

# THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ANALYTIC AESTHETICS

## THE ISSUE OF ETHICAL CRITICISM OF ART IN THE CONTEXT OF MCGREGOR'S CONCERNS

IRIS VIDMAR JOVANOVIĆ

*Department of Philosophy*

*University of Rijeka (Croatia)*

ividmar@ffri.uniri.hr

### ABSTRACT

My aim in this paper is to provide clarification of my view on ethical criticism of narrative art in order to respond to some of the concerns issued at it by Rafe McGregor. While McGregor and I share numerous assumptions regarding the cognitive and ethical value of art, we disagree with respect to certain practical concerns. To address his challenge, I argue for the necessity of joining philosophical research with research in other domains, primarily in cognitive sciences, in order to determine the extent to which engagements with art can have positive or negative cognitive and moral impact on the spectators. I am particularly concerned with showing that philosophy needs support from other disciplines in order to ground its claims in scientifically supported theories and to avoid self-generating theoretical disagreements that are populating its debates. However, I also offer an array of reasons for the inclusion of philosophy into other disciplines, and I urge for the recognition of philosophy's potential to respond to publically relevant issues.

### KEYWORDS

Aesthetic cognitivism, ethical criticism of art, disagreement, value of philosophy, Rafe McGregor

Rafe McGregor has published extensively on criminology, couching it in several interdisciplinary contexts.<sup>1</sup> However, the core idea underlying all of his work, independently of the particular interdisciplinary bent he gives it, is the claim that narratives can inspire social improvement, primarily in light of their educational potential, i.e. their aetiological value. As he claims, exemplary narratives can make us more sensitive, and can reduce inhumanity when they enable the audience to undergo certain formative experiences, saliently similar, even identical, to that of the characters, the aftermath

<sup>1</sup> See in particular his 2018, 2021a, 2021b.

of which is some sort of ethical change, hopefully one of improvement.<sup>2</sup> As he argues, with the right choice of narratives – where the choice is left to philosophers or critics – society could advance on a path more open to justice and social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

In my own work, I argued for a similar power of narratives, though my theories were confined to artistic ones, and I have provided a different account of how cognitive and ethical benefits are available from narrative artworks, whether literary works, television or theater.<sup>4</sup> I argued that in our engagements with narrative art, we are told stories and the process of learning in such instances is structurally similar to the process of learning from the ‘stories’ that other people tell us, i.e. from their testimony. We acquire various sorts of cognitive benefits – true beliefs, justified beliefs, new perspectives, more informed judgments, different sets of skills and values – when other people tell us something. Certain other conditions need to be fulfilled – our informant need to be reliable in what they are telling us and we have to employ certain checking mechanisms to test if what they are saying is true – but if these are met, we can advance cognitively and ethically in light of our artistic encounters.

A blow to such views – both McGregor’s and mine, as well as numerous others who advance similar theories, commonly known as aesthetic cognitivists<sup>5</sup> – came from those who issued what I call empirical challenge. One of the first expressions of this challenge is found in Berys Gaut’s seminal 2007 work, where he raises “the causal question”, namely the question of whether art impacts us, and if it does, whether this impact is morally enhancing or morally corrupting. While Gaut dismissed the relevance of empirical challenge, some took it seriously. Greg Currie, whose work in literary and film aesthetics has always been cornerstone for others in the field, famously expressed skepticism regarding literature’s capacity to make us better in his popular writings. More recently, this skepticism was given philosophically firmer grounding in his 2021, in which he challenges the cognitive value of art on the account of insufficient evidence supporting this view. And he is not alone. Ted Nannicelli (2020) inaugurated a new approach to ethical criticism of art, the production oriented approach, mostly as a response to the empirical challenge to the causal claim. As he argues, we cannot ignore that question in any context in which we discuss art – most notably, in the context of

<sup>2</sup> Here is McGregor: „My thesis is that criminal inhumanity can be reduced by the cultivation of narrative sensibility” (2018, xi). McGregor is careful in adding that there is “no guarantee that [the knowledge derived from narratives] will be moral rather than immoral (2018, 126). However, engagement with narratives can be beneficial since “fictional narrative representations can... explain the causes of crime and social harm” (2021, 3).

<sup>3</sup> McGregor 2018, see also his contribution in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> Vidmar Jovanović 2019.

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I will presuppose that aesthetic cognitivism includes art’s capacity to give us moral knowledge and influence our moral agency.

aesthetic cognitivism and the so called value interaction debate – but the problem is, we cannot settle it either, given the difficulties involved with conducting experiments.<sup>6</sup> James Harold (2020) concurs, even though he supports a different approach to ethical criticism. As he sees it, philosophers have erred in advancing primarily an armchair approach to questions of art's impact, thus contributing to the inability of their theories to actually provide any satisfactory answer to the question of the ethical impact of art.

It is with respect to this problem that McGregor and I disagree. McGregor rejects the need for empirical support of the claim that art impacts our epistemic and ethical agency, given the problems involved with providing evidence in its favor.<sup>7</sup> I embrace it, on the account of being too important to be neglected, not only for the theoretical aspects of the problem, but also due to its practical side. While I share McGregor's concerns regarding the difficulties of conducting empirical research, I nevertheless claim that our aesthetic theories on the cognitive and ethical value of art need to accommodate more of the interdisciplinary insights, for the following reasons.

With respect to the theoretical aspect of this problem – the question of whether art gives us knowledge, including moral, and impacts what we do and how we behave – I argued that numerous cognitivists, who embrace the moral improvement through the art view, cannot in fact develop their theories without having some support for that view, support which depends on something more substantial than their own idiosyncratic and subjective reading experiences.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, and emphasizing practical aspects of this problem, I claimed that the ethical issues that arise in this debate – Gaut's two options, moral enhancement and moral corruption – are too important for the social beings that we are, to be easily dismissed. If art indeed has the capacity to make us morally better, then this capacity can be put to good use: we can employ the means provided by art for the purposes of moral education, following McGregor's recipe. This is not to suggest that art be only used in that way or valued only for those reasons, but it is to argue that art can become a valuable ally in our attempts to build just society and moral agents.<sup>9</sup> If, on the other hand, we can indeed undergo a process of moral corruption in our artistic engagements, then this strikes me as a good reason to reconsider the kinds of artistic engagements we want to pursue, and are willing to let our children pursue. Given the importance of stable society, and the centrality of ethical individuals who make up that society, we have to make an effort to understand why we

<sup>6</sup> See Nannicelli (2020); Currie (2020). McGregor's take on this (2018) is the most detailed elaboration of this problem.

<sup>7</sup> See his 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See my 2021.

<sup>9</sup> I do not argue in favor of instrumentalization of art, and I do not want to imply that art should not be evaluated for its own sake, independently of its cognitive and ethical dimension. I lack the space here to develop my views of this.

do certain (im)moral things. If art is among the factors that facilitate such behavior, we have to take it into consideration. In other words, if art has an impact on our moral agency, we need to be aware of that in order to have a more profound understanding of the circumstances in which our ethical beliefs are forged and ethical actions committed. The trouble is, neither aesthetics (or philosophy of art) nor philosophy (i.e. its various areas) cannot *alone* account for these options, regardless of their centuries old attempts to do so, originating with Plato and Aristotle. It is for this reason that I invited philosophers to join in with other domains of research, proposing what I called applied ethical criticism of narrative art.

### **APPLIED ETHICAL CRITICISM OF NARRATIVE ART**

In describing my suggestion as applied ethical criticism, I relied on Nannicelli. Following his lead, I suggested to incorporate a wider theoretical framework into our research, though I expand upon Nannicelli in providing a more detailed division of labor.<sup>10</sup> I also follow Nannicelli in calling this approach ‘applied’, that is, in arguing that philosophical debates over art should not be conducted solely within philosophy but should have a public relevance and help us settle some concrete social issues, such as a choice of public funding of art, a choice of artworks to be included in school syllabus, etc.

The gist of my argument was a call to join philosophical debates on the ethical value of art with research in cognitive sciences, psychology, anthropology, history and various studies related to art, such as art history, film and literary theory, etc. Such an approach has, I believe, two advantages over ‘philosophy only’ approach. First, insights from cognitive sciences and (empirical) psychology would give us a more detailed and scientifically supported accounts of the impact of art on our reasoning, belief formation, desires, information processing, etc. Thus, some of the central concerns that philosophers raise with respect to, for example, immoral works of art, such as the possibility of moral corruption, would be settled. If we knew more about how different types of representations impact individual cognizers, we would be better equipped not to fall prey to corrupting influences. As a way of example, consider Bushman and Huesmann’s findings that children who see violent film behave more aggressively toward each other. This should be considered by philosophers engaged with the problem of violent art, and, by extension, pornography. Our theories of mimesis and imagination could also profit from considering such research.

<sup>10</sup> See Vidmar Jovanović 2021; forthcoming.

Second, joining philosophical accounts about value, knowledge and meaning of works with insights from history, anthropology and other social sciences, while also considering the body of knowledge available in literary and film studies regarding the formal aspects of works, would go a long way into helping us understand certain works which, while may seem violent or invoking a certain immoral perspective, are in fact not ‘dangerous’ in that sense. Understanding the context in which a certain work was created – such as the general pro-attitude towards slavery in which Mitchell wrote *Gone with the wind*<sup>11</sup> – would enable us to understand that such works invite certain immoral perspective because of the accepted beliefs of the society in which they originated. We *should not* dismiss that work today on the account of its pro-slavery attitude, but we *should* make the audience aware of its immoral aspects and explain why they are in the work.

## WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS

Reacting to my suggestion, McGregor here wonders whether such a wider theoretical context can get off the ground, given the reluctance of other disciplines to consider philosophical insights. To further support his argument, he describes the reluctance of criminologists to engage with his work on fictional examples considered as data for the criminological studies on harm. While I believe that part of the reason for such a dismissal of his work is the more general skepticism over art’s cognitive value and the capacity of art to contribute to society’s body of knowledge, the same worry can be raised regarding the openness to philosophical solutions within the public domain. How often after all does it happen that philosophers are consulted when challenging issues pop up?

Unfortunately, McGregor is not the first to point to his problem. Back in 2007, Peter Lamarque lamented literary critics’ “marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature” (27), and a literary theorist Catherine Belsey (2016) went as far as to suggest that philosophy of literature and literary theory have no sufficient ground in common. In the context of film, Andrew Klevan (2018) argued that film academia is for the most part unfamiliar with philosophy of criticism, suggesting that Carl Plantinga’s 1993 diagnosis of the relation between film studies and aesthetics, “marked to a great extent either by mutual inattention or by open suspicion”, is still very much true.<sup>12</sup> The same concern was voiced by Nannicelli and Perez (2022) in the context of television aesthetics. Against such ‘reluctance’ to consider philosophy

<sup>11</sup> I choose this particular example given the recent criticism issued at the film and its subsequent withdrawal from the public domain.

<sup>12</sup> In Klevan 2018, 3-4.

(and its various domains) as capable of delivering socially relevant insights, and to help address and solve social issues, we have to search for the ways to remedy such a negative perception. This is even more important, given the growing tendency within philosophy itself to doubt its very capacity to come up with answers to *its* own questions, and to help solve socially relevant issues.<sup>13</sup>

Addressing this tendency, known as the no progress view of philosophy, I suggest that the intellectual and practical benefits of philosophy are not to be searched for within the ‘final (or at least agreed-upon) answers’ provided by philosophical debates, as these are rarely accomplished. Rather than delivering such answers, philosophers have a particularly keen capacity to recognize where the problems lie (intellectual and practical), and by raising awareness of them, to bring them to the spotlight. In the context of philosophical aesthetics, and with particular focus on the problem of the ethical criticism of art, such an approach would ask us to, first, recognize that aesthetics and philosophy of art ask questions about our artistic engagements that no other discipline asks. While those questions may seem too abstract or the proposed solutions too distant from the actual issues,<sup>14</sup> there is still value in asking them. Aesthetics and philosophy of art thus testify to the intellectual capacity of mankind to probe the numerous aspects of art, one of the oldest human practice. Even if these questions are not sufficiently constrained by the empirical, as Andrea Selleri claims, their value is in the very act of asking them: in philosopher’s recognition that important aspects of the problem are not considered and that certain conceptual confusions are dormant, in formulating them and bringing them to attention of other cognizers. In such acts of recognition of where the problems and puzzles lie, philosophers manage to bring about more clarity and a deeper understanding of what is involved in a certain domain of human endeavors.<sup>15</sup> For example, the distinctive contribution of philosophy to the problem of immoral art is, in addition to Plato’s bringing it to our attention in the first place, in exploring the impact of immoral dimension to the artistic value of a work, and vice versa. Neither psychologists, nor art critics, are particularly bothered by this.

Second, in raising questions, philosophy also offers an extensive list of possible answers. The plurality of philosophical answers to one and the same question (such as the question of aesthetic status of immoral art, for example) tracks the plurality of views that people have on the problem. In one of its most significant aspects, philosophy is

<sup>13</sup> These challenges are nowadays known as the no progress view of philosophy; for two exemplary formulations see Chalmers (2015) and Dietrich (2011). My phrasing of the problem here is inspired by Dietrich’s claim that “Society does not turn to its philosophers for a deeper understanding of moral and ethical issues”.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Selleri (2016) gives an insightful overview of this criticism of literary aesthetics and its continual ignoring of the concrete empirical issues that pop up in the literary practice.

<sup>15</sup> My account of the relevance of philosophy and the progress it makes is developed in my 2018.

concerned with humanistic perspective, and such perspective is not confined by limitations operative within natural sciences. That being the case, plurality of views that philosophy brings to the table can ensure that multiple views are considered and that no one is left out. Consequently, a more thought-through approach to a certain issue is ensured.

The implications of my view however is not ‘anything goes’; for all of its diversity, philosophy recognizes criteria of reliable intellectual enquiry and looks out to respect them, modifying in the process its own approach to the problems at hand. Take the example of Plato’s challenge to art, centered on his assumption of audience’s identification with the characters and his worry about the arts’ stirring the emotional side of us. Contemporary approach to this problem takes into consideration the numerous insights into how emotions really work, thus rectifying Plato’s misconception of our emotional psychology. They also differentiate numerous others modes of engagement with fictional characters, such as sympathy or empathy, which rectify Plato’s view on identification. However, it can be argued that plurality of views will not get us far – after all, for all that they have in common when it comes to arguing about immoral art, Harold and Nannicelli nevertheless come up with radically different solutions. Harold holds that aesthetic evaluation of a work of art is and should be autonomous from ethical evaluation and Nannicelli argues that ethical evaluation trumps aesthetic ones. How then are we to solve such disagreements, or apply any philosophical theory to the problem at hand if we lack a consensus on which solution is best?

It is partly to solve such problems that I propose to join philosophy with other fields of research. For example, cognitive sciences could help us understand cognitive and emotional processes operative in our engagements with immoral characters, and predict how probable it is that we identify with the villain, or copy her behavior. Understanding that could then enable us to decide whether or not we want our children to watch *Sons of Anarchy*, since we would then know if Harold’s autonomism holds in practice, or only in theory. Such issues can be solved only through collaboration with other fields of inquiry.

The final question then is, what do other disciplines gain by allowing philosophy an entrance into their research programs? For one, a certain width of perspective on the problem and an awareness of why certain solutions may or may not be the best options available. For example, even if psychologists are right in arguing that violent fictional representations (may) inspire violence – an option to be avoided for sure – philosophical exploration of the educationally useful aspects of such representations could help

us come up with a context in which watching a violent film could be put at the service of ethical education.<sup>16</sup>

Next, certain questions are more commonly raised by philosophers, primarily those related to meaning, value and purpose. As stressed repeatedly by aestheticians and philosophers of art, neither literary nor film studies were considering literary works or films as *works of art*; it was primarily through the philosophical debates that these artifacts got to be viewed as art, and as possessing certain values associated with art, such as originality or artistic excellence. Recognizing that a certain artefact contains artistic and aesthetic value depends on one's having sufficient background knowledge and capacity of discernment, and philosophy could be employed for the purposes of aesthetic education.

Another question distinctive of philosophy has to do with exploring ways in which art acquires meaning and significance for individuals.<sup>17</sup> For all of philosophy's call to abstraction, it is primarily a humanistic discipline and as such, its take on any given problem or phenomenon rarely considers it in pure abstractness and theoretical isolation; rather, it aims to explain it in relation to individual cognizer or valuer, and to the group of such agents. For this reason, philosophy of art aims to explain the value that art has for human beings and the meaning we attach to these works, while also accounting for the individual differences in artistic preferences. Such insights could be employed to understand better why certain groups of people, such as male adolescents, tend to identify with certain types of fictional characters, such as male action-hero, or develop particular attitudes, such as sexual preferences, towards certain types, such as skinny blond damsel in distress.<sup>18</sup> Contemporary research into aesthetic preferences and aesthetic taste suggest a close link between aesthetic preferences and one's identity,<sup>19</sup> which should in itself justify inclusion of aesthetics into psychology, moral philosophy, sociology, anthropology etc. A further push for this argument comes from the recent work of Carl Plantinga (2018), who explores what he calls the rhetoric power of screen stories. One of these powers is to influence people's conception of certain types of people or social phenomena – one of his examples includes representation of gay community and the impact that such representations had on the recognition of gay

<sup>16</sup> An example here is Matthew Kieran's account of the positive cognitive benefits of immoral art (Kieran 2003).

<sup>17</sup> See Maes (2017); Felski (2020), Piercey (2021); Zamir (2020). While Felski's approach is that of a literary critic, her arguments are firmly based in philosophical theories. Simecek (2021) has provided an insightful example of how research into meaning can be incorporated into criminology; for reasons of space I can only advise one to consider her work for a wonderful example of the usefulness of philosophy.

<sup>18</sup> My example here is modified in accordance with Hogan's (2015) exploration of how dominant public ideal of beauty impacts an individual's preferences.

<sup>19</sup> See Acaraz Leon (2019); Fingerthut (2021).



people's rights. If Plantinga is right, and his arguments are quite convincing, then art could indeed have a wide social relevance and could contribute to the social stability and well-being (much like McGregor argues), but it could also be used for purposes of propaganda, distortion of peace and the like. My aim here was to show that both of these options are available and that we need a joint effort of philosophy and other sciences if we are to understand them.<sup>20</sup>

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