

## CHAPTER 16

# Morally Provocative Art. Contemporary Ethical-Aesthetic Discourse and its Limits

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**Abstract:** Recently, there have been many protests against controversial art around the world that got massive media attention and provoked discussions among the public, members of the art community, and scholars. This paper aims to make a review of recent ethical-aesthetic theories that explore morally provocative art. We can characterize contemporary ethical and aesthetic thought by its movement from extreme forms of moralism (Plato, Hume, Tolstoy) and autonomy (Wilde, Beardsley) to the search for more moderate options, in which both moral and aesthetic domains are considered valuable. By reviewing such concepts as ‘moderate moralism’, ‘ethicism’, ‘moderate autonomism’, ‘cognitive triviality’, and ‘cognitive immoralism’, I claim that these concepts mainly focus on artworks that rarely or never stir the outrage among the public in real life, even though these theories accurately reveal themes that are often perceived as controversial. I then propose to go beyond the analysis of the artistic field since contemporary conflicts around art have already become factors of change for the socio-cultural landscape and function as a platform where diverse social and political forces test their values.

**Keywords:** Conflicts around Art, Morally Provocative Art, New Moralism, Cognitive Triviality, Cognitive Immoralism

### 1 Introduction

The phenomenon of public protests against controversial art is actively spreading in contemporary culture, accompanied by various forms of social tension and debates among the public, representatives of art institutions, experts of the intellectual community, and state authorities. Philosophical and theoretical reflections on these conflicts usually fall under two categories: the first tries to find an ethical stimulus in artworks themselves while the second mainly focuses on the offended recipient.

The main problem of both types of discourses is that they seem to overlook each other's findings.

In this paper, I first trace the evolution of views on the ratio of the aesthetic and ethical domains in art in the context of the development of the autonomy of the art world. I then consider the interest in the moral aspects of artistic culture in the philosophy of art and art criticism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thirdly, I present the main arguments of 'new moralists' and their critics (immoral cognitivism and cognitive triviality), all of whom tried to conceptualize their views on the legitimacy of ethical judgments of art. In conclusion, I identify the limitations of the arguments put forward by the representatives of the 'new moralism', immoral cognitivism and cognitive triviality.

## **2 Moving Beyond the Strict Dichotomy Between Moralism and Autonomism**

The debate on whether art is morally blameworthy is no new. Even though philosophical views on the moral universe of art have been transforming throughout history, moralism in art dominated for quite a long period. For many centuries, philosophers, artists, and critics categorically accepted the idea that art can morally influence its audience. The possibility of the positive influence of art on the state of morality mostly raised doubts. The idea that art has the power to morally harm us can be found way back in Plato's *Republic*. The central setting of Plato's moralism (to which Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Shaw adhered to one degree or another) was the idea of the danger of art and its aesthetic power to inspire people to change their behaviour and adopt some harmful attitudes. Yet such criticism has never had enough evidence to support its claims. In modern times, David Hume (1825, p. 243) in his *Of the Standard of Taste* claimed that works of art that express an ethically harmful idea and call for reconciliation with sin or emotional empathy for an immoral hero or act diminish considerably the merit of their noble performances.

In the era of the Enlightenment, aesthetics as a system of views began to separate itself from ethics, and inside the artistic field, morality started to lose its dominant position in evaluating a work of art as a carrier of artistic quality. Classical aesthetics, represented by Alexander Baumgarten (1758) and Immanuel Kant (1987), showed us that we can have disinterested judgments of aesthetic qualities of the fine arts. Then, the modernist movement in every possible way emphasized and

protected the autonomy of the art world. Even though such independence was frequently threatened from outside the artistic field by various authorities that condemned some artworks due to their immorality, the artistic community, up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was quite cohesive on the issue of freedom of creativity and the need to abolish censorship.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, tendencies in the philosophical reflection on the ratio of ethics and aesthetics in arts changed. First, the cooperation of artists with totalitarian regimes added a new layer to the discussion of artists' responsibility and made scholars and artists pay attention to ethics a bit more than they used to at the beginning of the century. Secondly, the institutional theory of art deconstructed the romantic-modernist myth of art and suggested viewing the artistic sphere as any other social sphere, unable to escape the influence of other fields (e.g. politics and economics). Finally, art institutions themselves started to become more and more welcoming to the mass public. The ethical turn in philosophy of art and art criticism thus was largely the result of a general social turn in the cultural processes. These realities seriously influenced not only the artistic practice itself but also intellectual reflections on it. As a result, at the turn of the 20-21<sup>th</sup> centuries, there emerged several concepts of the so-called 'new moralism' (Macneill 2014, p. 167). These concepts were mainly interested in whether art can have moral value and, if so, whether such value is relevant to its aesthetic appreciation.

Let us start with 'moderate moralism'. Continuing the traditions of Hume's moralism, 'moderate moralists' believe that fictional actions in works can lead to some moral changes in a perceiving subject (Levinson 1998, p. 10). For instance, the American philosopher and art critic Noël Carroll (1996) notes that some works of art are simply created to attract us morally, thus it makes sense to subject them to ethical evaluation. Carroll (1996, p. 233) proposes that the ethical component is intrinsic to some artworks and that "moral presuppositions play a structural role in the design of many artworks." Therefore, the moral content should affect the aesthetic assessment of works.

The idea of moral development from art is also elaborated by Kendall Walton (1994), who adheres to Hume's moralism to some degree and claims that "If the work's obnoxious message does not destroy its aesthetic value, it nevertheless renders it morally inaccessible. That must count as an aesthetic as well as a moral defect" (Walton and Tanner 1994, p. 30). Walton suggests distinguishing between immoral and morally

dangerous art and invites a person to resist and refuse to perceive what is morally unacceptable since there is always a risk of changing their beliefs and “works of art may evoke imaginings which can affect one’s orientation” (Walton and Tanner 1994, p. 34). In response to Walton’s essay, Michael Tanner questions his confidence in “us” sharing similar moral beliefs (Walton and Tanner 1994, p. 52). This contention will become one of the key modes of criticism against ‘new moralists’ in the future.

Another author who proposes a moralistic approach in the evaluation of controversial and morally challenging art is Berys Gaut (1998). Gaut (1998, p. 182) proposes the concept of ‘ethicism’, asserting that ethical criticism of art is an aesthetic activity, and artworks that demonstrate a certain attitude towards fictional objects implicitly demonstrate the same attitude towards real objects of this kind. Gaut focuses on the manifestation of immorality, presented on behalf of the author when the author’s approval of the immoral behaviour of the characters is obvious. As an example of such manifestation of immorality, Gaut uses novels by Marquis de Sade. According to Gaut, an imaginary reaction to immorality in art can be subject to ethical evaluation in the same way as real action, since it can deeply express the moral character of the one who is imagining. Gaut (1998, p. 199) concludes that “someone who actually enjoys imagined suffering can properly be condemned for this response.”

Presented in the work of James C. Anderson and Jeffrey T. Dean (1998), ‘moderate autonomism’ admits the possibility of a conflict between moral and aesthetic domains in art. Unlike such aesthetes as Oscar Wilde, ‘moderate autonomists’ also admit that the division between moral and aesthetic domains is frequently unclear. Nevertheless, Anderson and Dean disagree with equating moral assessments of works of art with aesthetic ones. The only case when the moral content of artwork can affect its aesthetic assessment is when moral aspects make it difficult to get into the essence of artwork and provoke an inadequate reading of it. The immorality portrayed in artworks can subvert the possibility of uptake suitable for its genre,<sup>1</sup> which makes the work in question “aesthetically defective” (Anderson and Dean 1998, p. 156).

<sup>1</sup> Though it is necessary to mention that this focus on genre is very disputable in postmodernist context. The argument that might challenge ‘moderate autonomism’ in this regard is that in modern artistic culture, the genre is no longer an absolute value, the boundaries of genres are actively redefined and replaced by other aesthetic markers.

Instead of focusing on concerns that exposure to obscenity in works of art is morally harmful to people, ‘moderate autonomists’ in cases when moral defects of art can affect its aesthetic qualities. One of the examples of such subversion is Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda documentary *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which endorses the Nazi regime but still is recognized for its innovative genre discoveries and is considered a masterpiece from a formal point of view. Anderson and Dean (1998, p. 164) agree with the ‘new moralists’ that corrupt moral vision is dominant in this case but state that in most cases “moral flaws can be overridden by the aesthetic virtues of the work.” They conclude that the separation of the moral and aesthetic domains in the assessment of artworks is beneficial in cases when we are faced with controversial works of art.

### 3 Immoral Art and its Cognitive Power

‘New moralists’ share a typical moralist concern that exposure to immorality in works of art will, eventually, morally harm people. Daniel Jacobson interrogates this idea in his paper *In Praise of Immoral Art* (1997). Jacobson (1997, p. 162) proposes to reconcile moralism and autonomism and puts forward the statement that “what is properly deemed a moral defect in a work of art can contribute positively and ineliminably to its aesthetic value.” According to Jacobson (1997, p. 167), the immoral content of a work of art is not a disadvantage, but the merit of the work, since it fulfils a certain ethical function and allows us to look at moral issues from different ethical perspectives. Immorality in Jacobson’s conceptual framework acts as a cognitive function of art since morally shocking works can expand our moral understanding and enrich the variety of possible forms of experience.

The concept of immoral cognitivism was elaborated even more by Matthew Kieran (2003; 2009) who also proposes to pay attention to the cognitive and educational functions of morally problematic characters or storylines in works of art. In his *Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism* Kieran (2003, p. 60) considers the idea that “morally defective cognitive-affective responses” provoked by art can have a positive effect on understanding the artwork and motivate the audience to reconsider their own beliefs. Moral provocations of art are important because they redefine the boundaries between what is morally acceptable and what is not. This works even in such extreme cases as Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*. Kieran agrees with the ‘new moralists’ that such artwork is

morally transgressive and offers the enjoyment of described sufferings of others, but it still expands our perceptual and emotional capacities. We are “naturally interested in why people are bad, come to be so or come to do bad things” (Kieran 2009, p. 681). We admire immorality in art but condemn it in ordinary life. To understand this paradox more, Kieran (2009, p. 683) suggests taking a closer look at the complexities of interrelations between the evaluation of what we imagine and our moral character. But since so far this complexity is poorly understood, we cannot claim that our emotional responses to morally problematic art do necessarily reveal anything condemnable or praisable about our moral character. Both Jacobson and Kieran warn art theorists about the dangers of ethical criticism of art because it encourages us to ignore the possibility of viewing the world from different ethical perspectives. Art is a useful platform for practicing ethically significant matters, it also allows us to go beyond normativity and imperativeness. The immorality portrayed in the art can make a person contribute to new moral knowledge without vulgar moral didacticism. Still, this method of getting moral knowledge through immorality is not accessible to everyone since some part of the public can be hypersensitive to the content in question. Richard Moran (1994) calls this phenomenon ‘imaginative resistance’ - a form of imagination in which the person who perceives art does not want to be involved in the ideas that it offers. In this case, it will be difficult for the viewer or reader to perceive the work with an immoral hero, and some works of art will simply be ‘morally inaccessible’ (Jacobson 1997, p. 190).

Finally, some philosophers of art, such as Jerome Stolnitz (1992), oppose any assumptions about the influence of art on actions and moral knowledge. The concept of ‘cognitive triviality’ proposed by Stolnitz says that art reflects only those moral attitudes, which people already know. That is, any immoral or virtuous narrative in art is a truism and therefore cannot be the cause of an individual’s immoral or virtuous acts. This position does not claim that a person cannot perceive some moral aspects of a work as something new but notes that the act of influence occurs because the viewer, listener, or reader is already “morally sensitive” to a particular problem (Stolnitz 1992, p. 191). Art, of course, affects people, but there is no convincing empirical evidence that immorality portrayed in art and media leads to immoral behaviour in real life (Phillips 2017).

## 4 Morally Provocative Art and the Public Sphere

As can be seen from the review of the concepts of 'new moralism', 'moderate autonomism', 'immoral cognitivism' and 'cognitive triviality', there is no consensus on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in art, as well as an answer to whether art can morally harm the perceiving subject and influence their behaviour in an ethical sense. Both 'new moralists' and their critics recognize that ethical and aesthetic domains can create a strong problematic tension, which ultimately affects the degree of its influence on the addressee. However, some of these concepts have disputable claims. First, 'new moralists' take as a basis the assumption that moral content can be perceived universally. This view is already disproved by public conflicts around controversial art and by polarized debates around the art pieces that provoked these conflicts. In this regard, the cognitive approach proposed by Jacobson (1997) and Kieran (2003) seems to be more productive in overcoming the contradictions of ethical and aesthetic domains since it considers that both are aiming to expand the moral universe of a person. Secondly, the concepts of 'new moralism', especially 'ethicism', are based on a view that a work a priori and unambiguously manifests an attitude towards its heroes and their actions. This view on the author and their supposed manifestations contradicts contemporary philosophical theories such as that of 'the death of the author'. Finally, 'new moralism' and its critics mainly focus on works of narrative art, practically ignoring other art forms (for example, music), even though today non-narrative artworks are much more likely to cause public conflicts on a moral basis. Considering such concepts as 'ethicism', 'moderate autonomism', 'moderate moralism', 'immoral cognitivism' and 'cognitive triviality', it is important to note the presence of a difference between the academic comprehension of controversial art and the public one. This can be seen both at the level of choices of objects of their critique and their categorical apparatus.

With the spread of democratic regimes in cultural production and consumption, the public has begun to express their views on artistic events more actively, resorting to strong, morally charged arguments. This process has accelerated with the development of mass communication, gaining a particularly serious scale in the era of the Internet. The public now actively engages in ethical-aesthetic debate. With all the diversity of approaches, philosophical polemics about the relevance of moral judgments about art do not effectively help with the

analysis of the recent rise of public censorship and public conflicts around art in general. For instance, artworks that became canonical for ethical criticism of art rarely or never sparked outrage among the public.<sup>2</sup> For example, Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is one of the most prototypical cases for ethical-aesthetic discourse among philosophers of art. The novel is indeed an illustrative example of a moral provocation, as the story is told from the perspective of a hero who is attracted to teenage girls. The novel caused a scandal in the 1950s, but the confrontation was between different publications and literary critics and took place within the artistic field. *Lolita* is still considered a scandalous and provocative work, but we do not see any public conflicts around the novel, although many works of the past are becoming objects of today's ethical revision and protest actions. That being said, several other artistic events were accused of the sexualisation of children. For instance, photographs of nude children by Jock Sturges drew protests in the late 90-s in the USA and then in 2016-2017 in Russia (ncac 1997; Kishkovsky 2017). This shows that the provocative content of the work and even its public access is not enough for the emergence of a conflict.

If philosophers of art study such categories as 'moral' and 'immoral', then in the rhetoric of the public, we are more likely to hear about offensive art. For instance, the research of the public protests around art in America revealed that the most common grievances of the public about art were "indecent or pornographic" and "harmful or offensive" (Tepper 2011, p. 42). The identical situation takes place in the Russian context where from 1997 one of the most common grievances in the rhetoric of the public about controversial art has been that it is offending religious believers' feelings.<sup>3</sup> As a result, ethical discourse around art and public discourse around offensive art are significantly distanced from each other and do not intersect even in the subjects of their discussions.

As a future direction for research in the study of the ethical-aesthetic problems of art, I suggest going beyond the analysis of the nature of art and the artistic field and taking a closer look at the public sphere. Contemporary conflicts around art have already become factors that change the socio-cultural landscape. Protests around art push art institutions toward rethinking their approaches to public engagement.

<sup>2</sup> For the list of famous conflicts, see (ncac 2021).

<sup>3</sup> These grievances remain even in cases where in artwork's content there was no reference to the religious topics (artprotest 2015).

Previous instances of public conflicts around offensive art made institutions aware of the necessity of new strategies that can lead to fruitful discussions about sensitive topics. For example, in 2018 The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts decided not to take down works by Chuck Close after the artist was accused of sexual harassment. Instead, the museum decided to supplement Close's paintings with several works by other artists, who focus on the problems of abusive power in art (pafa 2018). The feminist curator Maura Reilly (2018) proposes a strategy of 'curatorial activism' that helps dealing with morally sensitive artworks and contexts by constantly re-examining cultural objects and social practices. It is also helpful to view controversies sparked by morally provocative art as a chance for an ethical commitment to dialogue rather than a problem that needs to be immediately concealed (Jennstål and Öberg 2019; Dixon 2021).

New artistic practices themselves put the public in the position not so much of addressees receiving aesthetic pleasure, as of subjects of social action. Art institutions are now more open to the public than ever before. What was previously a matter of a private sphere of the art field (e. g. art practitioners, critics, specific audience) is now operating in the public sphere. Thus, the critique of morally provocative art made by members of the public often ends in affective arousal and even vandalism. For example, in Russia the lack of legal consequences for vandals who decided to attack the art that offended them created a stereotype of impunity and the legitimacy of violence in artistic spaces. Such transformations cannot be associated only with art's controversial content, but also with shifts in the political order and the technology of social protest. This is why several scholars view protests around morally provocative art not as a sincere expression of resentment but as a political strategy. Morally provocative art can provide a context in which diverse groups can test their values and unite over their views on what is permitted to show and discuss in the public sphere (Balme 2011; DiMaggio 2000; George 2016; Grishaeva and Romashko 2017; Tepper 2011; Yampolsky 2018). In this regard, protesting groups see the public sphere in artistic spaces much more clearly than members of the artistic field themselves, and, to some extent, even more effectively use them as platforms for broadcasting their own political beliefs and values through emotional arousal and affective activities.

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