

The Moral and Aesthetic Debate in ‘Strange Fruit’: Coexistence of Violence and Beauty in Human Nature in Works of Art

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Abstract: In the contemporary era, philosophers have debated the homogeneity of art's moral and aesthetic values. As far as musical works are concerned, in contrast to traditional music ethics, contemporary musical works are increasingly characterised by the integration of aesthetic and moral values. However, it is important to note that aesthetic and moral values are not always unified and that there may be instances when there are differences and even conflicts between them. When such a conflict arises between the aesthetic and moral values of a musical work, it becomes necessary to consider how its overall artistic value should be evaluated. This paper employs a case study methodology to analyse the song *Strange Fruit* in depth. Discussing the formal aesthetics of the work, which has been the subject of considerable controversy due to its depiction of violence, is set against the moral value of the work, which reveals the problem of racial discrimination and prompts a deep reflection on justice in society. The conflict and balance between the two are explored in light of the claims made in the philosophy of art to date. In such instances, the value of art is profoundly affected by the conflict between moral values and aesthetic concepts.

Keywords: Artistic value, Aesthetic value, Moral value, Value debate

1. Introduction

With the development of contemporary art, the discussion between moral and aesthetic values has become more and more intense. Moralists such as Tolstoy believed that moral values should determine the aesthetic value of art. In contrast, Autonomists such as Wilde and Carroll argued that art evaluation should be independent of morality. Ethicists such as Gaut seek a balance between the two [1]. When Aesthetic Value and Moral Value conflict, finding a balance remains a significant challenge while the final goal is the Art Value judgement. This paper will explore this conflict using the song *Strange Fruit* as an example. Sung by Billie Holiday, the song profoundly exposes the racial discrimination and violence against blacks in the American South, which has aroused social concern. Through the case study, this paper will explore the characteristics of *Strange Fruit* on the aesthetic and moral levels and analyse the listener's reaction to reveal the conflict and tension between moral and aesthetic values. This study provides new perspectives for studying artistic value, an in-depth understanding of artworks' moral and aesthetic relationship, and references for artistic creation. This essay urges society to recognise the ethical issues with pop music and offers theoretical justification

for fostering a positive and inclusive artistic environment. By conducting a case study on *Strange Fruit*, the goal is to pave the way for future research on creative values and foster the harmonious growth of art and society.

2. Analysis of the aesthetic and moral values

2.1. Formal Aesthetic Value

The formal characteristics of a work of art, which can also be called representational characteristics, refer to the characteristics people can judge by directly looking at its appearance. In the case of music, these are melody, rhythm, key, harmony, and so on. Lyrics are a factor in evaluating a song's aesthetic value in addition to musicality when comparing it to a song without lyrics. In judging the aesthetic value, persons can start by judging the aesthetic properties [2]. That is to say, when confronted with a work of art, people will make an objective judgement of non-aesthetic properties according to its representation; after arriving at the judgement of non-aesthetic properties and the descriptive judgement, they will get the judgement of aesthetic properties, and then from the perception, they will get a kind of feeling and experience of perception, that is, aesthetic experience; and thus they will get the judgement of aesthetic value.

From the aesthetic point of view of the lyrics, *Strange Fruit* uses much imagery. For example, 'blood, bulging eyes, twisted mouth, burning flesh' [3]. Next, this paper will use the aesthetic value judgement process explained above to judge the aesthetic value of the lyrics through these images. First, it is the judgement of non-aesthetic attributes that these images are objectively bloody and violent; thus, they bring the perception of horror and cruelty to the listeners and get their aesthetic attributes - 'horror' and 'cruelty'. 'Horror' and 'cruelty' are far from the aesthetic standards of harmony and beauty usually pursued, so they are pejorative aesthetic attributes; after that, the listener, confronted with a work with such aesthetic attributes, obtains an experience of discomfort and fear. It was a frightening experience. In conclusion, *Strange Fruit* lyrics can be considered aesthetically flawed.

2.2. Moral Value

The issue of racial equality has always been an inescapable focus of world peace. Although the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln after the Civil War freed many black slaves, discrimination against blacks by whites in the southern United States continued unabated. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, with the rise of the record industry and jazz, which represented black culture, that more and more blacks participated in artistic creation and gradually used music as a weapon of voice and resistance [4].

Strange Fruit was born from the horrific practice of lynching perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan, which commonly shortened to the KKK or the Klan, is the name of several historical and current American white supremacist, far-right terrorist organizations and hate groups, highlighting the deep-seated racism endorsed by white supremacists. The song starkly exposes the brutality of racial discrimination and lynching, advocating moral values against such atrocities. The lyrics of the song 'Southern trees bear a strange fruit, / blood on the leaves and blood at the root' actually refer to the hanged black people. The lyrics 'Southern trees bear a strange fruit, / blood on the leaves and blood at the root', where 'strange fruit' actually refers to the hanged black people, and 'blood' symbolises their innocent lives and the violence they suffered. It can be seen that the lyricist uses artistic forms to convey a strong appeal for racial equality and human rights issues. This pursuit and call for justice aligns with the respect and pursuit of justice, equality and human rights regarding moral values.

Initially banned by radio stations upon release, *Strange Fruit* became a rallying cry for black resistance and sparked the American civil rights movement in the mid-1900s. Samuel Grafton likened

it to the "Marseillaise" of the oppressed South, underscoring its profound moral and social significance.

3. Conflict and balance of moral and aesthetic values

3.1. Conflict

As a result of the above analysis, it can be seen that the formal aesthetic value of *Strange Fruit* may be perceived as somewhat flawed due to its violent overtones, but beneath the surface of the violence is a moral quest to speak out for racial equality. The phenomenon of two value assessments, one negative and the other vivacious, appearing on a single work, as a conflict within the work, is likely to impact the judgement of the work's overall artistic value. So, which side's judgement should be followed? How does this conflict affect artistic value judgements and outcomes? And what is the reality?

In order to solve this conflict, one can attempt to return to the theory. It is evident that different claims about ethics in the philosophy of art lead to opposing results. Those who adhere to moralism, whether radical or moderate, believe that the aesthetic value of art should be determined by its moral value. Similarly, for autonomism, both radicals and moderates argue that artworks are not aesthetically superior because of their moral superiority. If people take *Strange Fruit's* high artistic standing in reality as a reference. Those who espouse moralism will take the same assessment of reality, which is undoubtedly an excellent song-cum-protest song. Conversely, for those who adhere to the doctrine of autonomism, the value of the song is assessed differently from the reality of the repercussions for moral values are not within the realm of judgement of aesthetic values ---- similar to aestheticism, which is the tendency towards a monolithic theory of artistic values. So, in essence, such a conflict embodies a central issue that is the subject of much contemporary debate. The question thus arises as to whether moral evaluations should be described as 'aesthetic' evaluations. About this question, ethicalism, as represented by Gaut, appears to offer a more expansive array of definitions of aesthetics than moralism and autonomism. To answer the central question first, 'ethicalism' recognises that moral values can indeed be described as aesthetic values. The primary distinction between ethical theory and moralism is delineating the scope of application[5]. Ethical theorists do not posit that exhibiting ethically praiseworthy attitudes is necessary for a work to be aesthetically valuable [6]. In essence, Gaut advocates for a plurality of aesthetic values, of which ethical value is merely one. Consequently, the outcomes of the ethicalist evaluation of *Strange Fruit* are identical to those of the moralist, with the distinction that the ethicalist is more lenient in accepting the conflict between formal aesthetic and ethical values and allows them to coexist.

In the case of *Strange Fruit*, it is evident that its moral virtues and moral power are inescapable. The moral value and potential social significance of the song are significantly greater than the aesthetic value flaws of the formal expression that characterise it as if it were tainted with a negative connotation. Concurrently, the song exhibits a robust instrumental and functional character. This point will be discussed in section 3.2. In conclusion, this paper does not deny that aesthetic and moral qualities can conflict and acknowledges that both influence integrated value judgements. The paper also supports the ethicalism represented by Gaut in terms of the determining role of the two in artistic value, especially in terms of the scope of the distinction between ethicalism and moderate moralism. In other words, the impact of moral values on artistic values does not have to be limited to sufficiency. It is argued that artistic value judgements should be dialectical rather than scale-like institutional judgements. The determination of aesthetic worth and artistic value should not rely on a single component but rather on a combination of multiple variables. The value of a work of art can be understood to include a number of dimensions, and the relationship between these dimensions is intricate and complex. It is therefore important to view the various flaws rationally.

3.2. The balanced interaction

After the discussion in the previous section, the conflict between aesthetic and moral values does not seem so strong in ethicism. This is also a change brought about by the continuous development and transformation of contemporary art. Gaut, presents an indirect discussion of the concept of 'moral beauty'[6], which leads us to refocus our attention on the concepts of 'The concept of moral beauty is indirectly discussed in Art, Emotion and Ethics, leading us to refocus our attention on the connection between truth, goodness and beauty, and is divided into a strong definition and a weak definition, of which the weak definition is more widely used. Based on the conceptual premise of moral beauty, in Gaut's descriptive perspective, goodness is required to have the descriptive character of 'beauty' rather than requiring that 'goodness' be interpreted exclusively in terms of 'beauty,' which preserves 'beauty' and 'goodness' in the sense that 'goodness' can be interpreted in terms of 'beauty. This preserves the independence of 'beauty' from 'goodness' while bringing 'goodness' into the discussion of 'beauty' to a certain extent. The 'good' is to a certain extent included in the discussion of 'beauty'. In addition, Panos Paris, a disciple of Gaut, based on the monograph Functional Beauty by Glenn Parson and Allen Carlson [7], proposes the aesthetic qualities of 'well-formedness' the virtuous purpose of 'humanly good' [8] and assigns aesthetic attributes to moral qualities.

Above all, *Strange Fruit* serves as a clear example of the moral purpose of the well-being of others. The song was composed to advocate advocating for the equality of human rights for the Black community, intending to serve as a vehicle for articulating the well-being of the race. Secondly, the conflict in *Strange Fruit* is simplified because that moral qualities are also given reasonable aesthetic attributes. This line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that the reasoning about moral qualities can be modeled on that illustrated in section 2.1 of this paper for the formal aesthetic value judgement path of reasoning. The two sets of reasoning share the commonality of explicitly delineating the role of aesthetic experience in aesthetic value judgments. In terms of functional beauty, a 'well-formedness' must satisfy the condition of being pleasing to the majority of judges. On the basis of moral beauty, it is clear that the well-formedness of virtue is pleasing, that it possesses the conditions for the aesthetic quality of 'well-formedness', and that good moral qualities are beautiful because of their intrinsic harmony of form and purpose. As a result, the aesthetic reasoning of moral qualities gradually becomes clear, and there is a structural/formal similarity between aesthetic judgments and moral judgments, which is the common root of ethics and aesthetics [9]. Formal and moral aesthetics can be jointly included in the judgment categories of 'beauty' and 'aesthetics,' belonging to the same 'aesthetics' set. They become two relatively microscopic subsets under the macroscopic 'aesthetics,' respectively undertaking the tasks of the phenomenal world and the ontological world, with conflict being weakened and balance being highlighted [9].

3.3. Related discussions

The debate surrounding the relationship between morality and beauty can be traced back to the 18th century. Kant already mentioned the relationship between beauty and goodness in section 59 of his Critique of Judgment [10]. He stated that 'beautiful is the symbol of the morally good.' For Kant, this was the mission he had given to the power of judgement. Wittgenstein, in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus published in 1922 [11], states that 'Ethics and aesthetics are one'. For him, 'Ethics are transcendental.' That is, his discussion of ethics also applies to aesthetics.

In addition to *Strange Fruit*, Picasso's Guernica has been a subject of considerable debate among philosophers. The work depicts the tragic aftermath of the bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The image is replete with depictions of suffering, death, and chaos, yet it powerfully conveys the themes of anti-war and peace. Audience reviews of Guernica frequently acknowledged and commended its role in exposing the brutality of war. In addition to the claims

above, cognitivism also espouses a classic view on such matters. Cognitivists posit that works of art can confer cognitive benefits. Regarding Guernica, cognitivism asserts that the mural not only conveys the idea that war is morally debasing, but also enhances our awareness of the ordeal endured by civilians in battle. However, the opposite view is that cognitive activity is not the purpose of a work of art, and it is not necessary to expand cognition through a work of art.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Strange Fruit* is a classic example of breaking away from traditional expressionist art and a major milestone in the development of modern music. As times change, the traditional criteria for assessing the value of works of art are no longer bound by traditional standards. Philosophers and aesthetes keep pace with the times, and contemporary developments of traditional theories are carried out. The article briefly discusses the aesthetic value of form and moral value, and uses Gaut's ethical theory and Paris's moral beauty theory as examples to discuss how to make a comprehensive assessment in the face of conflict, endow moral beauty with aesthetic attributes, and simplify the conflict in an appropriate manner. Works such as *Strange Fruit* and Guernica demonstrate the integration of violence and beauty in contemporary art. These works treat conflict as a factor that can inspire greater artistic tension, rather than a purely negative phenomenon. However, this article still has some shortcomings, such as the first is that the aesthetic expression of 'anti-aesthetics' is not discussed. Additionally, Paris's claim of 'moral beauty' has not fully explored the ugliness of evil. Looking forward, this paper hopes to see more works of vitality created in a more inclusive contemporary context. At the same time, this article calls on art institutions and educational institutions to take measures to restrict minors' access to works of a violent nature in order to protect their physical and mental health in a relaxed creative environment.

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