

Ethical Consumption: Can You Separate Art from the Artist?

Recently, thanks to the #MeToo movement and its contemporaries, a lot of prominent artists have been outed as doing some manipulative and abusive things. In light of these revelations, there have been a lot of discussions about the nature of art and how exactly one goes about ethically consuming art. This ties into a baser and more fundamental question: *Can Art be Separated from the Artist?*

Art of any kind is a medium of expression. It is obvious that all art is created with some intent – even a lack of any real, tangible purpose is a calculated statement in itself. In that sense, the art is linked with the artist in a very real sense; the art is a manifestation of the artist's energy and time. Art shows us the inner working of the artist – how they see the world. Art allows us to do something we can't otherwise – it helps us to see things from another perspective, even for a little while. In the case of more personal media like film, television or digital video, it becomes difficult to separate an artist's performance from who they are. We are unable to separate the character they play from the person they are. In that sense, the misbehaviour of the artist reflects directly on the art in question. We don't see just a man who's made a mistake, we see the character we grew up; the protagonist of our beloved novel; the writer of our favourite lines being accused. It's personal.

On the other hand, art is literally open source. One of John Green's oft-repeated quotes says "Books belong to their readers". The "death of the author" viewpoint is a valid one that holds up quite well. Authorial intent is irrelevant, motives are irrelevant – what matters is the consumer. How the consumer (i.e., you) interact with the art defines it. You make it your own when you define it on your own terms. In that sense, who partook in the art doesn't matter and neither does their belief system. Your interactions are independent of the accusations made. Your relationship is with the work of art, the character, the movie – not the actual artist, or person in question. New allegations don't affect you since you do not have a personal connection to the person.

Both of the viewpoints above are valid and in the end, it depends on what kind of relationship the consumer has with the piece in question. But one factor that's often left out of such discussions is the question of "Context". It's important that we contextualise not only the artist's beliefs and ideology but also the time period and environment that might have helped such ideology.

To know what I meant about context, it is important that we look back at history – and some of the unsavoury things artists have done. A prominent example of this would be Pablo Picasso. Picasso was rumoured to be a misanthrope and yet, his paintings of motherhood and motherliness could not be more tender. H. P. Lovecraft is widely considered the father of all things horror and monster related and yet his extreme racism is a matter of public knowledge. A detailed story of David Bowie sleeping with a fourteen-year-old groupie is available online. Rudyard Kipling, the writer of the *Jungle Book*, also penned an extremely racist poem named "The White Man's Burden", glorifying colonialism.

You can shrug off the above examples as people being "products of their time", their racism and xenophobia being indicative of society's broader context at that time. To blacklist and ignore their works would be to ignore our evolution and history. We seem to agree that art can be separated from the artist at this point. But – what about the current scenario? #MeToo is not particularly concerned with attitudes but the real manipulative and abusive actions that artists have been a part of. This is where it gets complicated.

The advent of digital video and media services have helped further the illusion of personal connection with the artist – whether it be a musician, actor, author, or even a YouTuber. Their

characters are what are contemporary to us – they are who we grow up with. Today's artists are our friends, talking directly to us. Nobody wants to be betrayed by their friend; to believe their friend has wronged them. This is why we see so many people so ready to defend the celebrities against such accusations.

This is also why some of us are uncomfortable watching movies or consuming media that involve such accused people. It becomes a moral grey area – Is it okay to consume media that was made before the accusations came to light? Is it okay if I just pirate their movies and songs so I'm not monetarily contributing to their celebrity status? Is it wrong of me to continue to enjoy the art even after the allegations? Is it unfair to the countless other people who worked on the movie if I blacklist the artist's work complete? – the questions are endless.

In today's context, it is saddening to know that a lot of prominent people has been outed doing such horrendous acts, violating their fans' trust. On the positive side, today, media and art has become so much more accessible and varied than ever before that it is possible to actively seek out and enjoy art that does not validate and house abusers. In August 2018, Kevin Spacey's newest movie, *Billionaire Boys Club* came out in theatres only to make \$126 on opening day. While some were quick to mourn how the other people in the project had failed – it was widely accepted to be a positive sign of how the consumer was making a clear choice. Those involved in the movie had actively made the choice to hire a known abuser, Spacey, and that had not panned out well for them.

When it comes to art that predates the abuser's actions being brought to light, it is important we are able to critically examine the art in wake of our new information. Repackaging history to also fit in with a modern perspective isn't new by any means. A prominent example of this would be Disney's repackaging of their World War II cartoons. Controversial propaganda cartoons like *Der Fuhrer's Face*, in which Donald Duck literally is a part of the Nazi movement were repackaged and sold by Disney as a special edition boxset. The boxset opened with a narrative about how the war affected Disney and linked modern situations with the situation at that time. This might not be possible in the specific cases of the #MeToo movement, but such repackaging and recontextualizing is important if we want to critically consider the media we consume.

As a consumer, when it comes to the question of ethical consumption, it is important that we try and actively support those struggling artists and those works which do not directly support the abuser. When it comes to history, no one can rewrite it – but we can, and must do is redefine it. It's important that we are able to separate the art from the artist, but also consider the broader context encompassing the two.