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EXPLORING TRANSMISSION: THE EPISTEMIC STATUS OF NARRATIVE-BASED KNOWLEDGE

Abstract

I explore the epistemic status of beliefs that we formulate on the basis of a certain narrative, such as a belief, derived from Houellebecq's *Serotonin*, that the rejection of a meat-based diet is causing significant existential issues with serious social and political ramifications. This process, referred to as transmission, is important for defending aesthetic cognitivism, the view that narrative art is a source of knowledge, but is vulnerable to numerous challenges, ranging from the fictional basis of narratives and epistemic reliability of narrative art, to questions concerning the kind of beliefs we end up having and their applicability in reality. I address these challenges and I explore how curiosity on the one hand and aesthetic satisfaction derived from a narrative on the other determine and shape this process. One consequence of my account is a diversity of readers' emotional and intellectual responses to the same work and I end by showing that this is not a reason to give up cognitivism.

1.

One of the main assumptions of aesthetic cognitivism – the view that art is cognitively valuable and that we can learn from it – is that by engaging with a particular narrative, spectators extract certain beliefs from it, implement them into their cognitive stock and use them in their cognitive and moral encounter with the world.[1] For example, our engagement with the *Wire* enables us to recognize different ways in which social institutions enable various forms of corruption, and our reading of *Serotonin* can make us aware of the urgency of sorting the environmental and economic concerns regarding veganism. Not all

[1] Carroll 2002, 2013; John 2010; Nannicelli 2023; Schellekens 2022; Vidmar Jovanović 2019, 2024.

Rivista di estetica, n.s., n. 88 (1/2025), LXV, pp. 21-35

cognitively valuable insights available in narratives are propositional: sometimes we are invited to consider a certain option of how we might think about our experience and we can rely on it to organize our cognitive contact with the world accordingly, or we can, following a polemical tone of a certain work, come to question certain aspects of our human condition, not knowing how precisely to conceptualize it.

Of particular relevance for cognitivism is narrative's relation to morality: given their focus on human relations and interactions, and the fact that, in the process of engagement with a certain narrative, the audience makes moral judgments regarding characters' actions, narratives motivate us to reconsider our moral commitments and beliefs, and can thus contribute to our moral development. The importance of such impact is explored by Noël Carroll (2013) who explains the cognitive power of narratives by claiming that they inspire moral emotions and invite spectators to make certain moral judgments which can be applied to the situations we face in reality. Through depiction of its main character, an HIV positive homosexual, as a loving family member, *Philadelphia* invites us to recognize the moral worth of homosexuals around us. In engaging with the film, we overcome our previous prejudice about a particular group of people and we replace it with a better grounded, more informed moral judgment.[2]

Recently however, the notion that narratives enable such learning and that we can transfer beliefs from fiction into reality – a process called transmission – has come under attack. Echoing Jerome Stolnitz's infamous denial of the cognitive value of arts, Greg Currie (2020) challenges the epistemic foundation of fiction, insisting that without empirical evidence corroborating cognitivism, we have to give it up. Cognitivists, he argues, rely on the claim that we formulate beliefs in the process of reading but empirical research does not support the claim that we transfer those beliefs into reality and act in accordance with them. And even if we did, it is hard to see why we would be justified in doing so, given the poor epistemic foundations of our fictional narratives: narrators are not under the epistemic imperative to tell the truth or pursue epistemic goals and our critical practices, such as criticism or academic exploration of narratives, generally have no clear epistemic criteria against which they measure any given work. Consequently, as Stolnitz argued, errors are tolerated effortlessly.

Transmission can be challenged in another way. Discussing the impact of ethical flaws, such as a work's flawed moral perspective, on a work's aesthetic value, Adriana Clavel-Vazquez questions a distinction between those beliefs we are asked by a work to export into the real world and those we are asked

[2] Carroll (2013) describes this as a process of moral calibration: the audience recalibrates their moral attitudes toward homosexuals because the movie enables them to see gay man Andrew as a *family* man, which for the audience has deep emotional connotations associated with families. Once such emotions towards Andrew are calibrated in fiction, audience can apply the same attitude toward homosexuals in reality.

to quarantine, i.e. hold only with respect to a given work. Comparing *Birth of a Nation* and *Django Unchained,* she explains: "The problem with the *Birth* is not that it prescribes unethical attitudes toward its characters, *fictional* black people, but that its prescribed attitudes are meant to stand in the actual world." The case is different with *Django*, whose "unethical flaws are quarantined in the work: the unethical attitudes expressed and prescribed are only directed toward merely imagined events and characters and do not involve attitudes toward actual entities" (2020, 146). Clavel-Vazquez gives an important ethical twist to the transmission problem, in questioning the criteria which determine whether a belief is to be quarantined or exported into reality. This is important not only with respect to the ethical criticism of art; in the context of cognitivism, it urges us to recognize that in some cases, the beliefs one ends up formulating on the account of a narrative can be deeply flawed; should transmission take place in such cases, readers would end up with morally harmful and/or epistemically unjustified beliefs: a reader who accepts *Serotonin's* claim that an aging body cannot stir sexual desire may end up with erroneous beliefs about possibilities of fulfilling sexual relation in mature age, perhaps even denying oneself a possibility to engage in such a relation. Notice however that there is another take on the problem: someone who fails to recognize the moral rationale of *Philadelphia* may remain homophobe, and one who does not spot the economic and environmental issues depicted in *Serotonin* may remain oblivious to one of the greatest challenges our society is currently facing.

Yet another influential challenge to transmission is voiced by Peter Lamarque (1996, 2021, 2023), who claims that the conventions of artistic practice do not allow for it to take place. Countering Carroll, Lamarque does not take moral judgments we make in the process of reading to be adding to our moral sensibility or extending into our reality: not only are these judgments only seemingly moral, while in fact they are aesthetic and enable us to appreciate a work as an artistic artefact, but even formulating them is not as straightforward as cognitivists would have it, as it is not clear how to formulate them on the basis of a narrative.

In what follows I defend transmission as a valuable mechanism that enables cognitive and moral capacity of art to be realized by the audience. Contra Lamarque, I show that readers can extract moral and cognitive insights from narratives and use them in their engagement with the real world. Once I establish transmission, I address Currie's worries regarding the epistemic justification of narrative art by offering a slightly modified account of aesthetic cognitivism. Some of the conclusions I reach in this part will be relevant in addressing Clavel-Vazquez's worries regarding the distinction between beliefs which can safely be transmitted and those that should remain quarantined. The account of cognitivism I end up defending is slightly impoverished in comparison to

what cognitivists traditionally aim at, but it is still strong enough to account for the educative value of narrative art.

2.

As one of the most ardent critics of aesthetic cognitivism, Lamarque has offered numerous reasons to doubt the assumption I defend here: the one according to which we can gain knowledge from narrative art, and profit in other epistemic and ethical ways (i.e. by expanding our understanding, reevaluating our beliefs, acquiring better reflective skills to make sense of our experience, etc). A serious problem for transmission is a tension Lamarque identifies as specificity vs. generality problem: as he argues, whatever moral principle the work presents, is either too detached from reality in virtue of being too specific to the work, or too detached from the work in light of being too general, and thus easily available in nonliterary contexts. Consequently, there is not much we can gain from engaging with narratives since the 'lesson' is either applicable only to the fictional situation or is so easily available to us in our everyday life that the narrative cannot in any significant way be the source of moral learning.

Both specificity and generality take different forms. One aspect of specificity is depicted in Ted Nannicelli's (2023) criticism of Carroll's analysis of *Philadelphia*. As Carroll claims, the moral change (recognition of moral worth of gay people) is brought about by a viewer's realization that Andrew, a gay man, has a loving and supporting family. But as Nannicelli sees it, this is wrong: gay people generally, rather than gay people who are members of loving families, have dignity and deserve our respect because they are human beings, not because they are family members. In other words, had the specificities of the narrative been different, so would the relevant moral insight. Specificity can also be related to the way in which the moral aspects of a story and characters are determined, perhaps by linguistic description or other structural and representative features of the narrative, such as its genre. On Lamarque's view, these aspects influence our attendance to the morally relevant elements of the story in a way in which dealing with moral issues in non-fictional contexts does not.

On the other hand, the generality aspect aims to eradicate literature as a relevant source of knowledge, since the things we learn from narratives are available via other means, such as from everyday experience, and in other sources, such as science. More concerning, on Lamarque's view, is that readers need to know certain moral, psychological, social and the like principles in order to properly engage with narratives: to appreciate Dostoyevsky's achievement in exploring the psychology of guilt, one needs to know that murder is wrong, which is why reading *Crime and Punishment* will not instill new moral lessons. Lamarque states as much when he claims that 'the moral understanding we bring to a work … is likely to be of more significance in our appreciation of a work than any moral

understanding we take from the work and apply in other contexts' (2021: 247). His claim is that we need to understand the relevant moral issue to be able to appreciate a literary take on it. But if that is the case, a reader does not gain moral insights or awareness; rather, she comes to appreciate an author's literary capacities in portraying these issues. The moral knowledge she brings into the reading process is put at aesthetic service, in appreciating artistic achievement in depicting the issue itself.

To illustrate his claims, Lamarque criticizes Eileen John's (2010) interpretation of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*, primarily her take on the scene in which Lily, upon exiting the apartment of her friend Sheldon, is seen by a chairwoman. Concerned that the chairwoman might gossip about her unchaperoned visit to a single man, Lily is rude and inconsiderate toward the woman. While John takes the scene to show that one is never free from moral concerns, and thus echoes critics who emphasize Wharton's obsessive probing into the social and biological forces that shape our morality,[3] Lamarque argues that the scene has symbolic meaning, in suggesting the main theme of the novel (Lily's social fall). To understand this scene in moral terms, as John does, and think Wharton was aiming to expose the hypocrisy of American high class, as critics think, is wrong. Lily's social fall is not the result of the social norms of her society but the logical ending of the specific narrative trajectory characteristic of tragedies.

In what follows, I argue that specificity vs. generality challenge does not undermine transmission. There is enough of a common ground between a work being too specific and too general for our engagements with it to be conducive of the enhancement of our moral and epistemic agency. Yes, some works are puzzling because they present situations that the audience may be too distant from. Not knowing which of their (moral) beliefs are applicable in those cases, and uncertain with respect to beliefs they should quarantine, spectators may abandon any attempt to engage with such work's mimetic aspect. But not all narratives are indeterminate in this manner, and many do present a fertile ground for (moral) learning.

3.

Let me start by suggesting that we could hardly explain our interest in narratives if they were so divorced from our world as the specificity challenge suggests. At least under the assumption of humanistic conception of literature defended by Lamarque and Olsen (1994), which sees literature as dealing with humanly interesting themes, it is hard to imagine how situations or interactions between the characters we read about could be too specific to the subject/theme nexus of

[3] Preston 2000; Singley 2004; Ohler 2006.

the work and therefore such that readers cannot relate to it. Dostoyevsky's readers may not be penniless students but they can relate to the anxiety Raskolnikov feels upon receiving his mother's letter, because many have to sacrifice their life projects to help support their families. Not many readers can live as idly as Lily, but most can understand the harm inflicted upon her by Bertha Dorset, and can recognize various strategies Lily has at her disposal to fight back, and evaluate their moral worth.[4] If narratives deal with humanly important issues, then those issues have to reverberate to people who read about them.

On my view, recognizing that we face saliently similar moral challenges (though not precisely the same circumstances) can be sufficient to acknowledge the relevant aspect of a situation that a fictional character is facing, and to abstract it from its wider setting (i.e. the specificities of the story) so that our thinking about it, reflecting on the options available to the character and his actual deeds, can have impact on how we come to think about our own situation. Insights can be available when a reader manages to abstract those aspects of a character's situation that she can appropriate to her own circumstances. Women today may be less vulnerable to social exclusion, but the mechanisms that can be used to sanction an individual, such as gossip, isolation or financial ruin, are still widely used to destroy one's reputation. As the story progresses, with Wharton's depiction of how the class system enables Bertha to destroy Lily's reputation and exclude her from her social surrounding, reader can recognize patterns of exclusion and ways of responding to them that can help her understand certain instances of her social environment. At least one important element of grasping *The House of Mirth* relates to Wharton's account of our tendency to take gossip as reliable source of knowledge of others, regardless of how misleading and detrimental it can be: both Lily and Sheldon repeatedly judge others (and each other) on the basis of gossip, notwithstanding their own inability to break free of the public image thus constructed of them. It would be beneficial for us if we could be more aware of that within our culture, saturated with false news, likes and dislikes made by people who never met us.

Even if specific setting of the story and characters' actions do not allow for abstraction and appropriation, narratives can offer varieties of insights that a reader may find epistemically useful. In paying attention to Lily's thoughts, actions and interactions with other characters, and working through Wharton's depiction of how one's upbringing interferes with one's social context and determines at least some aspects of one's character, a reader can feel an incentive

[4] As I show below, the novel enables moral learning by bringing the reader in a position where she can recognize that Lily rejects immoral options (blackmailing Bertha or exploiting others to destroy Bertha's social reputation and regaining her own), and chooses to act out of love. In doing so, she manages to simultaneously reject the hypocrisy of the established social order and the inclinations embedded in her by her upbringing, both of which represent a valuable instance of moral development.

to reconsider her own upbringing, and such reconsideration can help her get a better understanding of herself and those around her. Narratives can bring a reader in a position from which she sees things differently because her own way of thinking has become more informed and better adjusted to the complexities of our world. When Lily rejects the marriage of convenience to protect Sheldon, a reader can be motivated to consider moral implications of Lilly's actions against her own understanding of love, commitment and social status. Lily's determination to live up to the image that Sheldon has of her may be hard to understand for a reader who values social status over love, but Wharton's most meticulous scrutiny of Lily's emotional processes reveals something almost ineffable about the very nature of love, and the psychological state of surrendering oneself to such love. Lily's resolution to live up to the ideal Sheldon has of her, regardless of her upbringing and class membership, and at the expanse of her regaining access into the high class, shows us how love can have transformative powers and enable one to grow, develop and overcome one's moral flaws or biased thinking. A reader who recognizes the value of such moral growth and takes this as a real option for human beings can implement that insight into her life. This does not happen because reader has accepted a particular moral principle – say, love trumps social status or love changes one's character – but because she has come to evaluate certain concepts differently, or understand that her own issues can be better resolved, and her life more valuable if she were to act in a way that the novel reveals as a possibility.

Understanding the cognitive and ethical potential of works in this way helps us see why Nannicelli's criticism of Carroll is not entirely correct: he is right in claiming that the specific situation of the main character may induce us to form a false judgment about the source of moral worth of homosexuals, but that does not prevent other valuable insights available in the movie to be implemented into one's life. For example, many gay people find themselves expelled from their families. *Philadelphia* shows that families have other means available for dealing with one's homosexuality and that union, love and support are a viable option, one that not every parent was willing to consider back when the movie was first released, and the stigma attached to homosexuals was at its peak.

Regardless of specificity, narratives provide opportunities to expand our knowledge of certain psychological, social (and the like) aspects of our reality, to contextualize them and to thus get a more vivid sense of what is involved in a certain social (political, etc.) phenomenon. Such expansion can enable a cognizer to make sense of different aspects of her experience and the world more generally. Contemporary readers may have a vague knowledge of how the position of women changed throughout history, but in reading Wharton's novel, such scattered and vague propositions can become united and grow into more elaborate and less abstract understanding of how female role was perceived in a particular spatio-temporal chunk of our shared history. Acknowledging Lily's conditions can help them understand the conditions that women had to

overcome to reach financial independence and autonomy some of them enjoy today, which can contribute to their approach to certain contemporary feminist issues, and to them making more informed judgments regarding a wide range of challenges that we face as society, such as equal pay movement, participation of women in political arena, abortion issues, and the like. Lamarque certainly is right in claiming that readers need to bring (moral) knowledge into the work, but that does not mean that this knowledge does not expand in the process of reading and that we cannot rely on it in making judgments about our real world or current circumstances. After all, isn't this how we acquire knowledge in other domains and from other sources?

Furthermore, cognitivist is not claiming that *everything* we read has direct impact on our personal situation: often, narratives show situations that can happen and that do happen, to some people, sometimes; becoming aware of these situations and the moral nuances they present to us collectively is important because it adds to the archive of things we are aware of, and this awareness can, in turn, motivate us to engage more eagerly with the social issues at hand. The growing vegan movement can seem as a praiseworthy moral choice, until *Serotonin* puts to our view very concrete consequences for numerous farmers left penniless because of it. In that way, the novel can make us more aware of deeper economic and existential issues resonating from veganism, one which may not have occurred to the readers prior to engaging with the novel.

At this point however someone can argue, as Currie does, that a reader who is unaware of certain issues and gets acquainted with them via narratives lacks epistemic reasons to accept narrative depictions of them. After all, what makes Houellebecq sufficiently expert with respect to economic and ecological aspects of veganism, for a reader to ground her judgments on these issues on the basis of the novel? His specific description of one French family's demise can hardly be generalized to another French family, let alone to the world generally. This is certainly a valid problem for cognitivism; arguably, one of the hardest to solve. However, it does not negate cognitive and moral potential of a particular narrative to shed light on our reality. Notice first that other sources of knowledge are not exempt from errors, moral or epistemic and are imbued with various sorts of values: science may be held high on epistemic throne, but criticism directed at it gives us reasons to think that the epistemic goal of science as aiming at and delivering nothing but the truth remains an ideal hardly operationalized in practice, and not widely shared by the public.[5] Getting insights from science or understanding its account of complex phenomenon can be extremely difficult for a lay person unfamiliar with the topic and untrained in a given field– arguably, a plain reader can have a hard time grasping the impact of veganism on our environment, given the growing contradictions and indeterminacies in

[5] Kitcher (2011) discusses the reliability of science.

scientific reports. Reading *Serotonin* can mobilize our awareness of the interaction of moral, social, political and economic aspects that should be considered in approaching this issue, in ways in which scientific reports – coming from one of these perspectives but not from all of them – cannot. Moreover, given our lack of expertise in these domains, we may be more impoverished epistemically with respect to scientific sources than we are when it comes to judging the reliability of Houellebecq's description.

This claim is strengthened when we recognize that our narrative practices are not as divorced from epistemology as Currie would have us believe.[6] Houellebecq has a degree in agriculture and conducts extensive research of the topics he writes about. Wharton was, as critics and biographers argue, extremely sensitive to her social context and eager on reliably depicting it in all of its complexity, with the intention to criticize those of its aspects that were conducive to social exclusion of individuals and the creation of inequalities: she wanted her works to shed light on these forces, so that people could become aware of them and change their behavior accordingly. It is therefore implausible to claim that the moral contempt we feel for Berhta is but an artistic vehicle designed by Wharton to make us more aware of the linguistic capacities.[7] Quite the contrary, it was intended to be transported by those who use gossip as means of social exclusion.

My account so far does not address another aspect of generality: it is precisely because we all struggle with our public image that *The House of Mirth* does not have much (useful) to say about it, and because we all occasionally use others as means rather than ends that Bertha' s destruction of Lily does not make us more obedient to moral laws. In other words, narratives present things we already know and therefore cannot contribute to our cognitive or moral development. Stated in this manner, the claim is simply wrong: narratives, collectively, present a much wider domain of human experience than any individual reader can acquire. Our personal experiences are by far too limited, and our cognitive interests too narrow, to allow us to reach a stage at which we could not add anything relevant to our understanding of these concerns via our engagements with narratives. Narratives can therefore contribute to our take on them by deepening our understanding, enabling us to recognize new nuances or, to echo Carroll, to clarify concepts we have stored in our cognitive repertoire – or simply, to open our eyes to problems we did not pay attention to.

We thus see that neither specificity nor generality pose a threat to transmission. But we are still left with Clavel-Vazquez's question: when do we transfer, and when do we quarantine, beliefs we formulate on the account of a narrative?

[6] For reasons of space I can't provide a full epistemic grounding of narrative art here but see my (2019, 2024).

[7] I develop this interpretation in my (2024), where I use it to counter Lamarque's claim regarding the aesthetic nature of moral principles we extract from narratives.

My suggestion is that through the accumulation of artistic experience, audience develops the skills to differentiate various levels of author's reliability and they rely on them to decide whether to quarantine a certain belief, or to consider it as a candidate for transmission. Such skills may not be perfectly reliable, and some works will not allow for easy discernment, but the audience can regulate the level of trust she places in a given work: once she judges it as reliable, she is more likely to take it seriously as a source of knowledge, and transfer certain belief or a way of seeing the world, into reality.

4.

On my suggestion, transmission is the outcome of at least two forces that come united and mutually interact in situations when we take the work as reliably portraying a given issue and form our beliefs on account of it. First, spectator's intellectual and moral concerns determine her response to a work, as she relies on those concerns to filter the subject/theme of a narrative to see if the work addresses those concerns. Dammann and Schellekens capture this process by explaining that the epistemic gain we stand to gain from art depends, among other things, on spectator's "dispositions, expectations and ambitions qua epistemic agent" (2021: 4). I reinforce this view by emphasizing not only general aspects of our epistemic agency, but a rather concrete and specific issues that we face in our daily lives and social circumstances in which we have to navigate. Individual spectators care about different issues, have different concerns and problems and differ with respect to their ethical, aesthetic and cognitive character. Arguably, this is why the empirical research, measuring only the impact of (usually) one narrative and dismissing the relevant differences between readers do not get the result the cognitivists hope for: a narrative on the hardships of immigrants may fail to inspire empathy because the test subject does not take the immigrant crisis to be relevant to her private circumstances, and the narrative does not manage to inspire her to take it as such. Second, cognitive gain is also related to the specific manner in which a work's aesthetic and artistic features give rise to its mimetic dimension and cognitive/ethical potential: it is the uniquely beautiful way in which Wharton composes her paragraphs and gives us access into her characters' minds, that we recognize not only her artistic achievement but pay attention to what it puts in front of us. What is important here is that the work aligns with a spectators' aesthetic taste. Let me elaborate.

Unlike Lamarque, I do not think the literary qualities are divorced from how they mobilize reader's *epistemic* attention, cognitive/moral interests, emotions and imagination to attend to the work's cognitive potential; in that sense Lamarque is right to point to specificity of linguistic descriptions in developing moral dimension of a work, and wrong to think this aspect disables learning. In my view, when a reader recognizes that the work responds to her particular

epistemic and moral concerns – or when a work manages to convince her that the mimetic issues depicted in it are worth considering – she is motivated to pay attention to the work in manners that are conducive of learning. Schellekens offers detailed elaboration of how our aesthetic and epistemic endeavors come united in showing how aesthetic experiences can be epistemically motivating and inventive: they can mobilize our cognitive ambitions and bring pleasure in "branching out of our thoughts and of new exploratory possibilities opening up in ways which … lead us to alter or reset our individual perspective on the world" (2022: 13-14). I agree with her, but I also point to the extensive body of research on curiosity: understood as emotion, as well as intellectual virtue, curiosity has a motivating force, in encouraging one to attend to the object of one's interests.[8] When we attend to any particular narrative, it can invite our curiosity by bringing us in a position from which we can see that its cognitive potential coheres with the things we care about or are interested in, or it can inspire curiosity even if our personal situation has not given rise to the concerns that the work is about. But unless our curiosity is triggered, we will hardly consider the work worthy of our epistemic attention; it is only because we are genuinely interested in how Lily will resolve her situation that we seriously explore the options she has at her disposal. The suggestion is, when one attends to a narrative that speaks directly to one's interests, or, when in light of its representational and expressive features, the work inspires curiosity over a particular issue or shows why considering it is important, a spectator may be more strongly motivated to approach a work as a potentially informative and educative. As epistemic agents, we are delighted when our intellectual concerns are addressed and solved, and when we no longer feel lost or disoriented with respect to them, but manage to reach understanding: at that point, a work becomes a source of great pleasure.[9] Works which seem to do that can be experienced as having the potential to address readers' intellectual interests in aesthetically pleasing way; for these reasons, such works may inspire transmission. This is what makes the experience of learning from art unique.

To summarize: my model of learning from narratives states that the audience sometimes transmit certain beliefs from the narratives into reality. This process is determined by one's intellectual interests and aesthetic taste, and it includes *abstract and appropriate* and *recognize and implement* models. Given the subjective factors that inspire transmission, my account predicts that different readers transmit different beliefs from the same work. Lamarque and Currie see this as a problem for cognitivism, and in the next part I show that it is not.

[8] See Brady 2009; Dammann, Schellekens 2021; Fingerhut, Prinz 2020; Miščević 2018; Silvia 2010; Schellekens 2022; Tan 1996.

[9] See Breitenbach 2020; for my account of the aesthetic aspect of understanding see my 2020.

5.

To argue that art is a deficient source of knowledge on the account of falling to inspire a unique response is implausible, as other sources of knowledge are not exempt from such reactions: documentaries on the harms of smoking rarely turn smokers into non-smokers, newspaper reports on pollution may not motivate everyone to ditch their cars and hop on a local bus, and our educational system can fail to educate religious fundamentalists on the facts of evolution. This is because, as epistemic and moral agents, we are equipped with different sets of stored cognitive resources, and different emotional, evaluative and preferential dispositions, all of which influence our contact with and a reaction to a given source of information. As epistemologists argue, particularly those who stress the supremacy of understanding over knowledge, agents rely on things they know in order to process new information and see how to implement them into their existing body of knowledge. Moral psychologists propose a similar model in explaining our moral behavior: while it does not seem that people have a well-developed moral theories or that they habitually consider how their moral beliefs relate to their behavior, they rely on their intuitions to make rapid moral judgments. When these are insufficient, in cases in which we are faced with new or confusing moral issues, we rely on our stored believes to assess how they support or undermine our deliberation about the issue at hand, searching for ways to implement new moral considerations into the ones we already possess.[10] On my view, the same mechanism is operative when we engage with art: we rely on what we already believe, on our experience of the world and our familiarity with generic norms and individual artist's production to evaluate the extent to which we are willing to take her work seriously. In assessing whether to transport racially insensitive beliefs from *Django*, the spectator can rely on her understanding that racism is morally wrong, and on her familiarity with certain segments of Tarantino's work (his propensity for depicting violence, his participation in a culture which has condemned slavery) to resist the transmission. Notice however that the intended spectators of the *Birth* had no such moral background to consider, which explains why they were quick to transmit racist attitudes from the film into reality. Given that spectators generally share similar cultural and intellectual background, there will be enough of an overlap in how they process individual works, but their idiosyncratic experiences, interests, prejudice and preferences, epistemic and aesthetic, will also result in multiple interpretations of one and the same work.

Two worries remain. First, subjectivism I defend may seem to restrict the scope of narratives we recognize as epistemically relevant, as a reader may ignore works which do not speak to her concerns. However, to the extent that, as hu-

[10] Maibom 2014; Klenk, Sauer 2021; Sauer 2017.

man beings, we share sufficiently similar concerns, many of which are depicted by works when they develop (what Lamarque and Olsen (1994) call) perennial themes, most art will speak to our cognitive and moral concerns at some point in our lives, because most art can support the abstraction and appropriation process, or can be recognized as important for our overall thinking about the world and other people. Second, my account does not prevent transmission of faulty believes. The aesthetic force of a work can contribute to one's forming morally wrong or epistemically deficient beliefs, as when the invigorating prose of Margaret Mitchell convinces us that the slaves had a good life before the Civil war. However, this in itself is not solely the fault of the work: Mitchell certainly did report what, in her historical and geographical context, was a common worldview; the novel therefore remains an important source of knowledge in helping us understand how a particular ethical harm, inexcusable though it is, could have been so pervasive. There is no guarantee that we will not transmit wrong believes or quarantine precisely those that would assist us greatly in our epistemic endeavors. But, that is a fact of life: we are fallible and we misjudge our epistemic sources. Cognitivism that I defend is not exempt from this. Art is but one potential source of knowledge and we have to learn how to incorporate it with all the others we have at our disposal. That however is a project for another time.[11]

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[11] This work has been supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under the project number UIP-2020-02-1309. I am grateful to two anonymous referees of the *Rivista di Estetica* for their comments on the written draft.

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