Observing Pain: Empathy and Identification in Film Viewing
Abstract by Maura Spiegel

Exploring the aims and benefits of humanities courses currently being devised within medical school curricula, this paper explores the specific benefits of film viewing for medical students and other medical professionals who spend a significant amount of time in the presence of human suffering. Film theorists are currently reconsidering the mechanisms of viewer identification, and moving away from critiques of Hollywood films' interpolation of the viewer by way of unconscious identification and toward cognitive and more psycho-dynamic theories of what viewers experience when they see strong emotional content on film.

Looking at three film clips --from Career Girls (1997), Philadelphia (1993) and Wings of Desire (1986)-- in which scenes of suffering are represented that include compassionate spectators, Spiegel examines these films' complex representations of empathy, its uses and limitations, on the affective mechanisms of the characters, as well as the relation between identification and empathy. In addition she discusses the viewer's possible modes of identification with both the sufferer and "compassionator" represented in the films. An assumption of this paper is that an emotional catharsis is not a discharge or elimination of a feeling, but rather, a mediated way into feeling. Along with this, the paper posits that for medical students and others who work with ill patients or regularly encounter pain and suffering, the effects of regarding representations of suffering may have a constructive role in allowing them the opportunity to experience emotions that they cannot afford to feel while they are with the ill and suffering. Lastly, the paper posits that discussion within a classroom or other setting is important in order to help viewers recognize their own complex identifications and attend to what Cathy Caruth calls "unclaimed experience."