

Separation of art and artist



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Separation of Art and Artist

When people walk into my room, there are a few things that are likely to catch their eyes: First, the mess of clothes, papers, and junk foods covering the entirety of my floor. Second, the terrible design of my closet, whose door is unable to close, as it is smaller in width than the standard hanger. Lastly, the many posters covering the bulk of my wall space. Posters featuring creations from artists such as John Lennon and Quentin Tarantino. People whose art has been of great inspirations to me in my life... but people who have made personal decisions that have made their character difficult to tolerate. In the age of Me Too, when revelations of artists' misconduct are constantly surfacing, whether or not we should support art originating from controversial creators is always in question. When an artist of any type is blamed for maltreatment, wrongdoing, or unethical behavior, we must ask ourselves, should we separate that artist's creations from their character? When stomach-churning accusations, like those against Michael Jackson, come to light, many people demand a boycott of the artist. However, there are many complications that make boycotting artwork made by disgraced artists more complicated and that suggest that the best approach would be to merely separate the artists from their artwork. The question of whether or not we should separate artists from their artwork has acquired a new significance in the age of Me Too—it is now necessary to examine whether we can still watch and enjoy the films and TV series created by the wave of directors and actors denounced by the Me Too movement. Rather than boycotting artwork made by immoral artists, as many people suggest, we should separate the artists from their artwork.

Not separating the art from the artist punishes individuals who are not to blame. There was a time where the artist was a single entity which was easy to identify. Charlotte Brontë is the author of *Jane Eyre*. Van Gogh is the artist behind *The Sunflowers*, but it's not really these art forms on which the debate primarily centers. Instead, it's specifically the media and film industry, where the artist is not quite as easily identifiable. Of course, it's very easy to know which films Bryan Singer, who was recently accused of sexually assaulting four minors, directed, and he probably was the principal artist responsible for these films. That's not to say, however, that there wasn't a huge crew of people who also contributed to the production of these films. In Hollywood today, productions take place on such a large scale that, while it may well be the high-profile director who's praised with the creative vision and the hard work that goes into the film, this ignores all the other people. From actors to cameramen, to runners, who not only put in a lot of energy and commitment into that piece of art but who also contributed to it as a piece of artwork. Take David Permut, who spent almost a decade developing a biopic about film director Russ Meyer, "We had funding and were ready to make the movie," Permut told MarketWatch. "That green button turned into a red button literally overnight the moment the Harvey Weinstein news hit the world" (Rodriguez). The Weinstein Company was the producer of the film. This cancellation stripped Permut of the 10 years of work he had devoted to this project. In light of this, it becomes possible to separate the art from the artist because the artist is not a single individual who is responsible for the entire project, whereas the perpetrator of a sexual offense is very much the only person who is responsible for the atrocious act(s) that they have committed. But, even if we can attribute the film as a

work of art to a single artist, I'll now explain why it's imperative that we do continue to separate the two.

Another reason we must separate the art from the artist is that to not do so would actually benefit artists accused of immoral behavior. Before I begin addressing this point, let's discuss what it means to not separate the art from the artist. It's to create a bond between the two which necessitates that when we judge the art, we do so with the artist in mind. But this connection works both ways, meaning that when we associate the art and the artist, we must also judge the artist with the art in mind. It is this reciprocal relationship which is particularly harmful. Think of the first time you saw Edward Scissorhands, Midnight in Paris or the Cosby show or any other film involving a director or actor whose sexual misconduct has been exposed by the Me Too movement, but a film which the first time you watched it, or even the second, or the third, you enjoyed. When confronted with the horrific reality of what the artist behind your beloved film has done, you're faced with a dilemma: Can you carry on watching and loving the film in the same way? When you separate the art from the artist, you can. You can continue to love the film while simultaneously denouncing its creator for the abhorrent choices they have made in their personal life. And what happens in the oppositions world? The emotional reaction which art evokes is an incredibly powerful one, so powerful, in fact, that people often transfer their feelings of a piece of artwork onto the artist. According to Ian Moulton, a professor of English and cultural history in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts, "People tend to idealize people who create things they like, and they want to approve of the people who made the art as much as they approve of the art.

They therefore often dismiss claims which may interfere with their approval of the creator” (Alcantar). Furthermore, Peter de Marneffe, a Harvard graduate and professor of philosophy at ASU, claims that “ Ultimately, how people react to artists’ wrongdoings is a question of how closely they associate the artist with the works they produce” (“ Peter De Marneffe”).

There are many people who feel almost personally attacked when their favorite works of art are devalued by its creator’s actions. Now, for most people, who sympathize with the Me Too movement, this feeling is superseded by the abhorrence of what you know the artist has done. But this isn’t the case for everyone and I don’t think it would be unreasonable to attribute a significant proportion of the massively vocal backlash of the Me Too movement has received to the anger and betrayal experienced by those who feel they have been deprived of their favorite works of art because they can’t separate the art from the artist. According to Tarana Burke, a lifelong activist who founded the Me Too movement, “ Pushing back on accusations is easier than challenging the way that you feel about someone’s creation. If you love a piece of art, and you view the artwork and the artist as one, the logical solution that will allow you to continue to love the artwork is to question the allegations. I feel that this is why so many people are angered with the Me Too movement” (Ottesen). Only when we see the artist as an individual in their own right, completely removed from anything that we have ever enjoyed, are we able to denounce them with every ounce of our being, the way that they should be denounced. I will now address a primary counter-argument against the separation of art and artist.

Contrary to popular belief, one can separate the art from the artist and still be a moral consumer. Those on the opposite end of this argument may claim that with the rise in people feeling a responsibility to buy ethically made food and clothes, for instance, the same principle should apply to art. Even if we accept this argument, it completely misses the intent behind responsible consumerism. According to ethicalconsumer.org, we don't just buy ethically made food and clothes for the sake of doing so, the intent behind this is to stop the flow of revenue to unethically sourced products, thereby shutting down these businesses and encouraging ethical production practices ("About Ethical Consumer"). I completely support this intent, but its implementation within the arts industry is slightly different. If we accept the starting goal as encouraging ethical production practices, clearly the best way to achieve this aim is to just condemn the artists themselves. This means firing them as was done with Weinstein, refusing to work with them as Gal Gadot did with Brett Ratner, or even refusing to buy work which, when purchased, gives money directly to the immoral artist. This creates enough societal backlash to provide a rational, self-serving interest to engage in ethical practices, as it sadly seems like a moral one is sometimes not enough. Coloring our response to their artwork just completely misses the point. Now, let's discuss some possible solutions to the problems that arise from boycotting art made by immoral artists.

The public should separate the art from the artist in order to prevent a chilling effect on art consumption. The ultimate solution to the problems that arise from boycotting artwork made by immoral artists is to disassociate the two. This would allow for us to criticize the creators to the full extent that we

should while not dragging down those who are not to blame. Furthermore, artists should be punished going forward in refusing to give them work, but not indirectly by judging their art based on their unrelated behavior. Because the art is not the issue here, the actions of the artist are; therefore, our response should be directed at their actions and at the artist, but not at their work. Even more, we should all promote the work of the people these men victimized, who deserve to be known better for their own contributions than for what someone did to them. Impressed by Asia Argento's courage in speaking out about Weinstein? Watch one of the movies she directed.

It is naive to conflate the art with the artist. We do not live in a black and white world; you can be a bad person and still create art that is important. Art is something that provokes an emotional, not a rational, response within us. It is something that moves us and that may even change the way in which we perceive the world and it is something each person interprets differently. Expressing our love for a song, or a movie created by someone who has committed a crime should not be greeted with moral outrage. Our emotional response to art and our emotional response to the actions of the artist should not spill over into what should be a rational response in condemning the artist without condemning the art. We should not hide a fear of standing up directly to the artist under the guise of morality because it isn't immoral to enjoy a beautiful piece of art because of the horrible actions of the artist. And it isn't immoral to love something that moves you when you've already condemned the person who created it for their actions. This isn't taking an easy way out of the problem. It is taking the problem head-on. It is punishing the artist without hiding behind changing our reaction to their

artwork instead. I would like you to once again ask you to imagine that film that you once or still do love. Does your love for the film prevent you from condemning the artist? Does it not become easier to condemn the artist when you separate him from the emotional reaction to that artwork that you had? To separate is not to exonerate. It is instead to allow for more critical examination of both the art and the artist.

Works Cited

- “ About Ethical Consumer.” *Ethical Consumer* , 26 Mar. 2019, www.ethicalconsumer.org/about-us.
- Alcantar, Sarah. “ Separating Art from Artists.” *The Arizona State Press* , 27 Jan. 2019, www.statepress.com/article/2019/01/spartcult-asu-affiliates-contemplate-separating-art-from-artists.
- Ottesen, KK. “ #MeToo Founder Tarana Burke Reflects on the Movement – and the Reckoning.” *The Washington Post* , WP Company, 6 Nov. 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/metoo-founder-tarana-burke-reflects-on-the-movement-and-the-reckoning/2018/11/02/c17c31e4-cbd7-11e8-a3e6-44daa3d35ede_story.html?utm_term=.2a24abc2c08c.
- “ Peter De Marneffe.” *Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics* , ethics.harvard.edu/people/peter-de-marneffe.
- Rodriguez, Ashley. “ All the Shows Killed by Hollywood in the Wake of Its Harassment Crisis.” *Quartz* , Quartz, 20 Nov. 2017, qz.com/1133781/hollywoods-sexual-harassment-crisis-has-killed-all-of-these-shows/.