

# THE ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY: HOW WE OUGHT TO ADDRESS THE ART OF IMMORAL ARTISTS



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## ABSTRACT

I argue that biographical information is akin to other non-aesthetic, social, historical, or political information. As such, artist's biographies are always relevant and important when interpreting art. While the meaning and value of a piece of art is not determined by any single piece of contextual information, neither is its meaning and value ever entirely separated from context. In some cases, however, a piece of art that is technically magnificent may be experienced as repugnant when the artist has committed egregious acts.

## I. THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY

In “The Intentional Fallacy,” literary theorist William Wimsatt and philosophy Monroe Beardsley discuss the problem of trying to interpret art while relying on authorial intent.<sup>1</sup> One commits the intentional fallacy when one attempts to discern the meaning of a piece of art in part or in full by assuming the intent or purpose of the person who created it.<sup>1</sup> Their primary argument is that, when assessing the success of an artistic work, “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for” determining this success.<sup>2</sup> Their anti-intentionalist argument is based on the notion that the artwork “is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it.”<sup>3</sup>

They examine three types of evidence used when interpreting artworks: external, internal, and intermediate. Ultimately, Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that one commits the intentional fallacy when they “look to features *external* to the work for help in coming to an understanding of the work.”<sup>4</sup> External evidence includes anything private—journals, letters, or reported conversations—that reveals how or why the artist created the work.<sup>5</sup> However, using evidence that is *internal* to the artwork and available to the public—such as formal aesthetic elements—avoids committing the fallacy. Finally, Wimsatt and Beardsley describe *intermediate* evidence as that which concerns “the character of the author, or about private and semi-private meanings attached to words.”<sup>6</sup> Wimsatt and Beardsley note that the problem with this third type of evidence is that it is more slippery; use of it only *sometimes* leads one to commit the intentional fallacy. Further, they suggest that it is difficult to distinguish intermediate evidence from

- 1 William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (Summer 1946): 468-488.
- 2 Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 468.
- 3 Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 470.
- 4 Gary Hagberg, “Artistic Intention and Mental Image,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 3 (October 1988): 66, doi:10.2307/3333051. Italics Added.
- 5 Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 478.
- 6 Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 478.



external evidence. They admit, “the three types of evidence, especially [external] and [intermediate], shade into one another so subtly that it is not always easy to draw a line between examples, and hence arises the difficulty for criticism.”<sup>7</sup>

Besides Wimsatt and Beardsley, other philosophers have engaged with the intentional fallacy and the role of the artist’s biographical information. Noel Carroll interprets hard anti-intentionalism as a position where “reference to artistic intention and the biography of the artist are never relevant to interpretation of the meaning of artworks.”<sup>8</sup> However, in response to Carroll’s interpretation of anti-intentionalism, philosopher Kent Wilson clarifies that anti-intentionalists do not necessarily deny the relevance of biographical information to interpretation but instead deny the strict constraint that this information ought to have on interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

I agree with both Wilson and Wimsatt and Beardsley that an artist cannot control the ultimate reading of his art after he has created it. In fact, Wilson demonstrates how untenable intentionalism is with an example where a sexist remark, intended to be a humorous quip, is still interpreted as degrading regardless of what the speaker’s intentions are.<sup>10</sup> My own argument embraces the notion that we can interpret art irrespective of what the artist says about his work. I argue that we *ought* to interpret or understand art not as the artist intends or suggests but instead by taking biographical information into account alongside other aesthetic elements to inform our critical understanding of the works. However, unlike what Wimsatt and Beardsley assume about the detachment of the author, I do not agree that one can ever abstract the artist away from the work or, as William H. Gass suggests, forget that someone did it.<sup>11</sup> While the artist may not be a sufficient condition for the work of art—as many other factors contribute to the creation of an artwork—the artist is certainly a necessary condition for its creation. Acknowledging that someone was responsible for creating the work, regardless of what they may have intended, is central to my position.

I argue that biographical information regarding the immorality of an artist’s character is important and should color our general understanding, interpretations, or reinterpretations of art. In cases where the immoral character of the artist is known, this information

7 Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” 478.

8 Noel Carroll, “The Intentional Fallacy: Defending Myself,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 3 (1997): 305, doi:10.2307/431800.

9 Kent Wilson, “Confession of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist: Exposing Myself,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 3 (July 1997): 310, doi:10.2307/431801.

10 Wilson, “Confession of a Weak Anti-Intentionalist,” 310-311.

11 William H. Gass, “The Death of the Author,” *Salmagundi*, no. 65 (October 1984): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547668>.

ought to be taken into legitimate critical consideration. Theories of interpretation should not restrict criticism so that it neglects general biographical information. This view provides a morally defensible way to address the art of problematic artists.

## II. IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

Philosopher Kathleen Stock relies on intentionalism to develop a solution to the problem of enjoying the work of morally problematic artists, such as Woody Allen. Her solution is connected to what philosophers of fiction term “the puzzle of imaginative resistance.”<sup>12</sup> This puzzle, she explains, is where readers resist imagining what certain fictional passages ask them to imagine. Stock suggests that we experience imaginative resistance when “we are led to think...that those passages are asking us to engage in...counterfactual imagining.”<sup>13</sup> This kind of imagining is “in service of what would or could or might be the case” given that some other imagined scenario were also the case.<sup>14</sup> Some pieces of fiction, as intended by the author, direct us to make and believe certain counterfactual conclusions. However, in Stock’s view, had belief in these counterfactual conclusions not been ascribable to *authorial intention*, readers would not experience resistance. As it relates to the problem of Woody Allen and his filmography, Stock concludes that we are not morally compromised in enjoying his work because Allen’s problematic values are not endorsed in any of his work, save for *Manhattan*. As she phrases it “there is no serious implication in any of his films, intended to be believed by the viewer, that pedophilia is acceptable or in any way permissible.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, one cannot interpret the films as inviting, through imagining, the endorsement of a counterfactual about the permissibility of pedophilia.

There are two problems with Stock’s argument that keep it from being entirely compelling. First, she relies on the notion of artistic intention to suggest that Allen does not endorse pedophilia—a notion that I have already discussed as irrelevant. If Allen had suggested that *Manhattan* was *not* intended to endorse pedophilia, that would not change or undermine arguments, stemming from evidence provided by the film, that *Manhattan* does indeed endorse pedophilia. Second, the problem with her claim that we are “uncompromised” in enjoying Allen’s films is that she does not consider that our attention matters and is taken into account when deciding what kind of art gets made,

12 Kathleen Stock, “Imaginative Resistance and the Woody Allen Problem,” *Thinking About Fiction* (blog), November 13, 2017, <https://www.thinkingaboutfiction.me/blog/2017/11/12/imaginative-resistance-and-the-woody-allen-problem>.

13 Stock, “Imaginative Resistance.”

14 Stock, “Imaginative Resistance.”

15 Stock, “Imaginative Resistance.”



curated, or financially supported. If people with the financial power to fund art recognize that we are willing to look at and appreciate art that is made by problematic artists, these artists will continue to enjoy support, financial benefits, and even persist in their moral transgressions without trouble. Therefore, it seems we may be compromised in enjoying the works of Allen, even when his films do not endorse pedophilia. However, Stock's argument that the problem of imaginative resistance (regarding immorality in art) signals an aesthetic flaw in the work suggests that these works may be rejected for moral and aesthetic reasons. Numerous philosophers have engaged with this particular position, and it is worth examining further.

### III. DEALING WITH INFECTED ART: OTHER APPROACHES

There are reasons for condemning the art of immoral artists, especially when we believe the work demonstrates, expresses, or is connected to what is known or believed about an artist's immorality or problematic character. Stephanie Patridge argues that the immoral character of the artist "not only legitimately affects our appreciative response...but we might think that they should."<sup>16</sup> Specifically, she suggests that "[i]t seems that sometimes facts about an artist's moral life will affect our interpretation of, attribution of appreciative relevant properties to, and overall evaluation of an artist's work."<sup>17</sup> However, Patridge argues that there is no similar plausible claim to be made when the art is not obviously infected. In other words, if the artwork is uninfected, our appreciative response is unaffected by any revelations about the artist's moral life.

Similar to Patridge, Eva Dadlez posits that there may be ethical grounds for condemning art when the work appears to "endorse a problematic attitude."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, she notes that other philosophers believe that this kind of endorsement undermines the *aesthetic* value of the piece. Specifically, she draws on David Hume's argument in "Of the Standard of Taste" where he claims that we cannot "relish" works where "vicious manners are described without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation."<sup>19</sup> She then notes Carroll's

assessment of Hume's argument that suggests this incapacity to enjoy morally flawed works indicates an aesthetic flaw.<sup>20</sup> Dadlez and Patridge are right to suggest that when the immorality of an artist manifests in the artwork, those works are potentially aesthetically flawed or at least *less* good. One may find it harder to become immersed in the artwork and can experience, as Stock discusses, imaginative resistance. In fact, one study suggests that there is a strong correlation between one's moral evaluation and aesthetic evaluation.<sup>21</sup> Participants in the study who judged the actions of the artistic subject to be wrong also viewed it as less aesthetically appealing. Further, once one becomes aware of the fact that an artist is immoral, and the artwork directly reminds you of that odious fact, it seems highly unlikely that one could leave that knowledge behind so that our appreciative responses are unaffected.

However, Dadlez and Patridge are unclear about what they mean when they suggest that we have grounds for "condemning" or "rejecting" these works of art. I do not agree with one possible interpretation—that these works should be removed from our institutions—so long as the art demonstrates impressive technical skill or maintains historical importance. As philosophers Matthew Strohl and Mary Beth Willard point out, if one views and appreciates art strictly through a moral lens, this may ruin one's ability to appreciate art, especially since the revealed immorality of our favorite artists seems so common.<sup>22</sup> The person who views art through a moralistic lens is doing so "at the expense of severely impoverishing their aesthetic life."<sup>23</sup> However, it appears correct that our aesthetic evaluations are inevitably altered in light of these immoral revelations. These works are less good in one morally-rooted way, but their overall quality is not entirely diminished. As Berys Gaut suggests,

there are a plurality of aesthetic values, of which the ethical values of artworks are but a single kind. So...a work of art may be judged to be aesthetically good *insofar* as it is beautiful, is formally unified and strongly expressive, but aesthetically bad *insofar* as...it manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, since I am more concerned with how to address the art of problematic artists—regardless if the artwork is infected or not—I

16 Stephanie Patridge, "Some Thoughts on Art, Appreciation, and Masturbation," *Daily Nous*, last modified November 21, 2017, <http://dailynous.com/2017/11/21/philosophers-art-morally-troubling-artists/#Patridge>.

17 Patridge, "Some Thoughts on Art."

18 Eva Dadlez, "Flaws, Aesthetic and Moral," *Daily Nous*, last modified November 21, 2017, <http://dailynous.com/2017/11/21/philosophers-art-morally-troubling-artists/#Dadlez>.

19 Dadlez, "Flaws, Aesthetic and Moral."

20 Dadlez, "Flaws, Aesthetic and Moral."

21 Shen-yi Liao, "Genre Moderates Morality's Influence on Aesthetics" (unpublished manuscript, University of Puget Sound, 2010), 5.

22 Matthew Strohl and Mary Beth Willard, "Aesthetics, Morality, and a Well-Lived Life," *Daily Nous*, last modified November 21, 2017, <http://dailynous.com/2017/11/21/philosophers-art-morally-troubling-artists/#StrohlWillard>.

23 Strohl and Willard, "Aesthetics, Morality."

24 Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 183.



believe Patridge and Dadlez ultimately do not go far enough with their interpretive theories.

Interestingly, Patridge also considers cases where certain moral violations are so egregious that they could plausibly merit the rejection of the artist's work as a whole. She suggests that this may be the case when it comes to the artworks of Adolf Hitler, but she is not so sure how well this line of argument would apply to the films of Roman Polanski. Her reasoning is that Hitler's racism is more of a settled moral violation than Polanski's rape of a female child.<sup>25</sup> Patridge's attention to Hitler's art is not completely satisfying, since his work does not exhibit high technical ability, nor does it have historic aesthetic importance. The art world's lack of an original Hitler painting is not much of a loss, at least as it compares to the potential loss of a Polanski film. The tension that we feel when we find out that the person who created our favorite work of art is a morally flawed individual is not a tension felt in the case of Hitler's art.

## IV. APPLYING MY APPROACH TO ALL ART: OBJECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Again, my view is that our interpretations of art should take knowledge of the artist's immorality into account. If the artwork is infected, our direct aesthetic evaluations of the work are and should be colored, as Patridge and Dadlez suggest. This is true even if the artwork is uninfected, even if the moral failing is not touched on in the art. Audiences and critics have a duty, when the immorality of an artist is revealed, to bring this knowledge with them into the galleries, theaters, or other venues where one may engage with the art of problematic artists.

As I have noted, some anti-intentionalists hold that artworks should be interpreted, appreciated, or engaged with on "pure" aesthetic grounds, separate from any contextual information such as biography. The problem with this is that obtaining a pure reading or interpretation of anything is nearly impossible. We often bring something—an assumption or ideological framework—with us when we engage with cultural artifacts like artworks. Those who think or argue that they are doing a neutral, pure, or objective analysis are choosing to ignore the fact that we enter modes of aesthetic evaluation and artistic interpretation already inculcated with certain *beliefs*, which are often informed by the status quo or dominant cultural ideology. Therefore, ostensibly "pure" aesthetic evaluation and interpretation actually stems from an ideology already embedded in one's belief system, and—embedded so deeply and imperceptibly—it feels like an objective

insight or a truth more than just another interpretive belief.

Further, the social, historical, and political context of an artwork is frequently mentioned by art critics and historians. This type of contextual information is seen as valuable, legitimate, valid, and important for developing a fuller, richer interpretive understanding of the art. If these non-aesthetic features are considered legitimate grounds for criticism and interpretive theory, biographical information, especially regarding the immorality of an artist, should be considered legitimate grounds for interpretation as well. Biographical information is just another piece of non-aesthetic, contextual information just like the social, historical, and political context. Perhaps part of the reason why biographical information about artists—especially when it concerns the immorality of male artists whose moral transgression are so often forms of misogynistic behavior—is not considered as critically legitimate as other non-aesthetic features has to do with the male dominance in the field of art criticism and art in general. For one, recognition of this male dominance in the art world reveals that *the* viewpoint of what counts as legitimate criticism is ultimately a male viewpoint. Further, given this dominant male viewpoint in conjunction with the male-saturated art world, there are structural incentives to put forth non-provocational criticism that does not endanger the status of prominent male artists. Ultimately, the primarily male critics and aesthetic theorists wish—implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally—to protect the group of largely male artists. If we acknowledge biographical information concerning the immorality of male artists, and consider this information right alongside any other aesthetic interpretation of art, the status and reputation of those male artists is seriously threatened. As a result, my approach to the problem of dealing with the art of immoral artist's is likewise a threat to the dominance and privilege of male artists.

In fact, one major and potentially threatening implication to my approach is that it helps to reshape the culture around artists and what is considered legitimate criticism. On my approach, we need not tolerate or accept that problematic artists are the norm. Nor need we believe that good art comes as the expense of being a bad person. My approach has higher demands for artists and their character by signaling that their moral transgressions are relevant and unacceptable. Further my approach urges the development and embracing of critical theories that acknowledge biographical information as not just *sometimes* relevant but rather as always relevant and always important. Ultimately, my approach punishes the artist, not the patron. The interpretations that result from my approach avoid the "pure" aesthetic analysis which allows for the artist's skills or "genius" to override and erase his moral abuses. In other words, artists are no longer glorified persons who can have their reputations protected or elevated by their artistry.

<sup>25</sup> Patridge, "Some Thoughts on Art."



However, the audience or patrons get to “keep” or engage with the art while acknowledging the problematic nature of the person who created the work. My approach further punishes the problematic artist by encouraging them to recognize that our knowledge of their immoral abuses denies them the privilege of a “pure” reading of their work. This is precisely what photographer Nicholas Nixon regretfully recognized when he was accused of sexual misconduct by several of his students. He asked to have his photography exhibition taken down, claiming “I believe it is impossible for these photographs to be viewed on their own merits any longer.”<sup>26</sup> Under my approach, this is what artists must contend with when making moral decisions in their private and public lives.



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<sup>26</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, “Boston Museum Closes Nicholas Nixon Photography Show Early,” *New York Times*, last modified April 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/arts/design/ica-boston-closes-nicholas-nixon-photography-show.html>.

