

Audiences' Role in Generating Moral Understanding:
Screen Stories as Sites for Interpretative Communities

In debates over artistic interpretation, the idea that the audience has a significant role to play in determining a work's meaning is a familiar, if contentious, one. Since at least Roland Barthes, scholars have taken seriously the notion that the audience member can play an active role in fixing the meaning (or at least *a* meaning) of an artwork (Barthes 1977). However, in the discussions that take place around moral learning in art, the audience's role in determining the meaning of the work is often ignored.¹ The audience is usually portrayed as a passive recipient of the moral perspectives taken up by the artwork itself, or perhaps by the artist. That is, the meaning is there to be discovered, already fully formed, in the artwork, and thus the moral learning proceeds from artwork to audience: the artwork serves as the teacher, and the audience as learner.

In this paper, I explore the role that audiences can play in generating moral understanding from screen stories. The paper is in three parts. In the first part, I review Jacqueline Bobo's study of Black women audience members' response to Steven Spielberg's 1985 film *The Color Purple*. I treat this as a case study of what bell hooks calls "the oppositional gaze" (hooks 1992): some Black women understood this film in ways quite different from how what we might think of as the standard or proper interpretation, and these ways can be morally significant. I argue that the interpretation that Bobo's subjects offered has greater potential for positive moral understanding than the standard critical interpretation. It follows that screen

¹ With some exceptions, as we will see in Part II.

stories that might be morally flawed can nonetheless be valuable aids in promoting moral understanding.

In the second part, I consider an objection to this account as an account of moral understanding. If the meanings that give rise to moral understanding originate from the audience, how is it that the audience could be said to have *gained* moral understanding from the movie? Wouldn't the audience need already to have the understanding in question before they watched? I consider some possible responses before turning to a different approach, emphasizing the importance of developing new imagined versions of these stories in interpretative communities.

In the third part, I consider the role of audiences as communities making moral meanings together, including meanings that are not "in" the original artwork. Drawing on Bobo's research, I discuss how audience members can coordinate with one another to generate oppositional readings of artworks. This opens up the possibility of moral understanding coming about in a new way – through different audience members learning from one another's insights, and building moral understanding together. This leaves us with more interesting questions to be explored. I end the paper with three questions about screen stories as sites for moral learning that I think deserve further discussion.

The upshot of the paper is to emphasize a different way of thinking of the role of screen stories and moral understanding: that screen stories might serve as a *site* at which moral understanding takes place, rather than as a *source* of moral understanding.² Given that moral

² This is not to deny that a single work could not possibly serve as both site and source, at least with respect to different moral phenomena. I suspect such cases would be rare, however. Thanks to Carl Plantinga for pressing me to clarify this matter.

activity is itself social and relational, it seems appropriate that the sources of moral understanding could be as well.

I. *The Color Purple* and the oppositional gaze

Steven Spielberg was a controversial choice to direct an adaptation of Alice Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning novel, *The Color Purple*. There were many reasons given for doubting whether Spielberg was the right director for this film, including Spielberg's reputation for telling sentimental and crowd-pleasing stories, neither of which describe Walker's novel. Principally, however, the choice was controversial because of who Spielberg is: a straight white man. Spielberg was adapting a story written by a queer Black woman, and many questioned his ability to adapt this book in way that would capture what made the novel so meaningful and impactful in the first place. Further, Spielberg made numerous significant changes to Walker's original novel, including reducing the long-term, loving, sexual relationship between Shug and Celie from the novel to a single kiss in the film.

The film *The Color Purple* follows Celie (played as an adult by Whoopi Goldberg) from her life as a teenage girl at the hands of the rapist who she thinks is her father, to her forced marriage to the man she calls Mister (played by Danny Glover), who is also physically abusive. She is forcibly separated first from her children and then later from her sister Nettie (played by Akosua Busia). The story unfolds over several decades, showing Celie's learning to stand up for herself through her developing relationships with other women, especially a Blues singer named Shug (played by Margaret Avery), with whom she shares a deep connection, and her stepson's ex-wife Sofia (played by Oprah Winfrey). The film ends with Celie leaving Mister, inheriting her family home, and being reunited with her sister and her children.

White film critics mostly offered praise for Spielberg's adaptation -- Roger Ebert named it the best film of the year (Ebert 1985) -- and it was nominated for dozens of awards. However, Black film critics were less kind. Many Black critics noted important moral flaws in the film's portrayal of its Black characters (see Wilson 1986; Pinkney 1987). For example, Manthia Diawara argued that Spielberg's film takes up an attitude towards Blackness, and specifically towards the idea of the Black man, that expresses and reinforces dangerous prejudices (Diawara 1993). It does not particularly matter whether Spielberg consciously intended to put these attitudes and ideas in the film -- indeed, there is reason to think that he did not do so intentionally. Regardless of Spielberg's intentions, these racist attitudes, Diawara points out, are there in the film, and they constitute moral flaws.³

If the foregoing is right (and Diawara is far from alone in reading the film this way), then *The Color Purple* would not seem to be a fruitful film in promoting moral understanding. Even if the film were to have some moral virtues, it would also have numerous very serious moral flaws, and so the film would seem more likely to lead to moral error than to insight.

However, one might call Diawara's interpretation into question. Diawara's interpretation might be wrong, or, more interestingly, it might be one of a larger set of acceptable interpretations of the film. Our views about critical interpretation will constrain our views about what moral understandings a screen story can offer.⁴ Disagreements about critical interpretation are deep and serious. While critical monists will insist that there can be only one correct interpretation of the work -- so Diawara's view is either the correct one or it is not -- critical pluralists argue that more than one interpretation might be acceptable. I will not here try

³ There is a very difficult ethical problem in saying why such flaws would be morally salient. I favor a consequentialist approach (Harold 2020), but there are many different explanations.

⁴ Katherine Thomson-Jones argues this point eloquently in her (2012). My argument here is indebted to her insights.

to argue for critical pluralism. Others have done this ably (e.g., Stecker 1997). In what follows, I simply assume for the sake of argument that multiple acceptable interpretations, including interpretations not endorsed or foreseen by the artists, are possible.

In this case, the most important type of alternative, audience-generated interpretation for these purposes is what bell hooks famously called the “oppositional gaze” (hooks 1992).⁵ bell hooks is interested in the problem of how Black women are portrayed in popular media – mainly in television and Hollywood movies. Her focus is on popular artworks in visual media (primarily film and television) that feature a Black female character whose agency is compromised or artificially limited. She writes:

Talking with Black women of all ages and classes, in different areas of the United States, about their filmic looking relations, I hear again and again ambivalent responses to cinema. Only a few of the Black women I talked with remembered the pleasure of race movies, and even those who did, felt that pleasure interrupted and usurped by Hollywood. Most of the Black women I talked with were adamant that they never went to movies expecting to see compelling representations of Black femaleness. They were all acutely aware of cinematic racism – its violent erasure of Black womanhood. (hooks 1992, 119)

hooks says that many Black women simply turn away from mainstream white screen stories, as they are unable to take any pleasure from the experience.⁶ But others do engage with these stories, and hooks reports that she and other Black women often use what she calls the “oppositional gaze” to transform their experience of watching these movies and television shows. The oppositional gaze involves audience members generating their own interpretations and readings of these works. In gazing back at these works, she argues, Black women can take pleasure in the new versions of these stories that they imagine (hooks 1992, 119). hooks writes:

⁵ The discussion in this section builds on the discussion of the oppositional gaze in Chapter 9 of my *Dangerous Art* (2020).

⁶ Robert Sinnerbrink has suggested, and I think this is right, that this inability to take any pleasure in such screen stories constitutes a kind of imaginative resistance (Gendler 2000). It is an interesting question why some audiences overcome this resistance through the oppositional gaze and others do not.

We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels (hooks 1992, 128).

According to hooks, some Black women creatively construct new understandings of screen stories – understandings that enable them to engage more deeply with these works. In her research, Jacqueline Bobo demonstrated how Black women audiences engaged in just this sort of revision and interrogation in their understandings of Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (Bobo 1993; Bobo 1995). Bobo herself, like Diawara and many other Black film critics, is quite critical of Spielberg's adaptation. Bobo argues that Spielberg's choice to structure the film as a "universal" melodrama (he uses Dickens' *Oliver Twist* as a motif in the movie) undermines the specificity and nuance of the characters as they are portrayed in the novel. She criticizes the melodramatic structure and the use of comic and even slapstick moments (such as Sofia's Looney Tunes-like punches that send victims flying) that punctuate and thereby undermine many of the most serious dramatic scenes. But Bobo's detailed interviews with two different sets of Black women reveal a different way of thinking about the film: one that makes the film more enjoyable for Black women viewers, and that also offers a richer and more rewarding ethical vision.

Bobo conducted two studies, one in December 1987 in California, and the other in October 1988 in the Pacific Northwest (Bobo 1995, 97-102). The subjects, all Black women, were interviewed together. There were nine women in the first group and six in the second. The second interview was conducted while they were watching a videotape of the movie. All of the women in both groups had both read the book and seen the movie, though some had only read the book *after* having seen the movie adaptation. The women were all adults, between the ages of 30 and 60. They had grown up in different areas of the country, and had different levels of educational attainment. Some of them knew one another. These research subjects by and large

greatly enjoyed and admired the film, but their enjoyment was facilitated by reading the film differently than professional critics and scholars like Bobo and Diawara do.

Here is an example from Bobo's analysis that demonstrates the oppositional reading that these subjects formed in response to the film. Over and over in Bobo's interviews, subjects reported seeing the characters as more fully fleshed out than they are shown to be on screen. For example, consider their discussion of the dinner scene near the end of the movie, in which Celie finally confronts Mister and announces that she is leaving him. The scene ends with Celie holding a knife to Mister's throat. The subjects reported their admiration for Celie's growth as a character over the course of the film leading her to that point. One subject said:

I had different feelings all the way through the film, because first I was very angry, then I started to feel so sad I wanted to cry because of the way Celie was being treated. It just upset me, the way she was being treated and the way she was so totally dominated. But gradually, as time went on, she began to realize that she could do something for herself, that she could start moving and progressing, that she could start reasoning and thinking things out for herself. In the end I felt a little proud of her from the way she began and the way she grew. (Bobo 1995, 104-105)

For Bobo, as for many other critics, the development of this character arc was undermined by other elements of the film. Bobo writes: "moments of power were juxtaposed with comic and severely caricatured segments" (Bobo 1995, 105-106). Bobo notes, however, that her research subjects were able to simply ignore the elements of the film that would have undermined the effectiveness of the character development if they had focused on them: "If a viewer could physically edit the film and remove the comic routines, as it appears that the women I interviewed did mentally, then the scene featuring the women at the dinner table becomes a pivotal and empowering moment in the film" (Bobo 1995, 106).

Bobo's subjects posit a reading of the movie that makes the movie into a morally richer film than the one that Spielberg made. Bobo writes:

As much as [having Black filmmaker direct the movie] may have made a significant difference, the effects of the existence of the film were still important. And black women's reactions to it were a crucial part of that effect even though their reactions were themselves criticized. However, this again emphasizes that the ability of an audience to negotiate their responses is as important as the acknowledgement of their skill in doing so ... (Bobo 1995, 131)

So, Jacqueline Bobo's study supports the idea that audiences can be agents in making moral meanings, and those moral meanings may be of greater value than those found in the work itself.

II. How can this be learning?

This conclusion suggests an immediate objection, at least in the context of thinking about screen stories as sources of moral understanding. If, as Bobo argues, the skill in generating the moral understanding surrounding *The Color Purple* lies with those Black women who saw it, how can moral learning occur? The audience would be both the source and recipient of the putative learning. One cannot learn what one already knows.

One possible answer to this objection comes from Noël Carroll. Carroll claims that that this problem -- that audiences can only learn the moral messages that art teaches if they are already in some sense believe them -- is in fact quite a general one. He writes: "most of the moral beliefs that we might be said to acquire from art are things we already know and which, in fact, we must bring to the text in order to understand it" (Carroll 1998, 310). We don't learn truly new ideas from artworks, according to Carroll, for two reasons: (1) the only beliefs we can pick up from art are ones that we find familiar; and (2) we cannot even understand narratives unless we share the basic moral beliefs presumed by the work. So, works of art cannot by themselves be sources of moral learning.

However, Carroll offers a solution to this problem. Moral learning can be reconceived in terms of extending and deepening our pre-existing moral understanding; this is what he calls “clarificationism.” According to this view, art can allow us to see better the potential applications of and connections between the beliefs we already have; it can also help us to appreciate the value and meaning of what we already know. For example, we might say that Bobo’s research subjects already knew about the possibility of moral growth before watching, but the movie helped them to put their insights together so as to understand moral growth more clearly. Artworks like *The Color Purple* can be sources of moral learning in helping us to apply and deepen the moral insights that we already have.

While Carroll’s account works in the cases that he has in mind, I’m not sure it will do as a response here. The difficulty in cases where the audience generates an oppositional reading of the work is that the audience is doing even more, and the work (and artist) even less, than in the traditional case. As Bobo points out, her research subjects are engaging in the highly skilled activity of reconstructing a version of Spielberg’s film in which Celie’s character develops in a powerful and morally compelling way. Even the elements of the film that serve to clarify or apply moral ideas seem to be generated, in large part, by the work of the audience.

A second possible explanation comes from Peter Kivy. In his discussion of how works of literature can be sources of moral learning (Kivy 1997), Kivy suggests that readers play a critical role in generating moral learning through their active cognitive engagement with the work both during and after reading. On Kivy’s view, the “afterlife” of reading is that period of reflection and consideration that occurs when the audience is no longer reading, but is still turning over and considering the themes and ideas in the book. Kivy argues that such an afterlife offers an opportunity for the reader to “test hypotheses” suggested by the work in their imagination, and

thus to come to know that a particular moral claim is true, or false, and so advance our moral knowledge.

Kivy's account allows that audiences perform skilled work during and after the experience of taking in a work of art, and that work is necessary for their moral learning. This seems consistent with Bobo's report. However, Kivy's account falls short in two respects. First, Kivy's account is quite narrow in how he supposes that learning can come about: the work suggests a hypothesis, and the reader's role is to test that hypothesis. On Kivy's view, the reader is not generating new, oppositional interpretations of the work, but picking up on themes that are put there by the author – or, at any rate, that are there in the work. So Kivy still gives less agency to the audience than Bobo does. Second, Kivy neglects to discuss the important role that *communities* of audiences play in generating new ideas. The process that Kivy imagines is rather solitary, and the testing occurs inside the reader's head. However, Carl Plantinga and Garrett Strpko (2022) extend and adapt Kivy's view in a way that incorporates the role of communities.

Plantinga and Strpko take Kivy's notion of the reflective afterlife and add to it the idea of individual audience members working collectively to reflect morally on the moral ideas in the work. They make use of Wayne Booth's notion of "coduction" (Booth 1988), a process of discussion and conversation by which moral ideas from an artwork are elaborated and developed, to illustrate the social nature of the reflective process. Plantinga and Strpko write:

This promotion of moral reflection, negotiation, and understanding is just one of many potential benefits of film and television narrative. And it occurs not merely in relation to the films themselves, but as embedded in the constantly changing social and institutional practices of a culture. (Plantinga and Strpko 2022, xxx)

This, I think, is the key notion – the notion of moral reflection as a social process. The only piece lacking from Plantinga and Strpko's account is the idea that audiences can engage in this activity based not only on the themes and ideas from the work itself, but based on themes and

ideas that emerge from *alternative versions* of these works that audiences create by working together.

III: The role of audience communities

It is not an accident that Bobo conducted her interviews in groups, rather than interviewing subjects singly. Bobo argues that Black women viewing and discussing films together constitute what she calls an *interpretative community*:

Black women's challenge to cultural domination is part of an activist movement that works to improve the conditions of their lives ... As a group, these women make up what I have termed an interpretive community, which is strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by black women or feature them in significant ways. Working together the women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways. (Bobo 1995, 22)

This process resembles in part Plantinga and Strpko's conception of the reflective afterlife. But it goes further in one key respect. Bobo's research subjects use screen stories as raw material ("utilize representations") for use in a skilled activity that results in their creating something of political value: a new, morally potent re-interpretation of an existing work. The individual women work with one another, sharing insight, arguing with one another, and exchanging ideas. This is not to say that every member of the group comes away with the same interpretation or moral understanding of the film, but that the group discussion allows for one individual's insight or response to enrich and transform another's (and *vice versa*). This makes it possible for true moral learning to happen, even when the artwork itself is not the source of those insights. People learn from one another.

It is worth noting that while Bobo's study was designed in such a way as to create these interpretative communities, this does not invalidate her claims. The reason that Bobo constructed the study in this way was in order to model an authentic feature of the appreciation

and enjoyment of screen stories as they happen in ordinary experience. Real audiences do form interpretative communities on their own: friends and family watch films and television shows together and discuss. Appreciating screen stories is a deeply social experience.

Consider another exchange that Bobo reports, which shows different members of the group moving ideas forward collectively. Her research subjects are discussing a scene early in the film when, just after Mister has thrown Nettie off their property, Celie prepares to shave Mister. Mister grabs her arm and says: "You cut me, and I'll kill you." Bobo's subjects disagreed about whether Celie was thinking about harming Mister in that moment, and what it would mean if she had:

Whitney: She does think about it.

Phyllis: She thinks about cutting his throat, but she also thinks about the consequences of not killing him, which is another beating. Which is more abuse.

Morgan: I don't think that in this particular scene she even really thought about cutting his throat.

Phyllis: She's thinking about it; she's thinking about it now. But she's a young girl. She doesn't realize that if she cuts his throat bad enough he's not going to be able to hurt her. All she's thinking is that if she cuts his throat and he survives she's going to have to suffer the consequences.

Whitney: She's thinking about it now.

Phyllis: Even if she nicks the man. [She pauses.] It takes a lot to come out of low self-esteem. It takes a lot.

Whitney: But not a whole lot to get in it.

Phyllis: Not a whole lot to get in it, you're right. All it takes is one word, one person, somebody that you think is supposed to be caring about you, somebody that you have the impression that they define who you are. And if they tell you enough times and they treat you enough like you don't mean anything, you begin to actually believe that. (Bobo 1995, 109)

In this exchange, Phyllis, Whitney, and Morgan (not their real names) begin by arguing about Celie's motivations – what does Celie really mean to do and what is she considering – and move from there to a more general discussion about the relationship between self-esteem, abuse, and betrayal. The moral learning that happens here happens between and among these women. The role of Spielberg's film is to be a site for this learning, not the source.

What do I mean by a “site” for moral learning? The idea is that screen stories can provide a destination where people can gather together and discuss the same story, characters, and themes. The screen story in question is in one sense passive – it does not generate moral learning, but it gives everyone a reason to talk about moral matters in the first place, and thus offers an opportunity for groups to collectively generate alternative works that can provide such learning. The screen story is in effect a kind of gathering place where interpretive communities can work.

There are a number of questions one can ask about treating screen stories as sites for interpretive communities to engage in moral learning rather than as sources of authoritative moral teachers. First, what does it take for a screen story to be a fruitful location for these interpretive communities? Will any screen story do? Second, what, if anything, guarantees that interpretive communities will tend to generate moral truths and insights, rather than falsehoods and confusion? Third, what should we say about interpretive communities and aesthetics? Do such interpretive communities engage in art-making when they generate oppositional readings? Or, if the activity is not art-making, is it in the same family?

I am not going to offer a decisive answer these three questions here. I will instead try out some ideas as proposals for future discussion. These are tentative suggestions about how those discussions might go.

(1) Why was *The Color Purple*, with all of its flaws, such a rich and fruitful site for these interpretive communities? Jacqueline Bobo suggests that it was the existence of *The Color Purple* at that particular time and place. In the 1980s, a major Hollywood production with a nearly all-Black cast, based on a renowned literary work by a Black woman was unprecedented. No Hollywood studio had offered anything like it before. It was not necessarily the film’s aesthetic

or filmic qualities but its source material, its historical and cultural context, and its influence that made *The Color Purple* a site where serious moral conversation can happen.

So here perhaps is a feature that would make certain screen stories more conducive to serving this role. Works that are the first, or among the first, to tell a certain kind of story or portray a certain kind of character may be particularly attractive ground for interpretative communities to work in. If there is an audience who has been waiting to hear a story about a group that is not usually represented on screen, at least not in mainstream, high-budget, wide-release, then the first stories of that time will likely be a source of intense attention and interest from that audience: think of the reception of films like *Personal Best* (1982)⁷, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), or *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). As Paul Taylor notes, movies that take up controversial topics “can occasion and sustain vibrant participatory exercises in the criticism of self and society.”⁸ Even when the works are flawed (aesthetically, morally, or otherwise), pent-up demand for certain kinds of stories could generate not only interest and attention, but also enthusiasm for rethinking and reimagining these works.

But this is not to say that other factors are irrelevant. In some cases, we may be drawn to particular screen stories not for their cultural and historical relevance, but for their aesthetic virtues.⁹ And when we encounter morally problematic or troubling materials in a work that is aesthetically admirable in some way, we might be tempted to become oppositional spectators, and form some of these interpretative communities. Cynthia Freeland offers the example of

⁷ I am grateful to Cynthia Freeland for suggesting this example and for recommending the discussion of this film’s impact in Ellsworth (1990). Ellsworth’s analysis of the reception of *Personal Best* by lesbian audiences shares some striking similarities as well as differences with the reception of *The Color Purple* by Black women, as described by Bobo.

⁸ Taylor, [this volume](#).

⁹ This line of thought, as well as the *Chinatown* example, come from Cynthia Freeland in her comments on a draft of this paper, which was presented at the Screen Stories and Moral Understanding Seminar on April 16, 2021.

Roman Polanski's 1974 film *Chinatown*. The film is in many ways a simply magnificent work of neo-noir, with its surprising, twisty plot, electric performances (especially from John Huston), and famous score. But it is also deeply racist in its portrayal both of Asian characters and of the idea of the "Orient" itself. So works like *Chinatown* might end up engendering some oppositional interpretations that push back against these racist elements, and the aesthetic virtues of *Chinatown* play a role in making it as generative as it is.¹⁰

One might suggest that technology makes a difference, and that contemporary audiences making use of social media may be more inclined to form interpretative communities. It seems entirely plausible that technology has made an impact on interpretative communities, but technology does not tell the whole story. No doubt technology makes communication easier and quicker, but people have been forming communities around artworks that excite them for a long time before social media existed. I remember as a child growing up in the 1970s joining a *Star Wars* fan club. I was sent a monthly newsletter; I collected trading cards; I visited a local "hobby shop" to talk with new people and sometimes make new friends. I was able, in other words, to be part of a community with strangers whom I connected with only through our shared love for these movies.

There are likely other qualities that make some screen stories more attractive as sites for interpretative communities to create valuable oppositional readings as well: for example, perhaps the presence of preexisting groups and institutions that focus attention on particular types of screen stories makes a difference.¹¹ This is not an exhaustive list.

¹⁰ Some philosophers have argued that works of art with deep and serious moral flaws thereby have less aesthetic value. I have argued against this claim in Chapter 8 of my (2020).

¹¹ I am grateful to Carl Plantinga for this suggestion. See Plantinga and Strpko (2022) for further discussion of this idea.

(2) Why should we believe that the influence of interpretive communities on moral learning will be positive? The cases that Bobo studies (she also looks closely at Julie Dash's 1992 film *Daughters of the Dust*) are selected in part because they facilitated morally and politically rich interpretive processes. However, there seems to be no guarantee that this would be the usual result.

There are, in addition to Bobo's apparently rather admirable interpretive communities, other kinds of interpretive communities, including communities of what the television critic Emily Nussbaum has called "bad fans." The bad fan, Nussbaum says, "views antiheroes as heroes. The archetypal bad fan shrugs off any notion of moral complexity; he fast-forwards through arguments with the nagging wife and freeze-frames the bloody whackings" (Nussbaum 2014). The bad fan is determined to experience a work according to *his* moral view of the world, not according to the work's own moral framework, and the bad fan's moral view of the world is not an admirable one.

According to Nussbaum, the first prominent example of the bad fan can be seen in the response to the 1970s television show *All in the Family*. The creator of *All in the Family*, Norman Lear, intended that his show would satirize the main character, Archie Bunker, and ridicule his bigotry and closed-mindedness. The first episode even included a warning during the opening credits about Archie's bigotry, calling Archie's prejudices "absurd."¹² However, Nussbaum notes, many fans did not respond to the character in that way at all. To them, Archie was not an absurd caricature, but a refreshing truth teller. They saw Archie and his racist views as

¹² The disclaimer said: "The program you are about to see is *All in the Family*. It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices, and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show - in a mature fashion - just how absurd they are."

triumphant, regardless of how the narrative itself attempted to shape viewer's responses.

Nussbaum cites a study by Vidmar and Rokeach that looked at these contrary responses:

In 1974, the social psychologists Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach offered some evidence for this argument in a study published in the *Journal of Communication* using two samples, one of teenagers, the other of adults. Subjects, whether bigoted or not, found the show funny, but most bigoted viewers didn't perceive the program as satirical. They identified with Archie's perspective, saw him as winning arguments, and, "perhaps most disturbing, saw nothing wrong with Archie's use of racial and ethnic slurs." (Nussbaum 2019, 44-45; Vidmar and Rokeach 1974, 42)

Many of Nussbaum's other examples of bad fans are similar: e.g., audience members who admire Tony Soprano from *The Sopranos* or Walter White from *Breaking Bad*. These are main characters that we are meant to see as antiheroes (Vaage 2016), villains, or what A. W. Eaton has called "rough heroes" (Eaton 2010). They are characters with rich, complex inner lives who often do and say terrible things. These shows mean for us to care about these characters but not to admire them as moral exemplars.¹³ We are supposed to recognize and regret their moral flaws. However, in each case, the response of certain audience members has been to overlook those flaws or even reverse them, imagining these character's vices as virtues. Bad fans reimagine these works so that what are significant moral failings appear to be virtues.

So bad fans would be like the mirror-reverse of Bobo's interpretative communities. Like Bobo's communities, these fans mentally edit and reinterpret works, but they do so in ways that make the works morally worse, not better. And bad fans can also work in communities. There seems to be no reason to assume, in other words, that oppositional readings and communities of audiences will normally or mostly serve to generate positive moral learning. Oppositional readings might instead generate moral confusion and immoral distortion, or perhaps they will

¹³ Murray Smith distinguishes between works that merely align us with characters, and get us to see things from their point of view, and those that encourage what he calls allegiance with those characters, encouraging us to endorse their values. See Smith (1995).

change nothing at all, morally speaking. Sometimes audiences gather and reimagine works not in order to bring out a change in the moral or political ideas in the work but rather to fix a “plot hole” or re-imagine some morally neutral part of the narrative.¹⁴

There is, I think, an even deeper worry about the idea that interpretative communities will tend to produce re-interpretations of screen stories that are morally better than the originals. One reason for thinking that “good fans” are good is that they may have the perspective necessary to see moral issues more fully. This view gets support from standpoint epistemology – the view that people who are marginalized politically can achieve special moral insight not readily available to others (Hartsock 1983). The Black women audience members Bobo studied may then be able to produce a deeper and more revealing moral re-interpretation of the film precisely because of their race and gender.

However, this seems too simple. Recall that Bobo, Diawara, and many other Black critics did not share the views of Bobo’s subjects. The question of what kind of interpretation of *The Color Purple* is best from a moral or political point of view is not an easy one to answer. The various subjects do not all agree with one another; these non-expert subjects do not agree with professional critics; and in general the idea of a morally “best” interpretation is ill-defined and perhaps dubious. A different approach might be to follow Paul Taylor’s lead in his essay in this volume. Taylor argues that there are two types of moral understanding: moral understanding as an epistemic problem (getting the moral facts right), and moral understanding as an appropriate relationship between ethical communities.¹⁵ Taylor claims that the latter type of

¹⁴ I am grateful to Robert Sinnerbrink for emphasizing this point.

¹⁵ Taylor’s examples of ethical communities include those “in which women matter less than men and embracing the myth of America is more important than condemning the sexual violence and social death of slavery” and those “who are brought up short by the liberties that *Hamilton* takes with its historical figures and by its willingness to prioritize nationalism over decolonization.”

moral understanding is both harder and more important. Although it seems right to say that Bobo's subjects' re-imagining of *The Color Purple* would represent greater moral understanding in the first, epistemic sense, than Spielberg's own flawed conception, it feels strange to rest with that conclusion. If Taylor is right, the more important task, and I think this is precisely what scholars like Bobo are trying to do, is to take the oppositional readings and the standard readings and bring them together and talk through the differences. Ethical understanding may be achieved through a process of negotiating between differing insights and interpretations.

(3) Are these interpretive communities also *aesthetic* communities? Jacqueline Bobo describes what she calls "mental editing" that her research subjects engage in, and remarks on the skill required to do this interpretive work. There are numerous examples of fans actually producing, singly or as parts of communities, artworks: fan fiction, fan edits and re-edits of existing properties, and all kinds of art that are more tangentially related to the original, such as tattoos and paintings of characters. Some – though certainly not all – of these artworks, like many of the re-edits, are made with moral aims in mind. (And then there are the cases where fans, by virtue of letter-writing, petition, or other forms of collective pressure, actually get producers and directors to alter their plans for serial fictional works as they are being made.) Clearly some of these activities count as art-making. If someone paints a picture, or writes a story, or writes and produces an original episode of an existing television show (as has been done dozens of times by *Star Trek* fans), these clearly count as art-making activities, even if those activities are legally dubious for copyright reasons.

But what about the merely "mental edits" that Bobo describes? If interpretive communities don't engage in the material production of works but instead reimagine and reconceive works, should we recognize this "skilled activity" as a form of aesthetic activity?

Bobo's subjects produce, we might say, a *conception* of *The Color Purple* that is importantly distinct from the original. But is to produce a conception to produce an artwork? To answer this question would require doing some metaphysics, and those sympathetic to Collingwood (1938) might be quick to agree that art proper is the conception of the work and not the mere physical execution: the "mental edit" is the important part, not the material process that follows. This claim is of course a highly contentious one, and fortunately we do not need to settle it here.

The important question in front of us is not whether interpretative communities make art, but whether interpretative communities engage in aesthetic activity. Bobo rightly recognizes that interpretive communities do hard, important, creative work in their engagement with screen stories. This work deserves and rewards our attention. As Dominic McIver Lopes has recently argued (Lopes 2018), a wide variety of practices in and around the arts display and develop aesthetic skills.

What can we conclude from all of this? The aim of this chapter has been to explore an alternative to a common way of thinking about how screen stories offer moral lessons, one in which the audience plays more active, even oppositional role, in articulating the moral meanings. Interpretative communities that form around certain screen stories can produce original exciting reinterpretations of screen stories. And those reinterpretations deserve to count, at least sometimes, as aesthetic achievements and as moral achievements. This fact points us towards some further interesting questions, about the moral qualities of different interpretive communities, and about the aesthetic significance of this interpretative work. There is clearly a great deal more to be said.

It is significant that when screen stories serve as sites and not merely sources of moral learning, they often do so through communities of audiences. This makes a certain amount of sense. Morality, whatever else it does, helps us to relate to one another well and respectfully. So

it is fitting that improving and widening our moral vision should happen in conversation with one another. We can learn from screen stories, certainly. But we can also learn from one another, and screen stories can serve to offer a site where we can have that conversation.¹⁶

¹⁶ I am very grateful to the other members of the Screen Stories and Moral Understanding Seminar for their comments and questions on an earlier draft of this paper. I want to particularly thank Cynthia Freeland, Robert Sinnerbrink, and Carl Plantinga for their detailed comments and suggestions, which were too numerous to note individually here.

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