

## When good art is bad

D'Olimpio, Laura

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# When good art is bad: Educating the critical viewer

**Laura D'Olimpio**   
University of Birmingham, UK

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## Abstract

There is a debate within philosophy of literature as to whether narrative artworks should be judged morally, for their ethical value, meaning and impact. On one side you have the aesthetes, defenders of aestheticism, who deny the ethical value of an artwork can be taken into consideration when judging the work's overall aesthetic value. Richard Posner backs artists such as Oscar Wilde who famously wrote, 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all'. On the other side of the debate are proponents of ethical criticism such as Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Noël Carroll and Mary Devereaux. This article examines the educational implications of each position and ultimately defends the importance of moral education alongside aesthetic education. Given artworks are powerful vehicles for moral sentiments and meaning, it is important that viewers are taught to engage critically with art's ethical features as well as aesthetic features. In this way, educational concerns pose a challenge to the position of aestheticism.

## Keywords

Aestheticism, arts education, critical engagement, ethics, moral education

## Introduction

Among the debates that have raged within the field of philosophical aesthetics is whether or not the ethical value of an artwork may be taken into consideration when judging the overall aesthetic value of that artwork. The choice of position taken effects what one can say about the ethical value of an artwork, how it is to be evaluated and, further, its implications for society (for instance, in terms of censorship). The two main aesthetic positions that oppose each other are those of the aestheticist (also known as autonomism) and the moralist between which lies a graduated scale that allows for great or less compromise. These include the positions of moderate autonomism, moderate moralism and ethicism.<sup>1</sup> To simplify the positions, the ethicist (moderate moralism and ethicism) answers

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## Corresponding author:

Laura D'Olimpio, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B152TT, UK.  
Email: l.dolimpio@bham.ac.uk

yes, there is a moral value of artworks that affects its overall aesthetic value, while the aesthete (the autonomist) states *no*. For the aesthete, even if there is a moral value of an artwork, this will not (or should not) affect the work of art's overall value as the overall value of a work of art should be based solely upon its aesthetic value.<sup>2</sup> Richard Posner (1997, 1998) backs artists such as WH Auden, George Orwell and Oscar Wilde who famously wrote, 'there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all'. Against the aesthetes, on the other side of the debate, are proponents of ethical criticism such as Martha Nussbaum (1990, 1998), Wayne C Booth (1988, 1998), Noël Carroll (1996, 1998) and Mary Devereaux (1998, 2004). While much has been written about the ethical criticism of narrative artworks, not enough attention has been paid to the educational implications of this debate.

While the appeal of aestheticism is to protect the creative expression of artists and their works, this poses an educational challenge for teachers who wish their students to be critically engaged viewers. In so far as an artwork contains a moral and/or political message, the viewer of the work ought to critically engage with it. Furthermore, sometimes engaging with the ethical messages of a work of art is unavoidable. For instance, if there is a beautiful artwork to which I have a strong – either positive or negative – moral response, as a viewer, I would find this very difficult to set aside and just appreciate the beauty of the work in question. There are many examples of precisely this – particularly when the aesthetic value and the moral value of the artwork is in tension. Well known examples include Mark Twain's (1885) *Huckleberry Finn* and Vladimir Nabokov's (1955) *Lolita*. In this article, I shall critically detail the positions of aestheticism and ethicism and consider the educational implications of each. I ultimately defend the view that the value ascribed to a work may be a (positive or negative) moral value, and this moral value may affect the overall aesthetic value of the work of art. This need not result in censorship but should allow for critical engagement with art. Given artworks are powerful vehicles for moral sentiments and meaning, it is important that viewers are taught to engage critically with art in terms of both aesthetics and ethics.

## Aestheticism

Autonomism, also known as 'aestheticism', states that art and ethics are autonomous realms of value. Autonomists argue that the only relevant evaluation of an artwork is that of the aesthetic as it is only an artistic focus that is relevant *qua* work of art. Radical autonomism, such as the position held by Clive Bell (1914) from the Bloomsbury Group, states that it does not even make sense to assess a work of art in terms of morality (or politics or cognition; Young, 2005: 70). Aesthetes such as Bell claim that an artwork should be evaluated only in terms of its formal aspects; namely the aesthetic qualities which may include form, expression, unity, composition, line, colour, shape, tone, texture and pattern. Unfortunately, agreement is lacking regarding those features that are considered to be both necessary and sufficient in supporting an evaluation of the artwork and its ensuing aesthetic experience. The aesthete defines aesthetic experience as, 'the experience prescribed by an artwork that is valued for its own sake (and not for the sake of anything else, including moral enlightenment or moral improvement)' (Carroll, 2000: 353). In this way, the position of the radical autonomist has evolved as a

theoretical argument, whereby the very definition of aesthetic evaluation is based on what is categorically or conceptually unique to all artworks. This excludes moral evaluation which may not pertain to every work of art. The position known as moderate autonomism allows for a moral assessment to be made of an artwork yet argues that the work's moral value does not affect the aesthetic value. It is the artwork's aesthetic value which is equivalent to the overall value of the artwork.

Autonomists try to protect 'high art' from censor and from being reduced to everyday values such as commercialism. They hold that the ethical realm, much like the economic or political realm, has nothing to do with that of the aesthetic. In fact, we can think of examples of moralising in artworks that reduce the artistic value or appreciation of the work due to the heavy handed moral message seeking to grab the spectator's attention where the artwork may feel like a vehicle for the values presented. For instance, Aesop's fables are one such example, whose purpose was primarily moral education. For aesthetes, it is the aesthetic experience that should be primary, not secondary, when encountering an artwork, and experience of the aesthetic good is conceptually distinct from moral goodness.

Furthermore, aestheticists claim that the aesthetic experience, defined in terms of disinterested attention and independent of ethics, is the common denominator applicable to all art and should therefore be the standard of judgement for all artworks. In defence of this 'common-denominator' argument, the autonomist explains that the formal features of a work of art when appropriately (aesthetically) engaged with, produce an aesthetic experience. It is the formal aspects of a work of art which account for the aesthetic value and thus the overall value of a work of art (Carroll, 2000: 352). Thus, for an art object to be valued as art it must be capable of eliciting from the viewer an aesthetic experience.

## **Educational implications of aestheticism**

The ethicist/aestheticist debate is relevant in terms of its influence upon the critical evaluation of artworks that affects our recognition and evaluation of the impact of art. It is also educationally important because arts educators are teaching students *how* to engage with artworks; how to value them and how to receive them. If we consider that the aesthete is primarily and often exclusively concerned with the aesthetic features of, experience of and value of artworks, we can see that for art educators this justifies a protected space in which students can engage with art in a liberal manner. Aestheticism protects the place for art in society, and for artists' free, creative expression. It is anti-censorship and given that censorship of art often hinges on the moral and political messages of artworks and the role such art may play in influencing citizens (particularly young people), aestheticism protects art and creative expression from such moral and political judgements. In this same way, aestheticism also separates art from its (wider) educational impact because it is concerned with art for its own sake and not for the sake of its impact (educational or otherwise).

Aestheticist Posner (1997) declares that 'immersion in literature does not make us better citizens or better people' (p. 2). Yet, there is a growing interest in research in character education as to whether good literature and poetry can indeed make us better people (Bohlin, 2005; Booth, 1988; Carr, 2005; Carr and Harrison, 2015). It is understandable

why art lovers wish to defend the value of art for its own sake. And yet, artists and artworks play a significant role in encouraging reflection upon human activity. The place of art and the role for artists in society can be contentious precisely due to the moral, social and political impact of art; a fact of which aesthetes are well aware. Certainly Posner (1997) does not deny it, concluding his article by stating, 'the formal properties do not exhaust the worth and appeal of literature, but the moral properties, I suggest, are almost sheer distraction' (p. 24). This suggests that arts educators are better off focussing on the aesthetic qualities of a work of art rather than the ethical features on the aestheticist position.

One educational role for art includes highlighting society's ethical, social and political actions. Thus it seems odd, and counter-intuitive, to insist we cannot speak about art in ethical terms particularly when art is sometimes used to promote or critique certain moral, political and social messages. Against the aestheticist, where artworks prescribe an audience response that invokes morality and ethics, surely the moral value of the work in question is a component of the overall aesthetic experience. Such a claim is most obvious in examples of narrative artworks such as novels, plays and films. For example, famous aesthete Oscar Wilde (1891) is known for arguing, in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that there is no such thing as a good or bad book, rather, books are well or badly written and that is all. Yet, Wilde's books contain moral messages that are almost impossible for the reader to ignore and he took the line of the aesthete in order to publish such sentiments and avoid censorship or rebuke (unsuccessfully in his case). When Wilde defended aestheticism, he was doing so precisely because he knew he would be accused of impacting upon people through his art (Freedman, 1993: 51–52). Wilde's own interest in the debate was not in reference to the aesthetic/moral issue at hand, but rather the impact that people were trying to say his art had, and the impact he wished it to have. It is widely acknowledged that his art *did* impact and furthermore, continues to have a lasting moral impact.

We learn from narrative artworks. And Wilde's texts are completely concerned with the ethical in such a way that sees the values of art and morality as both present in the one text. It is the moral message of *Dorian Gray* that largely contributed to making it a great work; it is the moral value of the work that enhances its overall aesthetic value. This may be because, in this instance, the moral message is an intrinsic part of the work, a formal feature of the narrative artwork, and in this way, will necessarily count towards its overall value. Allowing for the ethical evaluation of artworks need not result in censorship of artists and their work. However, where we find a moral message in an artwork, and given that art affects us emotionally as well as cognitively, artworks must be subject to ethical evaluation as well as aesthetic evaluation. As Booth (1998) argues against Posner,

As every reader of Wilde knows, whenever we fully engage with any story, we engage not with abstract concepts or moral codes but with *persons*, both with the characters in the story and the implied person who has chosen to portray them in this precise way. (p. 375, italics in the original)

And, as educators, we want to teach students to engage both critically as well as compassionately and creatively with the artworks they encounter; with fictional characters and

scenarios, with the overall messages and meanings gleaned from texts as well as with their authors (D'Olimpio, 2018). If this is true, then we cannot rely upon aestheticism, we must instead move to a position that allows for ethical criticism of artworks.

## Ethicism

Two positions that accommodate the fact that artworks are created in, and impact upon the world ethically are moderate moralism as advocated by Noël Carroll (1996, 1998, 2000) and Berys Gaut's (1998) ethicism. Moderate moralism holds that some works are concerned with morality and in such cases moral evaluation is relevant and may impact upon the work's overall aesthetic value. However, works that are not concerned with morality, and lack ethical content and implications, are not appropriate objects of ethical criticism. Carroll (2000) notes that

even if there were a single criterion of value for all art, that would not have to preclude the possibility that there are not also multiple, local criteria of evaluation for certain genres of art, consistent with whatever the global criterion turns out to be. (p. 358)

For example, an artwork that has a moral message has a relevant ethical value that may or may not impact upon the aesthetic value of the work. The aesthetic value, therefore, is not determined by this ethical value alone – it can also, or even predominantly be determined by aesthetic features of the work. Ethicism is similar to the position of the moderate moralist, yet the ethicist takes a slightly stronger line when arguing for the ethical impact of an artwork upon the overall value of that work. Ethicism claims that ethical value is *always* relevant to aesthetic value if it is included in an artwork.

The autonomist claims that in society, it is *only* artworks that are *primarily* intended to promote aesthetic experience and thus they should be evaluated solely in terms of that to which they uniquely aim. Yet, artworks that combine aesthetic experience with social, moral and/or political messages are by no means uncommon. Examples range from the earliest religious art to any number of popular songs by artists concerned with social, political, environmental and economic issues that impact ethically upon society. The position of aestheticism does not do justice to these kinds of artworks, whose aesthetic experience includes understanding the relevant ethical messages imbued in the work. As Devereaux (2004) points out, Posner takes the ethical messages in works of literature to be optional extras, to which one may choose to attend to or not and, 'Like most aestheticians, Posner recommends the latter' (p. 8). Yet, as Devereaux (2004) argues, 'some kinds of moral judgements . . . take the literary work itself as their object' (p. 8). This means that the ethical judgement, in order to be appropriately made, requires aesthetic sensibility. Narrative artworks can be subtle and complex. In order to judge them accurately, one needs to attend to them properly, aesthetically, in order to glean an appropriate reading of the work as well as the prescribed aesthetic experience. However, as will be discussed in further detail in the next section, it is also the case that some aesthetic features of the artwork require appropriate ethical responses in order to respond properly to the artwork *qua* artwork.

The position of the ethicist, who defends either moderate moralism or ethicism, is more plausible as a theory of how we evaluate artworks and how we should evaluate the aesthetic experience and overall aesthetic value of art. This is because the moral message of an artwork may impact upon (support or negate, interrupt or augment) the aesthetic experience one has when engaging with an artwork that contains ethical components. Importantly, it is these components that are being evaluated as an aspect of the artwork in question and therefore, it is also these components educators want their students to learn how to engage with, in both an open, receptive manner as well as a critically engaged manner. I will give an example of why I think this is important and persuasive, by considering when the ethical flaw is also, one and the same time, a formal flaw in the artwork.

### Moral flaws as aesthetic flaws

As mentioned earlier, the (moderate) autonomist may compromise slightly and allow for an ethical reading of an artwork that contains an ethical component, provided the ethical value does not in any way affect the aesthetic value, and vice versa. This is a position that maintains that the ethical and aesthetical spheres of value are autonomous. However, ethical critics may argue that an ethical blemish in an artwork affects the artwork as a whole and thus impacts upon its aesthetic value as well. Taking ethicism as our working example, when we take an ‘all-things-considered’ view of the work *qua* artwork, certain ethical failings in an artwork are *always* going to be aesthetic defects and, in this way, formal flaws in the work (Carroll, 2000: 375). Thus, as aesthetic defects, these ethical defects may affect the overall value of the art object. The classic example ethical critics often cite is Leni Riefenstahl’s (1935) *Triumph of the Will*, an infamous propaganda film covering a Nazi party rally held in Nuremberg, Germany. Beautifully shot with stunning cinematography, the aesthetic value of the film is undermined by its portrayal of Hitler as a moral political leader who simply wanted the best for all Germans. It is a piece of propaganda disguised as a documentary and the moral message of the film interrupts the aesthetic appreciation of the artwork (Devereaux, 1998). The ethicist claims that, in this example, it can be seen how the ethical defect of the work (negatively) affects its overall aesthetic evaluation. Ethicism also allows for the ethical message of a work to positively affect its overall aesthetic evaluation.

Arguing that moral flaws can be defects in an artwork, the ethicist offers the ‘merited response argument’ where prescribed responses to artworks are either merited or unmerited by the narrative. If an artwork portrays an immoral message while prescribing aesthetic engagement, the immoral message *may* be unmerited and constitute an aesthetic defect in the work *qua* artwork if it interferes with the aesthetic engagement and prescribed uptake of the work in question (Carroll, 2000: 375). For instance, there may be an unsympathetic character to whom the reader is invited to adopt a non-satirical, sincerely sympathetic attitude towards. Yet, if the reader simply cannot do so due to the manner in which the character has been portrayed, then this is a flaw in the novel, not in the reader response. (Note that this is not to say we cannot sympathise with immoral characters or antiheroes – texts may be subtle and contain layers of meaning. Plus the overall ethical reading of the work may differ from the ethical judgement we make of a



character). In this way, immoral responses to artworks, 'notably prescribing immoral cognitive-affective responses' the ethicist argues, may be unmerited. This is particularly so if they give the audience reason to refrain from responding in the way that the artwork dictates (Carroll, 2000: 375). Thus, contrary to moderate autonomism and autonomism, moral defects in a work of art *may* be aesthetic flaws in the work. Uptake (or lack thereof) results from an audience member's (in)ability to engage appropriately with the artwork in question and thus supports the ethicist's position that moral defects in a work of art may impact upon its overall (aesthetic) value.

The reason this matters in an educational sense is because of how we teach young people to engage with artworks. We may consider that, in arts education, we are aiming to educate students to be appropriately sensitive audience members; well positioned to make the most appropriate (charitable as well as suitably critical) readings of works of art. If we were to adopt the position of aestheticism, we would only focus on teaching students to appreciate and critique the skill with which the words/paint/images are used, the style of the writing, the expression of the characters/dancers and the beauty of the artwork/performance piece. We would be encouraging an aesthetic experience based on those formal features (form, expression, unity, composition, line, colour, shape, tone, texture and pattern) but may discourage a moral or political reading of a work. Aestheticism involves expressly teaching students that the moral or political meaning or value of the work does not affect or impact upon its overall *aesthetic* value. This is fine when the artwork in question contains no ethical or political message, of which there may be some. Nussbaum (1998: 358) contends,

One can think of works of art which can be contemplated reasonably well without asking any urgent questions about how one should live. Abstract formalist paintings are sometimes of this character, and some intricate but non-programmatic works of music (though by no means all). But it seems highly unlikely that a responsive reading of any complex literary work is utterly detached from concerns about time and death, about pain and the transcendence of pain, and so on – all the material of 'how one should live' questions as I have conceived it.

Yet, this is not the case when it comes to *all* artworks and certainly is not the case in relation to narrative artworks.

With narrative artworks, such as works of literature, plays and films, there is always going to be some social, political and ethical messages in the work that are going to be important to understand if one is to understand the work in question. For example, one may watch Charles Chaplin's (1936) *Modern Times* for its humour and enjoy it at face value. However, its philosophical reflection on the industrial revolution further augments its artistic and aesthetic value. This film marks the last appearance of Chaplin's character, the Little Tramp, who is immediately recognisable and a powerful aspect to Chaplin's *mise en scène*. But there is more to engage with than brilliant slapstick. As a silent film, the message about how machines should be used to benefit human beings and their work, as opposed to making workers cogs in the machine, reveals both hope and anxiety about the industrial revolution. Such themes, along with its commentary on class, power and societal progress are central to a fully fleshed out understanding of the film, which, in turn, enhance the aesthetic experience gleaned. Watching scenes from this old film with



students in a classroom today could be used to provoke a stimulating discussion about the centrality of technology in our lives today, and reflections as to whether Chaplin was right to worry about machines 'taking over' our lives.

Furthermore, as educators, we want such messages to be engaged with not just in an open and receptive manner, but an ethically critically engaged manner as well. According to Iris Murdoch, judgements about value(s) are unavoidable in narrative works as, 'one cannot avoid value judgements. Values show, and show clearly, in literature' (quoted in Magee, 1978: 278). Value judgements are imbedded in our language and the words we use often imply or presume certain kinds of moral evaluations. Murdoch (1998: 27–28) notes that

It is important to remember that language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral . . . So the novelist is revealing his values by any sort of writing which he may do. He is particularly bound to make moral judgements in so far as his subject-matter is the behaviour of human beings.

And so, to the extent that artworks contain moral and political messages, teaching our students to critically and compassionately engage with these stories, characters and the situations in which they find themselves is not only a part of understanding and appreciating the work in question, but important pedagogically as well.

Murdoch and Nussbaum refer to the positive effects of engaging with *good* (aesthetically and ethically) literature, and they are optimistic about the role for literature and narrative artworks in educational spaces. As Nussbaum (2010) remarks, the arts and the humanities work to activate and expand our capacity 'to see the world through another person's eyes' (p. 96). Yet, there are also examples in which educators should teach students to engage critically with the ethical messages contained in artworks because they may not be so positive or virtuous. And this is even more important when the aesthetic quality of the work is very good, beautiful or engaging.

Returning to the example of *Triumph of the Will*, which is often cited as being aesthetically good despite its immoral message; if the viewer, especially the young viewer, is not critically engaged with the moral and political messages of the film, then they are simply swept up in the beauty, magnificence, power and exuberance of Hitler and Nazi Germany. This would be worrying to educators precisely because of the (im)moral messages conveyed through Nazism. However, if our viewer is critically engaged with the ethical features of the film, they may find it difficult to purely enjoy the film and have a full aesthetic experience as a result, precisely due to the (im)moral element of the work. The latter can be explained perfectly on the position of moderate moralism or ethicism because we can see that the prescribed audience response: to love and celebrate Hitler and Nazi Germany, is *ethically* unwarranted, and, in the case of this propaganda documentary, therefore, also an aesthetic or formal flaw. The ethical failing of the work interrupts and interferes with one's aesthetic uptake of the work precisely because it is unavoidable in the meaning. The appropriately sensitive audience member cannot, in this case, divorce the ethical judgement from the work and, I claim, neither would we want them to or think that they should. Engaging with the work means engaging with all of

these elements and, as educators, we should teach students this. Devereaux (1998: 354) notes that if we bracket the political message of certain works of art, such as Orwell's *1984*, and solely appreciate the formal features of the work, or admire *Triumph of the Will* purely for its beauty, then we miss an essential element of the work. This claim and examples such as these challenge the position known as aestheticism which insists on keeping the realms of aesthetics and ethics separate in relation to works of art.

## Aesthetic and moral education

History reminds us that certain texts and artworks were deemed virtuous and praised, commissioned and displayed while others were censored and destroyed by the authorities in positions of power who sought to convey and perpetuate certain ideas and values. This kind of censorship is something to which the aesthete strongly objects and, as educators, this should also be something we consider, when selecting artworks for inclusion on the arts curriculum. The question of *which* artworks and *which* or *whose* morals are allowed to be influential is inescapable here, and this inevitably highlights the concern to do with whose voices are neglected or omitted.

For example, Mark Twain's (1885) *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has long been deemed to be a great work because of its aesthetic *and* ethical content. This is due to the skill of the writer who sketches a nuanced depiction of the friendship between Huck (a white teen) and Jim (a runaway adult male slave), set in Missouri, the United States, in the 1800s when slavery is legal. By offering an insight into the perspective of others who we might not otherwise encounter, readers have the chance to experience the tension between social mores, universal moral rules, the law and compassion. More importantly, they gain an insight into slavery even if they were born long after slavery was made illegal.

However, there are other ethical considerations educators also need to consider. Twain's classic novel is not without controversy, most notably with its use of the vernacular and racial stereotypes. Educators must consider which texts are included on a curriculum, and the reasons (historical, artistic and educative) for those choices. It is particularly important for educators to ensure texts featuring voices other than those of the (often male) White colonial are provided to students. These days, there are many excellent, authentic novels by Black and Indigenous authors (such as Toni Morrison (the United States), Sally Morgan (Australia) and others) that may be taught instead. Also, if you have a class that loves rap and hip hop music, and there is a debate to be had about the language used and stereotypes portrayed in such popular music, it would be fascinating to bring the conversation about such topics into the classroom (see Chetty and Turner, 2018). Contemporary artworks such as these could be compared and contrasted with the classical text by Twain which is still commonly taught in American schools.

Just because we can make moral judgements of artworks, does not mean we should censor or restrict their creation and reception. However, it is understandable why the aesthete may be worried about the consequences of the moral judgements passed on artworks. Given that the ethicist claims that a work of art can be judged morally, and this impacts upon the overall value of an artwork, they may then go on (quite easily) to argue that *bad* moral artworks can have a negative impact upon its viewers and perhaps even

society as a whole. And perhaps this is of real concern to the ethicist – that the moral messages in artworks *will* influence the viewers and audiences of these works; it may *harm* members of our society and the community or simply change existing social norms. And this is precisely why aestheticists wish to protect artists and their artworks; because art is powerful. Yet, for educators, this is also why we should educate students to engage respectfully, critically and sympathetically with artworks. We need not deny that art can be influential, may present various perspectives and offer new ways of thinking about things. But from this, it need not follow that such free, creative expression be suppressed, repressed, censored or banned, even if there will always be exceptional cases and contextual factors to consider. What does follow, educationally, is the need to teach students to be critically engaged viewers who are still able to appreciate and value art for its aesthetic experience.

Take the example of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The appropriately sensitive audience member may find it difficult to fully enjoy the aesthetic experience of the music when they understand the antisemitic sentiments expressed by the composer and the appropriation of Wagner's music by Hitler and the Third Reich. Such discomfiture is not simply a matter of context – that is, where the performances are played or who may be in the audience (for instance, debates continue over the unofficial ban on live performances of Wagner's music in Israel). There are also complex questions that surround the work, such as, how responsible is Wagner for further inspiring Hitler's antisemitic ideology? Whatever the answers are to difficult ethical questions such as these, it makes listening to, and appreciating Wagner a multifaceted task. The educational point is that this artwork presents a wonderful opportunity for dialogue. It may not be the educator's task to provide answers to the students with respect to how they interpret or enjoy (or not) the work, but, rather, to encourage them to take up a position of critically engaged spectatorship. People will respond to artworks in various ways based on their individual identities, their past experiences and their subjective taste. And that is as it should be. But there should be a safe space created within the classroom to discuss the interesting questions that emerge – either prior to, during or after the experience of aesthetic engagement. And there should also be room for objection to the artwork, while understanding its position within the canon. So, it may be that a Jewish school decides not to play or perform the work, which makes sense. But that is not the same thing as ignoring its existence and refusing to discuss this interesting, seminal, artistically valuable and ethically challenging work.

The works of Donald Friend, however, provide us with a different case. The paintings and drawings of naked young Balinese boys by Australian artist and well-known paedophile Donald Friend (whose diaries were published after his death in 1989) were well regarded by much of the artworld. Yet, once one knows about Friend's perversion, it interrupts the viewer's ability to appreciate the work precisely because the immorality of the artist's behaviour enters into the experience of the art object itself as its content is tainted by an understanding of how the work was created. These underage boys served as not-entirely willing or not-entirely able to provide their consent models for the work; they were poor, working in the houses in which Friend used to stay when he visited Indonesia, and we now also have access to some of their accounts. In this case, I would not want educators to use such works in art classes. There are other suitable nudes or

Australian artists' work to draw upon instead, such as the photographs of Bill Henson which depict pre-pubescent children in a natural state without similar allegations of impropriety. Thus, any interesting ethical questions that may arise surrounding the content may be meaningfully discussed without continuing to support the misuse of these images of these Balinese boys. Or, if such discussion is not relevant to the educational purpose, then artistic technique may be discussed using an artwork that does not involve connotations of pre-pubescent sexuality or paedophilia. These are discussions and debates that need to be held. Such examples are likely to be controversial and there will be disagreement. This is obvious, as evident in an example that has been discussed much more widely; Vladimir Nabokov's (1955) *Lolita*, in which arguably sympathy is invited for the narrator Humbert.

To recap, then, the aesthete holds that while a moral value may be given to an artwork, this has nothing to do with that work's aesthetic and, therefore, overall value. On this view, an art object may be morally 'bad' yet aesthetically 'good' and therefore its overall value as an artwork can be deemed good. This overall value must therefore be seen to be disconnected from how an artwork is used or how its impact upon society is judged. For instance, if the artwork is used in an ethically deplorable manner and this use has a negative impact upon society, this is, on the aesthete's argument, a case of a good artwork being used in a bad way. Using the example of *Triumph of the Will*, the aesthete can maintain that the work of art is beautiful (if they do think it beautiful), aesthetically pleasing and the overall artistic value of the work is high, despite its negative moral message. The aesthete may claim that *the use* of this film is morally and ethically wrong; it was used as a piece of Nazi propaganda, which is clearly immoral. Yet, the aesthete argues that the work in and of itself is fine, despite its moral component and its use being morally deplorable. The question that ethicists ask the aesthete is how can the intrinsic moral meaning of the work be denied formal attribution to the piece? Further difficult questions follow. Is the artist responsible for this artwork that was intentionally made with a flawed moral message? This question is particularly interesting when one considers that a work may be used in a way other than that intended by its author. And appropriate display and exhibition is another important consideration that has also been the subject of debate with respect to works by Riefenstahl, Wagner, Donald Friend and others.<sup>3</sup>

The complex, difficult and nuanced nature of such debates to do with aesthetics and ethics, potential limits to free, creative expression and appropriate audiences/display of contentious artworks are those that benefit from educational facilitation. Carroll (2000) notes that 'Artworks can be immensely subtle in terms of their moral commitments. Morally defective portrayals may elude even morally sensitive audiences and may require careful interpretation in order to be unearthed' (p. 378). Thus, encouraging students to think about and explore such ideas in arts education is an important part of teaching young people to become appropriately sensitive audience members. Such audience members are sympathetic to artworks, open to receiving the aesthetic experience available to them by engaging with the artwork in question, yet they are also ethically critically active, particularly because art affects our emotions as well as our cognition. Where and when artworks contain moral, social and political messages, appropriately sensitive

audience members will engage with those too. In this way, ethicism is the most appropriate position for arts educators to adopt.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have detailed the position known as aestheticism (autonomism and moderate autonomism) and compared this to the position defended by the ethicist (moderate moralism and ethicism). The aesthete claims that even if there is a moral value of an artwork, this will not (or should not) affect the work of art's overall value as the overall value of a work of art should be based solely upon its aesthetic value. However, the ethicist, adopting an all-things-considered perspective, argues that the moral value of artworks can be gleaned, judged and may affect the overall value of a work of art. I have defended the ethicist, offering examples of when ethical failings in a work may also be aesthetic flaws which can interfere with the prescribed audience response and any aesthetic experience the viewer may potentially have by engaging with the work in question. But, most importantly, I have viewed this debate in aesthetics through an educational lens and added further support to my position by considering educational implications of aestheticism and ethicism.

It is vitally important that students are taught to value the aesthetic and formal features of artworks and appreciate aesthetic experience. I see it as central to arts education that students are also taught to value the creative expression of artists and their works, even as these often push social boundaries and offer new and sometimes challenging perspectives. However, while this open, receptive and creative approach to art is at the heart of arts education, this does not necessitate switching off one's critical engagement, which includes critically engaging with the ethical and political messages gleaned from art as well as the work's aesthetic features. Where we find artworks containing moral and/or political messages, the viewer of the work ought to critically engage with these. This is the case to ensure they understand and appreciate the work (which may include considering contextual elements in relation to when the work was made) and also so they are not at risk of being uncritical in relation to the messages conveyed through art media. While the teacher may bypass any moral risk by carefully selecting which artworks the students engage with, this in itself does not then protect students when they are out on their own, encountering, engaging with and stumbling upon other artworks, including mass artworks and media. Thus, the skills of learning to appreciate and engage, both critically and in a receptive or sympathetic manner with artworks, is of fundamental use to our students throughout their lives.

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## ORCID iD

Laura D'Olimpio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0797-6623>

## Notes

1. Noël Carroll (2000) outlines the different aesthetic positions that may be held with regard to art, including his own 'moderate moralism' in 'Art and Ethical Criticism: an overview of recent directions of research'. See also 'Ethical Criticism of Art' in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy available at: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/art-eth/#SH5a>
2. I am using the words 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably and thus am using the word 'moral' in a wide, not narrow, sense.
3. See debates within the public domain such as Funnell (2016) 'Can bad people create good art' and Funnell (2017) 'Our favourite paedophile: Why is Donald Friend still celebrated?'

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### Author biography

Laura D'Olimpio is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Education at the University of Birmingham, UK and co-editor of *Journal of Philosophy in Schools*. Her first book, *Media and Moral Education: a philosophy of critical engagement* (Routledge, 2018) won the 2018 Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia's annual book prize. Her second book, *The Necessity of Aesthetic Education* is forthcoming with Bloomsbury.