding on your inbox, you get like a dopamine rush in your brain. It's like we're being chemically rewarded for allowing ourselves to be brainwashed. How evil is that? We're fucked".

In the second link, we see the father, Mason, and Mason Junior talking about the ending of the relationship between Mason Junior and Sheena. In the final part of the dialogue, we have a question from Mason Junior to his father: "So, what's the point?" The father replies, "Of what?" Mason Junior: "I don't know, any of this. Everything". Mason: "Everything? What's the point? I mean, I sure as shit don't know. Neither does anybody else, ok? We're all just winging it, you know? The good news is you're feeling stuff. And you've got to hold on to that. You do. I mean, you get older and you don't feel as much. Your skin gets tougher".

In the third connection, in the scene in which Mason Junior gather his belongings to move to college, we see Olivia suffering for her son's departure, because, of the great moments of passage that the cycle of contemporary life seems to have, according to her, this is the last before her funeral. Olivia says: "You know what I'm realizing? My life is just going to go, like that. This series of milestones, getting married, having kids, getting divorced. The time we thought you were dyslexic, when I taught you how to ride a bike. Getting

divorced again, getting my master's degree, finally getting the job I wanted. Sending Samantha off to college, sending you off to college. You know what's next? It's my fucking funeral! Just go! And leave my picture!". Mason Junior tries to comfort her, and she replies: "I just thought there would be more".

The bond that seems to extend and connect through the three links seems to be the symbol of a culture that, throughout the cycle of our lives, subtracts us, our alterity, either by the impression of Mason Junior of becoming robots happy to obey; or that of the father, Mason, that, throughout our lives, we keep losing our ability to feel, to be affected, in a continuous reduction of ourselves; or that of Olivia, bound to the obligations and to the obedience of the rite, of what life *should* be until it ends, as if there should be more, as if something had been missing along that path, something that has been subtracted.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article highlighted the reflection on ethics in contemporary families. The instability of the topic, in all its major categories, always demanded an explicit positioning of our understandings regarding the central themes: ethics, family and contemporaneity. Regarding ethics, our essential foundation was supported by the thinking perspective of the ethics of radical alterity proposed by Emmanuel Lévinas. What was pursued in this study, then, was to think the Other in a radical way when faced with the vicissitudes of a contemporary family, which is mainly constituted by the transformations in the experiences of time and space.

To Emmanuel Lévinas, reason is unable to handle the subject of freedom, and especially of the freedom of the Other, because it works by ending and reducing the possibilities of being according to the filters of intelligibility created by reason itself. In this sense, thinking about the place of alterity in contemporary families is to reflect on the theme of freedom and to enter into a discussion in the field of ethics.

In attempting to understand the present by pointing out the relation of what predominantly has been understood in the relation between family and contemporaneity, we find that, for Being, currently, it is necessary not to keep in a fixed identity, but to continually stabilize that identity for improving and increasing their own capacities. In this sense, based on the Levinasian thought, it is possible to reflect on ethics in contemporary times, in our case, contemporary families. Regarding the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, we consider necessary, before any ethical discussion, to reflect on the way in which ontological processes manifest in a given time, so that it is then possible to think about the forms of a critique of the ontological movement that becomes spontaneous.

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Although, in a sense, the separation between ontology and ethics may seem strange, it is precisely at this point that one finds the radicality of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethical thinking. Ethics would be the space of impugnation of spontaneity with which hegemonic relationship practices are placed, which construct specific *forms of being* or specific modes of presence that translate, transform and capture all aspects of difference, or distance, and which properly demarcates the condition of alterity. To Lévinas, this is what characterizes, in a certain sense, the ontological movement, this movement tending to totality. Although it is necessary to emphasize that the very idea of Being, or what it means to Be, always has a contingent character to the historical world in which these ideas present themselves. Ethics is, then, this movement of criticism to the ontology on the way it presents itself, constituting a space for alterity as alterity.

Then we followed with an analysis of the film *Boyhood*, used as an empirical material for the verification of moments of socialization and sociality. In our understanding, socialization is the social process by which the plan and current social rationality, i.e., the nuances of contemporary ontology, are reproduced. Moments of sociality are those in which the ethical sense imposes itself, presenting an alternative to social hegemony that reduces the possibilities of existence to those compatible with the ontology of the present.

Faced with this, in a performance-based society, ethical attitudes are those in which the other, manifesting itself in its difference, has this distinction welcomed and preserved, even if this represents a path contrary to that of performance and that is followed by the responsibility of subjects who, before alterity, put themselves down, risk their own identity. In contemporaneity, it jeopardizes one's performance in respect to the alterity of the Other.

In this sense, the movie narrative helps us to notice several elements, among them: the permeability of limits in contemporaneity; the presence of the school capital discourse and the way it is rearticulated and reproduced by the family; the multiple and varied forms of family association in contemporary times; the idea that there seems to be a more adequate family model than the others, which is therefore pursued; the adaptation processes to contemporary culture suffered by family members; the way they reproduce it, etc.

However, the movie narrative, by allowing us to see the moments of impugnation of the totality in the family group, brings as perspective the family also showing itself as a space of resistance and of criticism to broader social schemes. By taking responsibility for its members, for its Others as a family, the family group confronts these schemes, not to simply deny their reasonableness, but to welcome its members in their other possibilities distinct from

those appreciated by culture. By embracing its members in their difference, the family positions itself in a movement of detachment from the wider elements and schemes of culture that impose the processes of capture of difference and promote its transformation.

This study could be enriched from other perspectives, considering them as rationalities that also engender the Other in the regularity of the Same. We believe that further investigations could conduct a deeper analysis, based on a history of mentalities, which could contribute with the ideal social representations of a family group, since there still seems to be, even before the multiplicity and variety of family formations, one that is understood as the best family. The remnants of a nuclear model over the imaginary of contemporary families may be an important path of investigation.

Another interesting path to be followed would be a more rigorous study of the influences and impacts of political economy over the family group, concerning a class discussion. The discussion about classes in this study was subsumed to the understanding that economic-social variants are also included in a society that distributes risks. However, an analysis focused precisely on these aspects may reveal important phenomena not yet contemplated here.

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