

Is aesthetization necessarily a moral flaw in a work of art?

Sabina Dorneanu*

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

A major theme of discussion within the recent philosophical aesthetics is concerned with the relation between the moral aspects, ideas, emotions in the works of art and their overall artistic value. While the ethicists hold that prescribing or arousing immoral – or undeserved – emotions in the audience accounts for immoral works of art, some of the opponents of this principle proposed that an emotion, or the choice to arouse a certain emotion in the audience on the part of an artist, may be appropriate, even if immoral. That is, if the context requires that specific emotion rather than a moral, but inadequate one, the immoral option is nevertheless viewed as appropriate. Therefore, an immoral element in a work of art may not always represent a moral flaw.

Another stronger view is that according to which a more perilous moral flaw in a work of art is for it to lie by means of aesthetization. That means that a certain work of art chooses to present a serious problem with aesthetic instruments, therefore facilitating an aesthetic experience, hence lying about the gravity of the matter. That is, a problem that is meant to be dealt with other types of instruments is approached in the form of an aesthetic experience, occasioning aesthetic emotions. My intention will be to point out that, following the line of the first argument invoked above against the ethicists, a lie may be sometimes appropriate, even if immoral.

There are two main views, that of the autonomists, according to which there is no pertinent correlation between the artistic value and the ethical or moral values involved in a work of art, and the ethicist perspective, that reclaims the

* sabina_dorneanu@yahoo.com

importance and viability of such correlation between the value spheres. I propose to set aside the autonomist perspective, as no longer being relevant for the current state of art and of the discussion within art theory. Some of the ethicists hold that it is immoral for a work to confuse our sentiments or our value hierarchy (Carroll 2001), and state that the aim of a work of art should be precisely that of decanting our mixed-up emotions. However, such confusion could prove in the long run a valuable source of insight, a Socratic learning experience (Alcaraz 2008). Another similar view is that prescribing or arousing immoral – or undeserved – emotions in the audience accounts for immoral works of art (Gaut 2002), which means we should expect the bad character to die and the hero to survive, or if that's not the case, at least to be inspired to engage into positive feelings toward the good character and to be rebuffed by the evil one. Nevertheless, some of the opponents of this principle proposed that an emotion, or the choice to arouse a certain emotion in the audience on the part of an artist, may be appropriate, even if immoral (d'Arms and Jacobson 2000). That is, if the context requires that specific emotion rather than a moral, but inadequate one, the immoral option is viewed as appropriate. Consequently, an immoral element in a work of art may not always represent a moral flaw.

Another stronger view is that according to which a more perilous moral flaw in a work of art is for it to lie by means of aesthetization (Alcaraz 2008). That means that a certain work of art chooses to present a serious problem with aesthetic instruments, facilitating an aesthetic experience, hence lying about the gravity of the matter. That is, a problem that is meant to be dealt with other types of instruments is approached in the form of an aesthetic experience, occasioning aesthetic emotions. I wonder if it's possible, following the line of the moralistic fallacy argument invoked above, to show that a lie may be sometimes appropriate, even if immoral.

Let's start by saying that a lie may seem wicked out of the context, but that the context might imply it at times. I'm not saying there is no lie, neither that it isn't critical. So for the moment I'm not denying it is a moral flaw, I'm only suggesting that it can aspire to benefit from mitigating circumstances. Let's go back to the case of an immoral choice on the part of an author to arouse immoral, therefore undeserved emotions in the audience. To deny that such choice is immoral because it's appropriate, fit for the purposes and the setting of the work, is not the same thing with asserting that a lie can be appropriate. Why? Because in the first case we are referring to internal elements of the work, to choices of stirring certain feelings, choices to present a certain character in a certain manner, to describe a particular action in a particular way. It's adequate, so it is not immoral, to believe that a negative character can have positive features, and therefore to allow the audience to accept or admire him. Consequently, the work no longer can be said to have a moral flaw. On the other hand, the author of a work that lies by means of aesthetization does not incorporate the lie as an inclusive element of the work, one to be judged and accepted or not by the audience. The lie is insidiously inbuilt and is actually a previous condition of presenting that

particular content with aesthetic tools. The audience is therefore oblivious about the lie a priori seated at the origin of the work. The lie is not an element of the work, but its own prerequisite. In this case, can we still maintain that the moral flaw has been erased? Apparently not: the lie, either as a non-truth or as not telling the truth, persists as a moral defect, and its tolerability does not alleviate its gravity. Even if the work could lead to a positive, moral outcome, it remains basically spoiled.

Could we possibly consider the lie that the work is guilty of as playing the same part as the crime committed by the evil character? No, because the author of that character did not committed the crime herself, but is only describing it. Even so, we can presume that an author that makes an immoral, but adequate choice, is making use of a lie, maybe even a preliminary lie. She might as well be lying about her own beliefs or feelings toward the character. I couldn't possibly admire such a character, feels the author, but I am going to lie about it and I am going to present it as a character that can inspire appreciation, just to see in what measure it is possible to arouse such feelings, in what measure it is possible to incite the immorality or weakness of the audience, or even mine. And this is no doubt possible precisely on virtue of the peculiarity of the aesthetics means that are capable of stirring tempestuous conflicts of the highest moral feelings. We can even maintain that such a lie is assumed, is a challenge the author herself puts up to. Lying however, as in aesthetization, appears to be the taking advantage of certain circumstances in order to create a work of art – its author may or may not be aware of the lie, may or may not be prejudiced, but in neither case is the lie assumed “in the first degree”.

However, to say that the aesthetization could qualify as a necessary lie would be like saying that we need to be lied as if we were little children, in order to be informed about certain matters. But I will come back to this point later.

Now, why would aesthetization be a lie? Why would we say that using other instruments than the “adequate” ones means lying about the gravity of the facts? And, furthermore, since when are the aesthetic instruments inadequate? Once upon a while, significant political or social episodes were conveyed with such instruments – Giordano Bruno's death, the kidnapping of the Sabines. The simple fact that they were does not necessarily mean that it was a good thing to do, but maybe more important than deciding upon it would be to ask ourselves what do we mean by saying that “we aestheticize when we render something an aspect that it does not correspond it”? The question is, does not correspond it in virtue of what? Of the generally accepted definition for that something? Let's take a film about infidelity, for example, that gives adultery a passionate and conflictive aura. We might be tempted to say that this is what we thought about infidelity. Another film might casts upon it an unappetizing and revolting light, and we could be tempted, again, to say that this is also what we thought about infidelity. More than one definition of infidelity is possible. But maybe infidelity is not the best choice, since it implies conflicting and opposing facets. Let's take a clearly negative

example that cannot possibly involve positive or interesting connotations: the rape. There are undoubtedly ways of presenting it with aesthetic instruments, without making it more attractive, and for sure impossible to make it uglier. Is Ana Mendieta's performance, *Rape*, an aesthetization in the sense of giving the rape a representation that does not correspond it? Even if to fathom the manner in which it does not correspond it supposes more fine-tuning than detecting the obvious inequality of retouching a photo of a starving African child, one could say that this presentation of rape is an inappropriate aesthetization. Could it be because it instantiates in an almost grotesque or ridiculous manner a traumatizing experience that cannot be recovered with such self-evident means? Or maybe because it does not seem to adequate itself to its goal, being rather enticing than tormenting? At this point I think we are already on the floating territory of taste, or that from a point on the frontier becomes really hard to trace and the impossibility to give a strong definition for aesthetization is being felt.

My point here would be that the problem with aesthetization does not emerge when it presents morally severe issues with aesthetic instruments, but when it presents them with poor aesthetic instruments, or better said with poor instruments. An aesthetization – hence an aesthetic “setup” – of an issue ceases to be an aesthetization if it makes a strong case out of it, if it triggers “moral” outbreaks and sets in motion inner agony, “opening” the eyes to a truth that otherwise would have remained buried or not sufficiently explored. Experiencing a severe matter in aesthetic mode is not necessarily bad, what is appalling is experiencing it in a pitiable, feeble mode. We could say, in such cases, that aesthetization qualifies as an immoral inadequation.

Let's get back to an idea mentioned earlier, that saying that aesthetization is a necessary lie implies that we are being reduced to the condition of a child that needs to be lied. Is it really so, or is it really so bad? When does a child need to be lied? Maybe when he refuses to do or accept something, because he is afraid or he is spoiled or he doesn't really have the means to understand what is at stake. Don't we have the same reactions sometimes, don't we mobilize the same resistance when we believe it's necessary, even if unconsciously? And wouldn't be a lie, in such cases, that spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down? Works of art that soften things down, such as Bracha Ettinger's delicately blurred images of suffering, might as well play this part of making the misery bearable, of overcoming a preliminary defiance, the same way we soften things down when we give bad news to a loved one. We do this not out of immorality, but out of love. I say this type of lying, this type of aestheticization, due to its healing effect, is far from being immoral.

We're not rallying our resistance only in real-life situations, but also in our encounters with works of art. In these cases, some authors talk about the concept of imaginative resistance (Kieran 2001) – the decline of entering a work that we see as morally corrupt, and I think that we could relate to this concept many of the postmodern fears and doubts about imagery, especially photography.

The trend started by Susan Sontag, of refusing to look at photographs that depict suffering, is maybe the best example. Of course, the basic idea behind refusing to look is that the eye is a sense organ and so it can foul us. However, we must rely on our senses if we are to receive information at all. A total refuse of contamination leads to a total lack of information. The distrust caused by digital technologies today adds to this fear and a fast return to postmodern skepticism is noticeable. W.J.T. Mitchell talks about a prevalent fear that he calls clonophobia, that is the dread of a possible multiplication or cloning of the terrorist threat, dread that is fueled by the excessive pervasiveness of images around (Mitchell 2008). The ensuing skepticism about what images could teach us is typified in his opinion by the paradoxical re-election of Bush in 2004, in spite of the terrifying images from the Abu Ghraib prison that circulated in press. This came as a regret that photojournalism lost its power, a power it still enjoyed during the Vietnam War, when it had been said that images of war had played a part in putting an end to it. But one could think that the equally terrifying images from 9/11 could have alternatively functioned as a propeller for Bush' re-election. The saturation of media with sadistic unbearable images, that makes people not want to look, does not necessarily mean that it makes them immune to suffering. It makes them only promiscuous about looking. But concluding from here that not looking, or acting aloof to that kind of suffering portrayed in media accounts for an indifference towards what happens out there, seems like concluding that indifference when shown a picture of one's dead mother is the same with indifference to one's dead mother. The war of images, as Mitchell calls it, is also a war against images, against their purported evil power.

Can this fear be also regarded as similar to the interdiction of showing certain kind of imagery to children under a certain age? Does it have as much or as little justification? Kubrik's film *A Clockwork Orange*, criticized for aestheticizing violence, holds a key: the violent felon is caught in the end and made to watch violence all day long as a treatment for violence. This means that watching violence does not lead to violence, but on the contrary. However, the experiment does not work. Apparently, violence is not a cure for violence, but the opposite isn't true either, since the criminal was already violent before the experiment. My point is that the argument that *a* leads to *a* or to *non a* is simplifying. Is watching violence leading to violence, or to an indifference towards violence? Or to both? Saying that violence leads to desensibilization merely explains a certain defensive reaction mobilized by the psyche in order to cope with an upheaval of emotions, but this defensive reaction does not imply an actual eradication neither of the idea of violence neither of the revolt or anger provoked by it – it is only a coping reaction necessary when there is no possibility of immediate response.

Appealing to the argument that sentiments aroused by fiction are not like sentiments triggered in real situations is debatable (Friend 2003). An individual can react equally forcefully to violence in fiction and non-fiction, due to identifying and projection processes. The feelings are probably the same, only the ensuing (re)actions are different. Running the risk of a certain moral relativism, we might

however notice that at times things are neither good nor bad, or better said beyond the good and the evil. The statement fits perfectly the case of emotions, and much of the ethicist conundrum can be put on the account of messing up feelings with actions. And even an action can sometimes be no more than an acting out, that is an involuntary reaction to something provoked by a momentarily uncontrolled affect. However, this view upon which the emotions we experience with immoral works of art are not the same we experience with immoral facts might have some psychological validity, in the sense that our values reflect our moral upbringing. Were I a savage like Mowgli, I might not be bothered by murder or rape, and not because I were immoral, but because I wouldn't share the same set of values. There are reasons to believe that some sort of residual prehistoric nucleus lingers along our evolved identity, and it could be that that "caveman" individual is the one that finds an illicit escape when enjoying immoral courses of events in narrative art for example, while the other evolved one is promptly reacting when things get "real". Fiction, or art in general, as many have said, allows us to enjoy emotions without any practical cost. I think that precisely this fear, of not realizing there *are* practical costs in the case of non-fiction art works, is the threat in the case of aesthetization. Because it would be immoral to live the thrills with no moral costs if the representation that conveys you that thrills is tied up to a real case scenario. The choice between being Platonic about it and see moral corruption in art, or being Aristotelian and see catharsis in it is not always an easy choice.

I think there is another type of aesthetization which I found more vicious, that of adding emotion to something or putting into emotional mode something that its author is lacking emotions for. The case is very frequent in today's youth approach of revolutionary ideals, for example, and not because of an overexposure characteristic to aestheticized politics or neutralized imagery, but because it is an ideal frequently un-felt, un-interiorized, but copied and vehemently spoken out without a genuine passion. Maybe this could explain the prevalent fiasco of present-day riots – there is a lack of affective or emotional attachment that stops the riot short of becoming convincing, pungent. It is like a cabotine mimicking. Adding beauty or emotion where there is none, or very little, is what I qualify as being truly a lie.

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