

Aesthetics

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'We cannot say that great art ennobles us unless we are willing to say that bad art corrupts us' (Ronald Reagan). How true is this statement, and how relevant is it for contemporary musicians?

Great art ennobles a man, but the same art can corrupt the mind of another. Art may inspire a man and yet create apathy in his friend. Government seeks to censor some art to protect the people yet surely this action is affirming the possible impact of art while not accommodating divergence in response, but then how dare government say how to respond.

Before the ennobling or corrupting nature of a piece of art can be determined the idea of great or bad needs to be considered. The idea of intrinsic moral quality within art has and continues to challenge philosophers and thinkers as they attempt to understand and critique both modern and traditional works. However an issue remains as how to universally frame any judgment concerning this moral quality.

The most obvious frame of judgment is that of personal taste; what I like and what I think. This method of judgment is all-inclusive and open for anyone but often leads to greatly varying decisions and judgments. Its constant subconscious use such as when ordering lunch or supper, reeks of some unsatisfying quality as if a response to art should be more considered than the choice of supper. Perhaps then judgment should be made according to education, knowledge and familiarity, the preserve of the formal critic. Though unsatisfactory this inherently excludes the vast majority from the decisions making process. The greatest obstacle to the idea is the dilution of the notion of good and bad with ideas of relativism, dependent beauty.

Increasingly a common form of criticism, reinforced through the proliferation of government funding, is ideological criticism as suggested by Marx and continued through Adorno. This suggests that the definitive method of judgment is within a political sphere and ideology, with success seen as reinforcing that view or at least commenting on an ideology. This is a prime example of dependent beauty with only a signal form of dependence required, that of ideology.

Dependent beauty as suggested by Kant is the idea that value and worth can only be applied through relative judgment informed by context. Therefore the merit of a piece can only be appreciated if the context of it is disseminated. Beauty, perceived dependently certainly provides a formalized notion of beauty and is often used to rationalize perception, however historically this has also been used to negative effect and perhaps suggest that true beauty lies in a deep place than just current perception. Often looking back many significant creative minds have been acknowledge as 'ahead of their time' and consequently misunderstood which highlights the temporal nature of assigning beauty based on dependence.

The opposite of dependent beauty is free beauty, a beauty which is judged separately from context or surroundings and consequently by some mystical, unquantifiable quality. Undoubtedly this quality does seem to have some level of existence, as often agreement on the 'great' quality of art is surprisingly widespread and distributed.

However as implied by the various interpretations of beauty, the purpose and goal of a piece of art can tend to be as significant a measure of success as any other process. Tolstoy within 'What is Art?' argues this that the emotional or sociological response to a work provides the basis for critique and judgment not additional guidance by the artist this is not to say that the artist cannot intend a result though surely an interesting point arises when the responses differ to the intend reaction.

Within traditional works significant emphasis was placed on the value of the work, however even within that context often the art had significant point to it. This purpose, of ten defined by the creative behind it, could included or be limited to either an aesthetic, personal, social, political or spiritual meaning.

The personal purpose of art is possibly the most significant meaning of art to the creator, who can use this as an outlet for personal emotion or release as is often the case through popular music and media. Though this kind of artistic purpose is not solely limited to current popular music. The main focus of this kind of expression and purpose is very introspective and inherently personal, perhaps with only a limited audience intended or benefited.

More inclusive then than this personal gratification are the social and political motives and purposes behind art work. Often this art work request its judgment be through an ideological lens as it's purpose is defined to comment on the surround social and political sphere. This style of art could take the form of satire, political song or more grandiose affairs. The effect and style of this work is often greatly politicized even when it is intended to be within the social sphere as often the funding and backing for such a piece comes from the blatantly political or government funded quangos resulting works affirming to the political sponsors. However there are numerous situations where the art challenged the current climate.

Some of the most significant and well known works of art have been inspired by spiritual and religious purposes and consequently contain significant spiritual and religious purposes. Traditionally the formalized church has been a significant funder of works. This is not an excuse to belittle the spiritual message often intended by the artist as they attempt to comment on some perceived higher issue or emotion. Often within the spiritual meaning is the idea of art and especially music facilitating the individual and groups ability to escape from ones surroundings into another emotive reality, as is often seen in ritualistic practices, where music is critical to the success of the ritual. The integration of art into religion is not solely limited to music with the massive architecture of many religious buildings also furthering the spiritual climate. Still the most significant thought here is the idea that the music, art or performance can convey this deeper spiritual idea, which tend to deal with transient feelings, thoughts and emotions, fundamental to the human condition.

This ability of art to influence the individual in an ethical way has been criticized greatly by in modern times often in response to over zealous censorship and constraint. The prevailing defense is summarized by the thought 'art for arts sake'. Proponents of the sole aesthetic judgment argue that art should not be judged, by what they view as secondary side effects but rather solely on the aesthetic value. This is not to say that every work must be viewed independent off all other works in fact the work should be considered completely within the frame of previous works and not just to dismiss other consequences of the art. To complete this notion an artwork must therefore be identified as an aesthetic object and the quality of it judged as an aesthetic object. But then what is an aesthetic object? Perhaps it is a way of viewing an object were all the other considerations are dismissed bar the aesthetic. Though this would seem to be an impossible task it would be wrong to dismiss the idea based on practicality, but then maybe the significant point is that nothing can be truly separated from its context or practicality.

However under certain circumstances this method of consideration becomes prevalent, such as when considering art of a different culture removed to a great enough extent. In this case how can the intended, political, social, spiritual, personal values be applied to the detached viewer who is unaware of the circumstance, which surround an indigenous people. This could be an opportunity for beholding the sole aesthetic object however, rather then taking this supposed opportunity many seam to transplant their values to work, often so that the lack of understanding becomes the

perceived point of the work.

Throughout though it has been assumed that every piece of art actually has an intended impact or influence. What of the works that are just 'art for arts sake'? Do they even qualify as art?

This situation of 'art for arts sake' has historically and increasingly been dismissed. Plato's republic saw art as a definitive force with significant moral impact and thus laid a level of accountability on the artist that included possible banishment if it was viewed as corrupting. The puritan's applied this in more recent time while the Taliban government of Afghanistan provides a contemporary history to this style of censorship. This censorship provides an insight into the perceived negative effects of art.

Censorship in its less severe forms is commonplace within current governments and societies. This is always on an ethical basis. The response of government historically and currently always seems to be more concerned with the possible damage that art can cause to society rather than the good it can promote. British censors traditionally work within this remit, viewing protection as more important than expression.

Indeed this would represent the greatest problem with accepting the ennobling power of art. Not its existence but the damning realization that one must also expect the corrupting power it may command. It would be unfair to say that the influence is easily controlled and sometimes the product is far from the intended design. In which case 'art for arts sake' is a fallacy as it could never exist and as Plato demanded the creative must take into account the consequence of their work. At the same time we should accept the reality that art is a different thing to each man and consequently the uniform response does not exist. This leads us to the greatest quandary presentable not 'whether great art ennobles or bad art corrupts' but rather that a single work can both promote and corrupt different people surely this feature alone is great!

For me personally as a composer the idea of corrupting or ennobling seems too absolute to offer a solution. The amount of situational, social and emotional control of the audience required makes this an impossible position to gain uniformly. Indeed the declining moral standard means even pure shock value can no longer be assured. Instead I prefer the thought of John Lloyd 'if it [art] does not enoble it promises a sketch of nobility'. To me this offers a far greater reward than ennobling some and corrupting others instead it offers me the opportunity to display greatness for others to aspire to and surely this is the greatest way in which one can enoble himself and another.

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