

A Reconsideration of Aesthetic Value and Moral Value of Artwork

- An Immoralism Approach

Jiaxuan Yao^{1,a,*}

¹Shanghai Pinghe School, Shanghai, 201206, China

a. yaojiaxuan016@gmail.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: While contemporary art, famous for its abstract form and transgressive nature, is prevalent in the artistic world, the artistic world hasn't established an objective aesthetic evaluating system that allows viewers to fully experience the aesthetic value of transgressive art, which is the most radical, offensive, and morally problematic art form among the contemporary arts. The article reviews the two traditional evaluative approaches, Autonomism and Moralism, and discusses their limitations. Then, the article introduces the concept of transgressive art and Immoralism. The author also recognizes the theoretical gap that fails to illustrate in what perspective viewers can fully understand the aesthetic value of transgressive art. The article then establishes that the moral value of transgressive art lies in the fact that moral defects can contribute to its aesthetic value if the artwork is viewed from a receptive and reflective perspective. The article is significant in filling the theoretical gap and establishing a more systematic evaluative system.

Keywords: Transgressive art, Immoralism, Aesthetic value, Moral value.

1. Introduction

Contemporary art is famous for its abstract form, engagement with political and social issues, sarcasm and offences against aesthetic systems. Among all the categories of contemporary art, transgressive art is the most radical, disgusting, and morally-problematic one. However, the current artistic world hasn't established a systematic and objective aesthetic framework of transgressive art, either degrading the transgressive art for its moral defects or bragging about the art for its stunts. In 1989, senator Alphonse D'Amato tore up a reproduction of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a mass-produced crucifix immersed in the artist's urine for considering the artwork as obscene. In 1990, Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center was charged of violating obscenity laws for exhibiting Robert Mapplethorpe's artwork *The Perfect Moment*, which is a set of photographs concerning sensitive topics like sexuality, gender, and HIV/AIDS [1]. On the other hand, Araki Nobuyoshi's photographs were inappropriately depicted by Western critics as the sexual emancipation from rigid Japanese patriarchal restrictions [2]. The partial evaluation of transgressive art reflects the deficiency of current theories in discussing the relationship between an artwork's aesthetic value and moral value. Therefore, this essay attempts to review the definition of aesthetic

and moral value and the limitations of two classical theories Autonomism and Moralism. Then, I introduce my position on Immoralism and reestablish the framework for evaluating the aesthetic value of transgressive artworks. I defend my framework by illustrating the movie *The 120 Days of Sodom*, and the photography by Araki Nobuyoshi.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Aesthetic Value

Being aesthetic refers to an object, landscape, or artwork that shows beauty [3]. Evaluating the aesthetic value of an object or to what extent and in what ways the object is beautiful is consistent with our experience of appreciating the object, namely, the aesthetic experience. What constitutes the aesthetic experience is achieved through two approaches: the content approach, that is, what viewers have experienced, and the valuing approach, that is, the way or perspective viewers experience the object [4].

Regarding the content approach, viewers perceive an object as aesthetic because of the combination of aesthetic features or elements they experience [5]. The aesthetic properties can be classified into formal properties and expressive properties. Formal properties refer to the tangible and objective aspects of an artwork that can be observed and measured such as line, shape, texture, space, and color. On the contrary, expressive properties refer to the intangible and conceptual aspects of an artwork that require interpretation, such as the tone, conveyed emotion, and themes [6]. While the narrow view of the content approach claims that aesthetic properties rely only on formal features, a broad view includes the experience of formal and expressive properties.

By contrast, the valuing approach is committed to the distinctive character of aesthetic value that differs aesthetic experience from other kinds of experience. German philosopher Immanuel Kant established the landmark of the valuing approach in his book *Critique of Judgment*, where he proposed the concept of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness means “independent of all interests.” In this context, interests refer to the intentions towards the artwork with certain desires, and disinterestedness is identified as the aesthetic attitude in the form of contemplation disengaged from all emotional, moral, and sexual feelings or instrumental concerns. Kant proposed that only in the contemplative state of disinterestedness can the artwork be appreciated objectively and universally by everyone [7]. For instance, to appreciate an ancient Greek sculpture of a nude body in a disinterested state, one must learn to suspend any erotic desire towards the nude figure. Otherwise, affected by the erotic desire, one cannot accurately recognize the aesthetic value of the sculpture. Take religious painting as another example. Viewing in a disinterestedness attitude, an atheist should not comment on these paintings in a profane or skeptical tone. One should also not determine an object’s aesthetic value by its economic value. These counterexamples illustrate why viewers should experience artworks with a disinterested attitude to recognize an artwork’s full and accurate aesthetic significance.

Then, what makes aesthetic value a kind of value? Aesthetic Hedonism is the prevailing answer to this question, viewing happiness as the ground of aesthetic value. According to Beardsley, “the aesthetic value of an object is the value it possesses in virtue of its capacity to provide aesthetic gratification when correctly and completely experienced” [8]. The epistemological qualification of “when correctly and completely experienced” is consistent with the attitude of disinterestedness, preventing viewers from possessing greater pleasure than the capacity of the artwork can provide due to the arousal of intentional appetites.

2.2. Moral Value

Analogous to the definition of aesthetic value, the moral value of art lies in the experience of moral features in art. Moral features of the art refer to the theme, producing procedures, and the conveyed emotions of the artwork. Then what makes moral value a kind of value? This essay proposes that the moral value of artwork is determined by the extent to which it either positively or negatively contributes to its aesthetic value. In the following paragraph, this paper will propose two central positions that discuss the relationship between moral and aesthetic values: Autonomism and Moralism.

Autonomism, also called Aestheticism, is the view that “it is inappropriate to apply moral categories to artworks and that only aesthetic categories are relevant [9].” In other words, Autonomism defends a separatist thesis of aesthetic and moral value. Therefore, to determine the aesthetic value of an artwork, Autonomism only evaluates its formal properties regardless of its expressive properties. Holding the belief of Autonomism is equivalent to viewing the artwork in disinterestedness for viewers have to refrain from disturbing other intentional desires so that they can fully appreciate and only appreciate the formal properties of artwork. However, Autonomism is widely blamed for ignoring artworks with moral features and other expressive properties.

In contrast, Moralism is concerned with the association between aesthetic value and moral value. Moralism proposes that “aesthetic objects should be judged wholly or centrally concerning with respect to the moral standards or values [9].” The moral merits of an artwork constitute its aesthetic value, whereas moral defects of an artwork constitute its aesthetic flaw. Gaut, who is the proponent of the radical thesis of Moralism, claims that ethical evaluation is entirely relevant to the aesthetic estimation of the work of art because the artwork manifests the attitude of the artist. Artists can convey and embellish their morally corrupt attitudes aesthetically through artwork so that viewers will sympathize with the immorality and render the artwork acceptable [10]. For example, Leni Riefenstahl’s movie *Triumph of the Will* in 1935, under the perspective of Moralism, is aesthetically flawed because it established a sense of beauty through the glorification of Nazi and Hitler’s National Socialism, and it encouraged viewers to embrace Fascism value. The limits of the radical thesis of Moralism lie in its absolute rejection of the aesthetic value of a morally corrupt artwork. In the following passage, the author will refute the position of Autonomism and Moralism by introducing and defending the alternative perspective of Immoralism.

3. Transgressive Art

Visually observed, transgressive art is shocking, disgusting, and morally problematic. Anthony Julius defined the aesthetic significance of transgressive art as violating the social-consensual and non-legal taboos. It transcends and challenges the social conventions and good-evil spectrum within the taboos and displays the exposure and catharsis of repressed instincts. However, Jake Chapman suggests that transgressive art aims to release the feelings repressed by the trauma after the war [11]. However, these approaches are limited to a certain historical context and cannot provide a panorama for transgressive art. Instead, this article proposes transgressive art to the art form that invalidates the principle of disinterestedness through moral defects in the artwork. In other words, transgressive art challenges the rule of Autonomism.

Take the notorious artwork Paul McCarthy’s *Bossy Burger* (1991) as an example. In a claustrophobic studio set, the artist, adorned in the attire of a chef and a mask resembling Alfred E. Neuman from *Mad Magazine*, clumsily empties containers of ketchup and mayonnaise while complaining and groaning. He covers every surface with the gooey substance, completely engrossed in his aimless activity. In the end, he kneels on a table covered in mess and applies layers of ketchup to a worn-out armchair. Such excessive art renders the Kantian aesthetic value redundant. Its pure

expression of catharsis and chaos eliminates all the possibilities for viewers to feel emotionally detached or indifferent from the artwork, which is required by Autonomism in viewing artworks. Using ketchup and mayonnaise the created catastrophic scene has no symbolic meaning or aesthetic significance, but intentionally assaulted the Autonomism value [11]. However, transgressive art does not signify the rejection of aesthetic value in art, which accords with the Moralism value that a moral defect is an aesthetic defect. Instead, viewers should embrace an alternative aesthetic view.

4. Immoralism

The existence of transgressive art challenges the narrow view of aesthetic value that lies in the experience of formal properties and the disinterestedness proposed by Kant. Instead, viewers should endorse a broad view of aesthetic value that pays attention to not only experience of formal properties but also moral, cognitive, and political values manifested through expressive properties [12]. In other words, the broad view of aesthetic value considers the author's intention of creation and social implication and calls for a holistic view of an artwork. Since Autonomism and Moralism are too limited in accommodating the broad view of aesthetic value, a new perspective that associates aesthetic value with moral value should be established. In such context, the author invokes the Immoralism proposed by Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran that moral defects of an artwork can contribute to its aesthetic value [13].

While some critics propose that moral flaws contribute to aesthetic value because they stimulate our cognitive growth and to delve into the reflection of moral issues. At the same time, some attribute the reason to the exploration of unprecedented aesthetic experience, this paper propose a pluralistic and particularist view of aesthetic evaluation. In other words, it is too difficult to set a universal evaluative standard in response to the broad aesthetic view from which the conclusion that "moral defects contribute to the aesthetic value" can be made or an absolutist claim as Autonomism and Moralism can be held. Therefore, viewers should consider multiple factors when evaluating an artwork. The author would like to qualify the Immoralism argument as moral defects of an artwork can contribute to its aesthetic value" in certain contexts.

One answer remains unsolved. While the academic field has proposed the concept of Immoralism in analyzing the aesthetic value of transgressive art, no one has established in what state viewers should appreciate the transgression art so that they could recognize its total aesthetic value as disinterestedness is necessary for the appreciation of formal aesthetic properties. This article proposes that a receptive and reflective state is necessary to appreciate transgressive art.

Unlike Autonomism's rejection of the receptivity of emotional or moral feelings and Moralism's empathy with the author's intention, keeping such an emotionally mature state is appropriate and necessary for recognizing the aesthetic value of transgressive art. As I have demonstrated, it is impossible to disengage ourselves from the intuitive response of feeling shock, disgust, or a sense of injustice in the face of the transgressive art. Viewers should first keep honest and receptive to our feelings instead of embellishing or twisting the feelings as if they are acceptable and positive or degrading the artwork as worthless. Then, viewers should reflect on the author's intention of creation, consider the aesthetic significance and necessity of moral defects, compare the artwork with the existing aesthetic knowledge and experience, and have a holistic evaluation of the artwork. Viewing an artwork with immoral elements does not mean, as what the "aesthetic defect argument" supported by Moralism proposes, to identify with such elements. Otherwise, viewers would have a defective understanding. Compared to disinterestedness, a contemplative state that withdraws from all emotional and moral stimuli, a receptive and reflective state is also a contemplative state but accepts all the stimulus and intuitive responses to understand the artwork better.

Having established the structure of evaluating the transgressive art based on a broad view of aesthetic value, Immoralism and the refined-contemplative state, I am going to defend my structure

by invoking two classical transgressive artwork: the movie *The 120 Days of Sodom* and the photography by Araki Nobuyoshi.

The 120 Days of Sodom is identified as the first of all banned movies. However, the tag forbids many people to recognize its aesthetic value. The movie is set in Salo, a Fascism puppet regime established in Italy during World War II where over seventy thousand people were killed, and numerous children and women were raped during its 18 months regime. The movie epitomized the tragedy in Salo. Most of the movie takes place in an exclusive castle dominated by four authorities: a bank president, a judge, a duke, and a bishop, symbolising the power of economy, jurisdiction, royalty, and religion respectively. The four Fascism authorities captures their four daughters and forced them to be their wives and captured eighteen young boys and girls and exerted a malicious slavery on them. The 18 young adolescents were forced to obey an extremely inhumane and rigid law enacted by the four legislatures. Otherwise, they would be executed. They were required to publicly eat excreta, commit incest, listen to the story of the old whore, and finally get executed. Viewing such plots, the audience will inevitably feel disgusted and horrified. However, the director didn't mean to merely stimulate the audience. Instead, through this depiction of immorality, the director aimed to expose and criticize the authoritarian and dehumanized nature of Fascism regime. As the duke said, "Fascists are real anarchists" because they possess infinite power over others. Under the extreme dominance, a young man was selected to turn from a slave to a guard. He then showed great conceit to his previous partners and became the accomplice of Fascism rulers. In comparison, the director also depicted a guard who had a secret love affair with a housemaid, which symbolized the pursuit of freedom and love, being killed by the authorities because of the illegal love affair. In his last scene, he raises his arm and gives a proletarian salute, signifying the director's belief in Communism. The comparison between the selected young man and the executed guard intensified the justification of Communism belief. The moral defective elements of the movie constitute its aesthetic value manifested in its criticism of Fascism and endorsement of Communism and social justice.

Araki Nobuyoshi's photography also exemplifies the claim of qualified Immoralism. His photographs often feature women's bodies bound with ropes or undressed to represent the theme of sexuality and bondage, evoking the erotic thrill of the audience. His photographs are widely praised for the reference to traditional Japanese aesthetic forms, mastery of photography techniques, and bold exploration of taboos and female desires, constituting the artwork's aesthetic value. However, the aesthetic value is degraded for its prevailing feature of the male gaze. Nobuyoshi's photographs emphasized women's submission to the male gaze manifested in the sexually provocative styles, eliciting concerns for women's autonomy and criticism for degrading women as mere objects of gazes [2]. Araki Nobuyoshi's photography illustrates that moral defects do not always contribute to the aesthetic value, and multiple factors should be taken into account.

5. Conclusion

This article reviews the concept of aesthetic value and moral value. Invoking the concept of Aesthetic Hedonism, the article claims that aesthetic value derives from the happiness experienced through watching. The aesthetic experience comprises the content and the perspective for which people view the artwork. The content approach claims that the content is composed of formal properties and expressive properties. The value approach invokes the disinterestedness proposed by Kant, which states that only when viewers refrain from all the interests and desires can they fully experience the artwork's aesthetic value. Then, the article establishes that what makes moral value a value lies in its contribution to aesthetic value and reviews two classical approaches: Autonomism and Moralism. While Autonomism claims that aesthetic evaluation is irrelevant to moral features, Moralism holds that aesthetic value is fully dependent on moral value. However, neither approach is sufficient in evaluating the offensive content and complexity of transgressive art. The article invokes Immoralism,

proposing that moral defects of an artwork can contribute to its aesthetic value” in certain contexts. Concerning no theories about in what state viewers should appreciate the transgression art so that viewers could recognize its full aesthetic value, the article proposes that viewers should view the transgressive art in a receptive and reflective state. The author defends his position by illustrating the example of the movie *The 120 Days of Sodom* and the photography by Araki Nobuyoshi.

References

- [1] Stallabrass, J. (2020). *Contemporary art: a very short introduction* (Vol. 146). Oxford University Press, USA.
- [2] Hiroko, H. (2010). Representation, distribution, and formation of sexuality in the photography of Araki Nobuyoshi. *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 18(1), 231-251.
- [3] Munro, T. and Scruton, R. (2024, May 20). aesthetics. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/aesthetics>
- [4] Drummond, H. (2024). Value of Art. *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/value-of-art/>
- [5] Carroll, N. (2015). Defending the content approach to aesthetic experience. *Metaphilosophy*, 46(2), 171–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12131>
- [6] Hospers, J. (2022, October 4). philosophy of art. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy-of-art>
- [7] Kant, I. (2001). *The critique of practical reason: 1788*. Infomotions, Inc. ; Virginia Tech.
- [8] Beardsley, M. C. (1982). *The Aesthetic Point of View*. Cornell University Press.
- [9] Peek, E. (2024). Ethical Criticism of Art. *Internet encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/ethical-criticism-of-art/>
- [10] Lamarque, P., & Olsen, S. H. (2019). *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art the analytic tradition: An anthology*. Wiley Blackwell.
- [11] Julius, A. (2003). *Transgressions: The offences of art*. University of Chicago Press.
- [12] Goldman, A. H. (2013). The broad view of aesthetic experience. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71(4), 323–333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12031>
- [13] Bermúdez, J. L., & Gardner, S. (2020). *Art and morality*. Routledge.