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Caitlin O'Donnell

Jesus Aguilar

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Caitlin O'Donnell  
Seminar: Art and Intentions  
Final Paper

When we view works of art, we are looking to be affected in a positive way. We might want art to teach us something or show us something we would not ordinarily be able to see. We might want to be shocked, excited, saddened, or even confused. Above all, we don't want to be bored by artworks; we want to be fascinated. Our desire to be fascinated is difficult to satisfy. It is one of the great challenges of art, heightened by a moral problem: immoral artworks are among the most fascinating artworks that exist. Because of art's great power to change the way we think and feel, the artist is in a position of control that can easily be abused. Our fascination with immoral artworks can be explained using Burke's theories on the sublime.

In Burke's view, the sublime is that which, at its most powerful, produces astonishment in the viewer. Our inability to comprehend the sublime prevents us from reasoning about it, causing a temporary suspension of our mental abilities that produces a feeling of horror (Burke 57). The sublime is opposed to the beautiful in that it does not produce positive pleasure, but an emotion similar to terror or pain, which is, according to Burke, "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," more powerful than the emotions produced by beautiful objects (Burke 39). We are more likely to be motivated to act by terror than we are by positive pleasure. The sublime does not occur in the presence of real danger; it does not cause real pain (Burke 57). It is for this reason that the sublime brings delight to the viewer. It is the anticipation of pain in the absence of pain that causes relative pleasure. The pleasure brought by this absence is greater than the pleasure brought by the presence of beauty.

We can relate the experience of fascination to Burke's idea of the sublime. Fascination is not a judgment of the beauty of an aesthetic object. It is possible to be fascinated by beautiful things, but fascination can be derived from ugly, horrible, immoral things. Fascination is subjective. While an object of the senses can be inherently complex or dangerous independent of

our experience of it, it is fascinating because we determine it to be so. We may judge something to be fascinating based on our knowledge or lack of knowledge about it or based on our past experiences. If I judge something to be fascinating, you may or may not agree. Fascination, like sublimity, is a total captivation of the mind. It comes from an inability to fully comprehend what we are experiencing. Also like sublimity, fascination is more delightful than beauty.

It is the experience of fascination, not beauty, that causes us to take pleasure in the viewing of artworks. This explains how we can enjoy viewing an artwork with an immoral message. We may judge a work to be beautiful (inducing aesthetic pleasure) and simultaneously reject its moral content. We can even avoid moral judgment altogether. One famous example of the problem of immoral art is Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 film, *Triumph of the Will*. This propaganda piece, a documentary of a Nazi rally, is a beautiful depiction of an ugly event in history.

In “Beauty and Evil,” an essay about the film, Mary Devereaux discusses different ways of approaching immoral artworks. We have a few options. One is to separate the film's aesthetic and moral content and examine them separately. This way, we can see *Triumph of the Will* as aesthetically good and morally bad at the same time. But this “formalist” method fails. After all, the film is not just a beautiful artwork that happens to have a morally reprehensible vision behind it. The moral content of *Triumph of the Will* is its essence; to temporarily circumvent morality in this way is to shield ourselves from seeing the full value of this work of art (Devereaux 242-244). So we attempt another technique, which Devereaux calls “sophisticated formalism.” Here we do not ignore the artwork's moral content, but we can separate it from aesthetic content while examining the relationship between the two. This allows us to recognize the director's achievement of making something horrible appear beautiful. Without having to judge the film's morality, we can now appreciate how Riefenstahl has used formal elements to glorify Nazism. However, sophisticated formalism is still an unsatisfactory way of judging an immoral artwork.

According to Devereaux, “sophisticated formalism doesn't ignore content,” in the way that simple formalism does, “but it does *aestheticize* it” (245). In other words, the moral content is now an aesthetic element in the way that cinematography and editing are aesthetic elements. All we can do is ask if the film does a good job of using moral content. We cannot use this method to evaluate the problem of immoral art in a meaningful way because sophisticated formalism still does not allow a full appreciation of the film's interplay of beauty and evil (Devereaux 244-246).

The method which Devereaux claims is most appropriate involves accepting a broad definition of the aesthetic (Devereaux 246-247). When we say that an artwork is “good” it is unlikely that we mean it is “beautiful,” for beauty is no longer a central issue to the evaluation of artworks. The moral, political, and religious aspects of much of the art created in the past century add another dimension to our experience of art. Relegating these features to some non-aesthetic domain so that they may be considered separately diminishes the power of the artwork. Rather than isolate the moral and aesthetic as formalists propose, we must view the film as a unified whole and “engage with the moral issues it raises” (247). This is not the same as sophisticated formalism's “aestheticizing” of a work's moral content. Here we are not ignoring the vision of the work in order to judge how successfully its moral, political, or religious message is conveyed. We are viewing the work for what it is: a piece of propaganda whose goal is to make us accept the doctrines of Nazism by, as Devereaux puts it, “[tempting] us to find attractive what is morally repugnant” (248). The film is beautiful, its message is horrifying, but as a unified whole, *Triumph of the Will* is fascinating. The only way for the viewer to discover this is to accept (for better or for worse) the twisted morality at the core of the artwork.

Why do we like immoral art so much? “We obviously don't sit down to watch *Triumph of the Will* for fun,” Devereaux states (251). We watch it for a variety of other reasons, however: to learn about history, to study propaganda, to appreciate its beauty, and to understand the fascist

world view and prevent events like the Holocaust from happening again (Devereaux 251). But these reasons don't really explain why we *enjoy* immoral artworks. No, they aren't *fun*, but we are drawn to them nevertheless. Burke's theory on the sublime may provide explanation: we don't need to have fun (or feel immediate pleasure) to be attracted to something. Perhaps it is just the absence of "fun" that makes immoral art so interesting to us. Immoral art is a medium through which we can feel the anticipation of terror without experiencing the real terrors of pain or death. And Burke's idea that this aesthetic experience of the sublime is so much greater than that of beauty explains why immoral art is so much more fascinating than plain old beautiful art. Would *Triumph of the Will* be the same if Hitler had been the benevolent dictator and father figure he appears to be in the film? If the film was not lying to us in presenting him in this manner? Or, at the very least, if the Nazis' hatred had not resulted in the Holocaust? Of course not. Part of what is so fascinating about this film is how utterly disturbing, disgusting, and dangerous its message is, whether we approve of it or not. Our inability to comprehend the seemingly limitless horrors of the Nazi ideology is a sublime experience that results in relative pleasure in the absence of pain. *Triumph of the Will* brings us to the edge of accepting fascist doctrines but we do not make the leap because we know better than that. This leaves us fascinated.

In *Fascinating Fascism*, Susan Sontag provides a perfect example of our passion for the immoral, this one from the realm of fetishes. Much of the imagery that surrounds bondage and sadomasochism is derived directly from Nazism. This does not imply that those who participate in these activities are fascists; as Sontag notes, these people are merely "playing at Nazism." But how did Nazism become so eroticized? Wasn't it sexually repressive to begin with? Indeed. And that is the basis of the sexual appeal of fascism (Sontag 98-102).

Sontag's article highlights a crucial distinction that makes all the difference in our reaction to immoral art: "uniforms are not the same thing as photographs of uniforms" (99).

Horror is not the same thing as the representation of horror. The staged experience is not the real experience, and it is only from the staged experience that we can obtain the relative pleasure of the sublime. The homosexual male who commonly enjoys using Nazi imagery for the purpose of sexual excitement is not likely to be so turned on by real Nazis should they return to power and persecute homosexuals as they did in the past. Only the reenactment of the repressive elements of Nazism will do here.

In examining the eroticization of fascism we must remember the subjective nature of fascination. Fascism is not fascinating in itself. It is only through our lack of experience with it that we come to be fascinated by it. By the time Sontag observed the behaviors detailed in *Fascinating Fascism*, Nazism was a dead ideology. It did not pose any threat to our sexual freedom, and many of the people practicing sadomasochism at the time were not yet born during its heyday. It was this historical distance and unfamiliarity that ultimately allowed it to become sexualized. Here again we recall Burke: "To make anything very terrible," he says, "obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger...a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (Burke 58-59). As lack of obscurity destroys sublimity, familiarity destroys fascination. The tameness of normal sexual behavior bores us, and so we turn to fascism.

This is how immoral art comes about. We become bored of what Riefenstahl once referred to as "whatever is purely realistic, slice-of-life,...average, quotidian" (Sontag 103); it has no capacity to fascinate us. What was once fascinating or sublime ceases to be so once it becomes familiar. We must constantly search for things that appeal to our desire to be fascinated and few things fascinate us like the immoral. Herein lies the danger: the fact that we find in immoral art exactly what we are looking for leaves us vulnerable to manipulation. Immoral art is able to conceal its immorality behind its fascinating surface.

Artists can have many intentions: to educate, to shock, to represent, to recreate, to innovate. But above all, artists aim to fascinate their audience. If a work of art is not fascinating in some way or another, it is not successful. Since art's obsession with beauty is long gone, if the artist wants to fascinate us, he or she must push the envelope in other ways. It seems that the easiest way to do this is to create artworks that step outside the boundaries of morality. This can be done by lying and glorifying what is truly horrible (as in *Triumph of the Will*), or by challenging social norms and taboos.

Is it morally wrong to create immoral works of art? That depends. It is wrong to lie and manipulate. Leni Riefenstahl fully intended to make her audience believe things that were not true. She misrepresented the truth about Hitler and the Nazi party. She didn't just lie, she used her technical skill and command of narrative to create a manipulative, yet beautiful and fascinating product. She appealed to the German people's desire for unity, strength, power, and a charismatic leader by creating a fascinating work that represented what they were looking for (Devereaux 227-241). What she did in creating *Triumph of the Will* was wrong. Her film was a work of propaganda that lied in order to build support for the Nazi's horrible cause. The true immorality of the film is in the way it tries to force us to accept the doctrines of fascism through manipulation instead of letting us decide for ourselves.

In other instances, however, artists are not wrong in creating immoral artworks. Immoral art can be both fascinating and constructive. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is a fascinating and beautiful representation of a pedophile's relationship with his teenage stepdaughter. Because pedophilia is taboo in our society, the work was controversial when it first came out and continues to be today, though much less so. It is probably true (and most people would agree) that acting on pedophilic desires is morally wrong for a number of reasons. But this does not invalidate *Lolita* as an acceptable artwork. Nabokov is not trying to convince us that it is a good

idea for men to have sex with underage girls. The book is a work of fiction; he is presenting something that is not true but he is not lying to us about pedophilia in the way that Riefenstahl is lying about the Nazis. *Triumph of the Will* is a documentary, made to be accepted as truth. *Lolita* may change the way we feel about these relationships, but it does not glorify them in a way that makes them appear morally permissible. Nabokov allows us as readers to interpret freely and make our own judgments rather than fooling us into accepting something we would not normally accept.

By examining the difference between works of propaganda and works that simply contain offensive or controversial material, we can see that the issue with immoral art is not its content, but a combination of the intentions of the artist and the final result of these intentions. If Vladimir Nabokov had intended to promote pedophilia, he could have done so. The subject matter and moral content of his novel would have been the same, but the intentions would be morally wrong. If his efforts to convince us were successful, we could say that the artwork is immoral because it manipulates us into accepting morally unacceptable ideas. Still, he might have failed at this and not have achieved these intentions and the work would not be so immoral, but perhaps not so fascinating either.

That an artist could use his or her work to convince us to believe something that is wrong is a testament to the power of art. In an effort to give the audience what it wants, fascination, artists face a moral dilemma. To fascinate their viewers they must break some kind of boundary to replicate the feeling of sublimity. Few things fascinate us like immoral art. To produce immoral art in a moral way is a challenge that artists must overcome.



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