

Finding Certainty in Subjectivity

Prompt: Is it morally permissible to enjoy and appreciate art by artists whose lives were (or are) seriously morally flawed? Defend your decision.

Word Count: 1497

“When we refer to people, we use the past tense, but when we refer to art, we use the present tense, because art lives on.” While this statement seems like a dull convention of English grammar, it reveals the possibility of a distinction between art and its artist. While art can be viewed as an extension of the artist, it may also be viewed as autonomous, transcendental work, utterly independent of the artist. Due to the subjectivity associated with the messaging behind artwork and the standards of morality, a loose distinction between art created between a problematic artist and art that encourages an audience to adopt a harmful viewpoint may be established by the consumer nonetheless. While we cannot say that there is a situation in which an artist can be completely detached from their work, it is important to judge artwork both accompanied by the implications of its context and independently. The extent to which it is morally permissible to enjoy art by artists whose lives were/are morally flawed is governed by the subjectivity of the artwork and the inability of the audience to claim, with certainty, that supporting the art directly condones such behaviour.

With the rise of cancel culture, many audiences have been quick to distance themselves from artwork when the artist is revealed to possess a morally flawed viewpoint. A prime example is the exposure of J.K. Rowling’s transphobic views circa 2019.¹ The response to this news was

¹ “JK Rowling Says She Knew Her Views on Transgender Issues Would Make ‘Many Folks Deeply Unhappy.’” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 15 Mar. 2023, www.theguardian.com/books/2023/mar/15/jk-rowling-views-transgender-issues-many-folks-deeply-unhappy. Accessed 28 July 2023.

profound, ranging from the public denouncement of the franchise by Harry Potter fans to the renaming of the game “Quidditch”.² The Harry Potter series, despite its intrinsic flaws and the flaws of the artist, was and can be perceived by some as being a representation of empowerment to those who are “different” through the characterization of its protagonist. 20th-century literary analyst Roland Barthes proposed the “Death of the Author” theory, stating that an author does not create a text; the reader does by reading it.³ This theory may lend to the importance of assessing art through a lens that does not allow the artist’s intentions to overpower audience perspectives. Some believe that letting a piece of art, such as a book franchise, fade into obsolescence by refusing to engage with it serves as retribution for the artist’s immoral beliefs. However, such a task is not so easily accomplished. On the contrary, it is almost a moral *duty* to appreciate art by artists whose lives were morally flawed. We can recognize what hateful beliefs look like while acknowledging that the person in possession of these beliefs is talented and their artwork is impactful. By continuing to re-interpret and appreciate art created by someone problematic, we redirect the narrative and control the legacy of the art.

However, an issue emerges when the artist’s immorality explicitly calls upon audiences to express and support the same sentiments. In December of 2022, musician Tory Lanez was convicted of shooting fellow musician Megan Thee Stallion in both feet.⁴ During this process, Lanez himself released an album maintaining that he was framed for the shooting, accusing

² Pandey, Manish. “Harry Potter: Quidditch Renamed to Quadball over JK Rowling Link.” *BBC News*, BBC, 21 July 2022, www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-62252514.

³ *Barthes, Roland the Death of the Author - Sites.Tufts.Edu*, sites.tufts.edu/english292b/files/2012/01/Barthes-The-Death-of-the-Author.pdf.

⁴ “Column: Megan Thee Stallion Was Right. but She’s One of Too Many Women Who Aren’t Believed.” *Los Angeles Times*, 24 Dec. 2022, www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-12-24/megan-thee-stallion-tory-lanez-trial-black-women-misogyny.

Stallion of lying. Lines in songs such as “This b— lie about getting shot but she still a stallion” evoked responses from the community ranging from silence to agreement. Although Lanez was convicted, he and many others maintained that he was being framed, perpetuating a culture of fear amongst Black women around reporting crimes such as assault. Supporters of Stallion took to social media to voice their support for her and took actions such as unsubscribing from the practice of streaming Lanez’s music, ceasing to support his art because of what he, and it subsequently, represents. The importance of distancing from his work lies in preventing the further dissemination of this perspective, serving more significance than its subsequent decrease in monetary support. Each Spotify stream of a song earns the artist as little as \$0.0033 per stream with other platforms clocking in at similar rates.⁵ With Lanez’s rumoured net worth around \$4 million, audiences do not affect his financial stability by unsubscribing from his work.⁶ Engaging with Lanez’s artwork in a way that does not allow him to profit from the practice does not make it morally justified as we as the audience are condoning such views. Despite the subjectivity of art in itself, Lanez’s album is an example of art that exhibits a degree of certainty surrounding its intentions both when contextualized and presented independently. While Lanez’s art and its impact are important to examine and learn from, it is not morally permissible to enable the artist and *enjoy* the art because it perpetuates harmful rhetoric.

In attempting to separate art and its artist, the Aestheticist movement in the latter half of the 19th century maintained that ethical criteria should not be brought to bear on the aesthetic

⁵ Mulroy, Clare. “Spotify Pays Artists (Sort of), but Not per Stream. Here’s How It Breaks Down.” *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 5 May 2023, www.usatoday.com/story/life/2022/10/22/how-much-per-spotify-stream/8094437001/.

⁶ “Tory Lanez Net Worth.” *Celebrity Net Worth*, 27 Mar. 2023, www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/richest-rappers/tory-lanez-net-worth/.

realm because subjecting art to ethical issues ignores its true essence.⁷ This argument was used to defend Picasso's work; while he is credited for revolutionizing the art world, he was a misogynist. Poet Jay Parini argued that an artist's moral character is not tied to their artistic greatness or the products of their creativity, meaning that Picasso's unjust treatment of his subjects - the women in his life - should have no impact on our perception of the aesthetics of his work.⁸ While Picasso outwardly claimed that "Women are machines for suffering", perhaps the subjectivity of his paintings allows viewers to appreciate his art without adopting a mindset that degrades women. Many believe that Picasso's portrayal of his female subjects was vulgar and demeaning at times, reflecting his unfeeling attitude towards them. For example, in his 1932 *The Dream*, Picasso portrays his mistress, Marie-Therese, as having half of her face in a phallic shape. Because it is entirely possible for an artist's work to be unrepresentative of their true feelings towards their subject, the extent to which we may be certain that Picasso's immorality shines through in his work is governed by our perception of his values corroborated with our own views. In this case, the shortcomings of celebrating Picasso's work are not commonly acted upon because of the perception that his artistic contributions overshadow his immorality. Parini's claims are valid in that an immoral person's talent may still be recognized, but unconvincing in the essence of art is detached from ethical issues. If anything, the essence of art is captured by the issues it evokes; we can enjoy the aesthetics of Picasso's art, but doing so without recognition of his moral character and its implications is the true act of immorality. While it may be morally unjust to celebrate art that objectifies and ridicules women, the appreciation of the

⁷ Dixon, Daisy. "Conflicted Art: How to Approach Works by Morally Bad Artists." *Art Aesthetics Magazine*, 30 May 2019, www.artaesthetics.net/publications/2019/5/26/conflicted-art-how-to-approach-works-by-morally-bad-artists.

⁸ Ibid

context under which it was made provokes conversations about moral issues such as those portrayed in Picasso's work, making it an important pillar in the history of art.

It is believed that *great* art should be able to stand alone without being supplemented by the artist's life or morality. A prime example of this is Banksy, an anonymous British graffiti art, known for his anti-war, anti-capitalist, and anti-authoritarian works.⁹ While Banksy's true identity remains unknown, his intentions for creating the artwork are found in the captions accompanying his graffiti pieces or on his websites. Banksy serves as an example of the detachment of art from a person. While Banksy is known for his art and its impact, the inner complexities of him as an individual remain unknown due to his anonymity, prompting the assumption by audiences that his artwork is representative of his true ideals. Banksy is an example of a case where the morality of the artist is *unknown*. For now, audiences are left only to interpret his work at face value. If it is true that the attachment of an artist's morality offers a more certain interpretation of a piece of artwork and diminishes its ability to be assessed in a subjective manner, then the detachment of art from its artist may be equally as important as its contextualization in order to recognize the biases that are associated with knowing its background.

Art is equally evocative and subjective. With a holistic understanding of the artist's mistakes but a recognition of their talents nonetheless, we as an audience can extrapolate the ingenuity of artwork while recognizing its context wholly. At its core, the permeating importance of art is not to discern its "absolute truth"; because of its subjectivity, art means something different to each audience member. By limiting ourselves to the confines of the creator's vision,

⁹ "Banksy." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 19 July 2023, www.britannica.com/biography/Banksy.

we subsequently limit the ability of the art to take on a life of its own. Contrastingly, by recognizing the immorality of the artist, or the art itself, we can better understand how our interpretations of artwork align with or fail to account for the true context of its creation. In conclusion, a nuanced mindset is required to interpret art in a way that recognizes both the intentions behind its creation and its ability to be “reborn” through reinterpretation.

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