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Aesthetics and Ethics: On the Power of Aesthetic Features

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ABSTRACT. The relation between ethical and aesthetic values is one of the most prominent debates within analytic aesthetics. Yet, the debate has so far focused mainly on the extent to which the ethical dispositions expressed by a given work can ultimately affect its aesthetic value, reception, and ensuing appraisal. In this paper, I am interested in the reverse question. My goal is to examine how aesthetic features and stylistic choices, broadly construed, can affect the reception, understanding, and even further investigation and assessment of the ethical content of a work. Informed by phenomenological research, my analysis will touch upon narrative and non-narrative works, while also reflecting on the contribution that can be derived from studies in everyday aesthetics. The way we see and perceive ethics is of crucial importance and it is likely to affect our understanding of ethics and our willingness to engage in the ethical, social, and political climate that characterizes our current global community.

1. Introduction

The relation between ethical and aesthetic values is one of the most prominent debates within analytic aesthetics. Most recently, the attention has turned to the way in which the ethical dispositions expressed by a work affect its aesthetic assessment. Positions such as ethicism, as defended by Berys Gaut,[2] moderate autonomism, as in the version advocated by James

[1] Email: disummaknoopl@wpunj.edu

[2] Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 182-203 and Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Anderson and Jeffrey Dean,[3] moderate moralism, Noël Carroll's[4] milder version of ethicism, and cognitive immoralism, Matthew Kieran's[5] response to ethicism, all gauge the extent to which ethical values and the ethical dispositions expressed by a given work (what Gaut defines as the "merited response" and Carroll the "uptake" of a work) can ultimately affect its aesthetic value, reception, and ensuing appraisal.

While favoring, among these positions, a moderate moralist approach, I am here interested in a different issue, which, while being historically prior to the debate mentioned above, is hardly analyzed in connection to it. I am interested, to clarify, in examining the extent to which aesthetic representations and stylistic choices can affect the reception, understanding, and even further investigation and assessment of the ethical content of a work. To what extent are aesthetic properties to affect our moral compass?

There have been, needless to say, multiple answers to this question. In this paper, I will consider two of the most prominent. The first, which applies mostly to literary and filmic works, is to rely on narrative and on narrative's ability to express a given disposition and to secure the audience's response. The second proposes instead an argument for the aesthetic value of artworks based on their ability to trigger the imagination, an ability that further deepens our ethical understanding. These are both popular and promising strategies and I am sympathetic to both. However, as I aim to show, they are not sufficiently equipped to fully appreciate the importance of aesthetic features, and this especially when seen alongside the aforementioned debate on ethicism (in its stronger or more moderate varieties).

An different solution, which I will contemplate in this paper, is to research alternative modalities through which artworks can engage our

[3] James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean, "Moderate Autonomism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 38 No. 2, April 1998: 150-166.

[4] Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 36, No. 3, July 1996: 223-238; Noël Carroll, "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research," *Ethics*, Vol. 110, No. 2 (January 2000): 350-287.

[5] Matthew Kieran, "Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (Autumn, 1996): 337-351.

imagination, modalities that, while harder to pin down, are based on a more openly phenomenological and experience-based account of aesthetics. For, as I will argue, widening the range of aesthetic features that have the potential to affect moral evaluations is likely, in certain cases, to show how moral values may not only be elucidated by art, but that they can, more strongly, be seen as *dependent* on their aesthetic rendition. Differently put, it can be argued that, in some cases, the aesthetic rendition of a work can alter our moral spectrum by both introducing new perspectives, and, more contentiously, by fundamentally altering accepted moral standards.

I will begin by considering the emphasis given to narrative in relation to the merited response or uptake of a work and further compare such approach with the notion of imaginative understanding as the leading disclaimer for the artistic status of a work and as what ultimately prompts moral reflection. While these are valid and relevant ways of characterizing the realm of the aesthetic, they are also prone to objections. It is in light of these objections that I will further develop my argument for what I take to be the prominent role of aesthetics in the understanding, but also in the questioning, and shaping, of moral values.

2. Morality and Art

It is important, before introducing my argument, to consider some of the ways in which aesthetic features, broadly construed, have been singled out for their ability to interact and relate to the ethical content of a work. More narrowly, I would like to focus on two solutions: the first is the attention, rather frequent in studies of literature and moving pictures, given to narrative; the second is the importance given to the ability of art to trigger the imagination, a feature that is further connected to the belief in "aesthetic cognitivism" which defends the idea according to which some cognitive virtues of a work count as aesthetic virtues.

Narratives, and the way in which a narrative is structured, are essential to the aesthetic value of a work and to its assessment. For what matters about such a structure is, importantly, not only the way in which it connects together different events and episodes, a topic on which much has

been written, but how those connections generate a response in the audience. Narratives elicit expectations, and, by doing so, they command specific responses to the audience, responses that resonate emotionally, but that can also, as in the case of Carroll and Gaut's accounts, direct our moral dispositions and expectations.

While Carroll and Gaut do not claim, explicitly, that their conclusions apply exclusively to narrative works, it is undeniable that narrative works best fit their models. In Gaut's ethicism, which claims that "if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious"[6] the crucial component is the emphasis not on ethically meritorious or commendable features *per se*, but on the attitudes that are being expressed. And this is, essentially, what ties his position to narrative works. For narratives, as I have mentioned, are an excellent way of prescribing attitudes: narratives are responsible for the ordering of events, for their relative prominence, but also for the way in which cognitive responses are orchestrated in the work. Empathic and sympathetic responses to characters in narrative fictions, for example, are largely shaped by the way in which they are introduced by the narrative and they are intimately connected to evaluative processes among which is the endorsement, or rejection, of moral attitudes.

Before assessing whether narrative is indeed the aesthetic feature of a work that more aptly relates to a work's ability to express moral message, it is worth to briefly introduce the second solution sketched above. For the role of aesthetics in the discussion on the relation between ethical and aesthetic values is also, frequently, framed within an overall tendency toward aesthetic cognitivism. Broadly, aesthetic cognitivism defends the ability of art to convey knowledge, a claim that, while controversial, has been endorsed by several of the main contributors to the debate on the relation between aesthetics and ethics. Yet, despite such consensus, there is no unanimous agreement on *how* artworks convey knowledge. Responses abound. Think, for example, of Martha Nussbaum's notorious argument for

[6] Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," 182.

the role of emotions and imagination in delivering ethical knowledge;[7] of Noël Carroll's claim that literary works can trigger our imagination by acting as thought experiments,[8] and, more recently of Matthew Kieran's defense of cognitive immoralism[9] which is grounded in the ability of artworks to deepen our moral knowledge by promoting imaginative understanding.[10]

Are these two solutions, the ability of narrative to prompt moral evaluation and the belief in the capacity of art to trigger our imaginative responses, enough to describe the influence of aesthetic features in the debate on the relation between ethics and aesthetics? Not quite. In fact, while not incorrect, both are guilty, in different ways, of underestimating the power that such features can at times have on moral understanding.

A first set of objections comes from the limitations that are inherent to the rather frequent, if not almost exclusive, reliance on narrative works. For not only moral attitudes can be communicated by means other than narrative, but also because not all narratives, as Gaut himself has observed, feature the strong intentionalism that is behind both ethicism and Carroll's milder position, moderate moralism. In both accounts, narrative works mandate certain responses: they reflect an intention – the intention, expressed by the author, that the audience will respond to the work in a given way – an intention that is then understood and processed by the audience. But is intentionalism, and its connection to how we respond to narrative works, truly warranted? While I am not inclined to defend a

[7] Martha Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990: 155.

[8] Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 60th Anniversary Issue (Winter, 2002), pp. 3-26.

[9] Matthew Kieran, "Art, Morality, and Ethics: On the (Im)moral Character of Art-Works and the Inter-Relations to Artistic Value," *Philosophy Compass* 1/2 (2006), pp. 129-143.

[10] Following this intuition, Kieran argues for a more ambitious thesis, namely that a work soliciting immoral attitudes may not necessarily be aesthetically flawed; on the contrary, it may allow us to explore a wider spectrum of moral responses and attitudes, thus providing the audience with a more nuanced and critical understanding of the relevance of ethical values.

complete abandonment of intentionality a la Roland Barthes,[11] it is not impossible to question its pivotal role. To begin with, authorial intentions are not always visible or clear and they need to be gauged in tandem with the historical and, broadly, cultural milieu to which they belong. It is also plausible that, at times, the author may decide to let the audience partly take over the interpretation of a work by, for instance, adopting an ambiguous ending or by relying on narrative structures that are particularly popular nowadays, such as puzzle narratives, or what Thomas Elsaesser[12] has defined as mind-game films. Therefore, while it is incorrect to radically depart from the original intention of a work, it would be equally incorrect to reify that intention.

Moreover, a strong reliance on intentionality may even end up "impoverishing" the nature of our ethical responses to artworks, responses that cannot always be reduced to a clear cut merited response mechanism. I will return on this point in the next section.

The second strategy introduced, namely to rely on the ability of a work to stimulate our imagination, defends a more rounded understanding of the role played by art in eliciting ethical reflection and allows for a more elastic understanding of the cognitive effects that can accompany the reception and assessment of an artwork. Yet, even in this case we can contemplate a couple of objections.

A first difficulty is that it is sometimes problematic to understand what is implied by imaginative understanding. A well-known response, advocated by Kendall Walton,[13] relates imaginative understanding to

[11] Barthes, Roland. (1977). *Image – Music – Text*. New York: Noonday Press.

[12] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in *Puzzle Films. Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 14.

[13] Kieran seems to rely, in his connotation of the imagination, on Kendall Walton's mechanism of make-believe in relation to fictional works (Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of Representational Arts* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009); this being the case, it is then safe to assume that, when confronted with scenarios that are likely to entice ethical reflection, imaginative understanding amounts to make-believing, or at least entertaining, the ethical viewpoints expressed by a work. Yet, imagination, to this extent, is characterized exclusively as a make-believe activity and as the ability to contemplate different viewpoints.

the mechanism of make-believe that facilitates the audience's engagement with fictional works. However, this solution is too broad. For if imagination is characterized exclusively as a make-believe activity and as the ability to, in turn, contemplate different viewpoints, then it is hard to see it as a unique feature of art, for two intertwined reasons. On the one hand, the ability to contemplate different scenarios does not belong exclusively to the arts; imagining is, after all, a cognitive activity that belongs to our everyday life, one that, despite being in the service of learning, remains, when left uncharacterized, a bit bland.

On the other hand, and more importantly, Walton's account does not explain how we move from exercising our imagination to reaching an evaluation of the work – and, specifically, a moral evaluation. The problem, differently put, is that there seems to be a gap between our ability to imagine and our ability to form the kind of moral evaluations that will in turn affect the assessment of a work.

Alternative solutions to what is implied by imaginative understanding present different problems. Carroll's idea according to which the imagination is related to artworks being able to present us with situation analogous to thought experiments,[14] for example, solves the problem of how to get from imaginative understanding to moral evaluation, for, after all, thought experiments are at least likely to lead to a certain moral assessment. But by restricting its analysis to thought experiments, Carroll's account is bound to focus too narrowly on the conceptual and narrative components of a work while leaving aside other aesthetic features that may be able to contribute to moral understanding. Additionally, as David Egan[15] has pointed out, there are significant disanalogies between the kind of imaginative understanding that takes place in thought experiments and the one that characterizes our relationship with artworks.

Such objections are potentially met by the extensive work of Martha Nussbaum. Her emphasis on the sympathy we feel toward fictional

[14] Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," pp. 3-26.

[15] David Egan, "Literature and Thought Experiments," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 74, Issue 2, Spring 2016: 139-150.

characters and on how it allows the audience to entertain their positions and thus "grow," morally, with them, it appears to cover a broader spectrum of aesthetic features. Yet, while imaginative understanding is given a more complex treatment, Nussbaum's account relates almost exclusively to literature, thus largely falling back into the objections I mentioned in relation to narrative works.

More accounts could be mentioned, and, while none of them is fundamentally mistaken, I believe it is important to consider an alternative response to what makes imagination so relevant in the case of artworks. I will outline it in the next section.

3. Aesthetic Power

The question I will consider in this section is a question that concerns less the nature of the attitudes inspired by artworks, such as blame or praise, than the *way* in which such attitudes are encouraged. Differently put, my focus is on the *processes* necessary to both engage our imagination and to assess the extent to which such an engagement can affect our dispositions toward the values expressed by artworks.

My interest in how artworks "move us" (a fairly vague, but hard to encapsulate expression) is an interest, primarily, in the experience of artworks and it what that experience can lead to. In this sense, my analysis stems from positions such as John Dewey's application of Pierce and James' pragmatism to the arts, an application that, in line with what is being discussed in this paper, was essential to the recognition of a bond between the aesthetic and the moral dimension.

From art historian such as Meyer Shapiro,[16] who fervently attacked the elitism attached to formalist interpretations of art, to nowadays, where pragmatism is seen both as a way of reinterpreting the history of modern art – as in the work of Molly Nesbit[17]– and as one of the standpoints for the

[16] Mayer Shapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1978)

[17] Molly Nesbit, *The Pragmatism in the History of Art* (Pittsburgh: Gutenberg Periscope, Ltd., 2013).

analysis of contemporary art, Dewey's account remains a prominent source.

Furthermore, in addition to its pioneering role in art history and criticism, Dewey's notion of art as experience finds followers in several positions within philosophical aesthetics. An example is what Michael Kelly[18] has defined as the "Dewey effect," which is based on the highlighting, in the "Artworld," of moral and political demands, but Dewey's influence can also be seen in the emergence of studies in everyday aesthetics and in the development of more openly phenomenological analyses of the arts, as in the case of Arnold Berleant's social aesthetics[19] and, with regards to moving pictures, in Robert Sinnerbrink's concept of "mood" in film[20] which grounds his critical reading of the works of directors such as Michael Haneke, Lars Von Trier, Asghar Farhadi, and others.

While different in their means and analysis, these positions share a certain sentiment against strong intentionalist claims and a fundamental belief in the complex and multifaceted nature of aesthetic experience; a complexity that is due to the wide range of contributions, from stylistic devices to perceptual stimuli, that artworks offer to us, but that are also the byproduct of our interaction with them.

It is precisely this characterization of aesthetic experience, more elusive and hardly reducible to a set of relatively rigid conditions, that, I believe, has been overlooked by most accounts dealing with the relation between ethics and aesthetics. But the complex nature of aesthetic experience is indeed essential to artistic appreciation and it is likely to affect the understanding of moral attitudes, thus further contributing to the ongoing debate on how such attitudes can affect the aesthetic value of a work.

One may observe, at this junction, that the concerns and aims of the debates I have been surveying are fundamentally separate. On the one hand, we have, as I have mentioned, the question of whether ethical dispositions

[18] Micheal Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics: Facing the Demands of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[19] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991)

[20] Robert Sinnerbrink, *New Philosophies of Film: Thinking Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

can affect the aesthetic assessment of a work. On the other hand, in reference to what I have briefly outlined as being the positions that followed Dewey's concept of art as experience, we instead have a reflection on the intertwined nature of the two and on how art cannot be thought of without its more engaged, morally, socially, and politically driven counterpart. In the former case, to summarize, the conundrum is on the "effects" of morality on art, in the latter case, it is simply a matter of stating their coexistence.

Yet, there is a problem with this objection: it is fundamentally reductive. For the coexistence of an aesthetic and moral dimension is all but passive: as an experience, art is transformative and it is able to display and comment on moral values in ways that go well beyond the simple endorsement or rejection of a given attitude. In this sense, accounts focusing on the experiential nature of art and on the processes through which aesthetic features affect our dispositions can only complement the discussion on the importance of ethical values that has been carried on during the past decade of analytic aesthetics. Allow me to consider a few examples.

As seen, one of the shortcomings with existing positions reflecting on the impact of mandated ethical attitudes on aesthetic assessment is that they rely, for the most part, on narrative works and on works that are able to express a given attitude largely thanks to the ways in which the narrative is fashioned.[21]

By no means do I deny the role played by narrative in making the audience attend to a given disposition, and yet, sometimes, such a role is exceedingly central. Exceedingly central, especially when considering the broad range of aesthetic features that characterize our experience of artworks and that are, for this reason, fundamental in their ability to engage

[21] For example, in his refutation of A.W. Eaton's robust immoralism – the position according to which a moral defect can count as an aesthetic merit – Carroll notices how Eaton may be committing a "narrative fallacy" by not attending to "the place of the character in the overall narrative." Noël Carroll, "Rough Heroes: A Response to A.W. Eaton," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 71 No. 4, Fall 2013: 372. Carroll has also, more generally, emphatically pointed to the importance that narrative has in motion pictures and in how motion pictures exercise their "power." Noël Carroll, "The Power of Movies," *Daedalus* Vol. 114, No. 4, The Moving Image, Fall, 1985:79-103

our imagination.

While I cannot here do justice to the scope of these strategies – which would require a more detailed analysis of individual works – I can nonetheless point to two main directions of research that are likely to contribute and further shape the debate on how aesthetic features can affect ethical understanding and assessment.

The first, inspired by Robert Sinnerbrink's *Cinematic Ethics*,[22] is a reflection on how non-narrative elements, in both narrative and non-narrative films, can lead to sophisticated forms of ethical reflection.[23] The second, which is based on architecture and, more broadly, urbanism, allows us to consider the more radical possibility of seeing moral values, their establishment and adoption, as a byproduct of aesthetic solutions.

In *Cinematic Ethics*, Robert Sinnerbrink argues for a connection between emotional responses toward film and moral assessment through what he labels "cinempathy." Cinempathy, which comprises both empathic and sympathetic responses, is defined as "a cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience." To explain how cinempathy works, Sinnerbrink relies on phenomenologically informed close readings of a number of films such as *A Separation*, *Stella Dallas*, *Biutiful*, *La Promesse*, *The Act of Killing*, etc. that, more directly than others, engage the audience in ethical reflection while resisting the reduction to more standard, but often facile, ethical considerations. Sinnerbrink focuses on the mood of these films, on camerawork, and on several other ways in which film can affect our engagement through means that are often *other* than narrative.

Using Sinnerbrink's analysis as a standpoint allows us to consider a broader spectrum of aesthetic means that, together with narrative, but sometimes independently of it, can lead to ethical reflection, assessment,

[22] Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

[23] Sinnerbrink points out how the ethical reflection elicited by film is at times likely to differ from the simple endorsement or rejection of a moral attitude and that it cannot always be confined to what a given ethical theory may command. Films are not always, in this latter sense, examples of Kantian or Aristotelian values, but an invitation to more nuanced analyses that can truly shape our moral landscape.

and perhaps even a certain sense of puzzlement.

An interesting example is the recently awarded *Elle* (Verhoeven, 2016). While narratively interesting, what contributes to the film's aesthetic success and what, in turn, renders the assessment of this film so compelling, is Isabelle Huppert's performance and the way it investigates the psychological dynamics of her character, Michèle. The film, which revolves around the brutal rape of Michèle, follows her search for the perpetrator, a search that allows the film to reflect on the terrifying moral complications behind rape by combining, in the character of Michèle, a woman hunted by a grotesque past, the aesthetic of video games, her relation to her neighbor – a man with good looks and a penchant for religious conservatism whom will turn out to be the culprit – and her role as the uncaring mistress of her best friend's husband. What makes the oddly prismatic, while nonetheless thoroughly believable and cohesive nature of Michèle's character so interesting is that all her *personae* are tied to a set of rather immediate moral evaluations (such as our belief in the horror of rape acts and our dislike for betrayal), that, however, in their intertwined dynamic in the performance of a single actress, are bound to surprise and even destabilize the audience's moral assessment of the film. For, once again, there is no pre-ordinate uptake: the spectrum of ethical responses is broadened as to involve perplexity, a certain lack of clarity, and, in turn, a sense of uneasiness. Such a response, the generation of an ethical puzzle as opposed to the direct moral condemnation or praise of the film's moral message are due to the aesthetic solutions chosen by the film which, in this case, is to provide a character with seemingly incompatible identities that, when combined, are bound to undermine and challenge our moral convictions.

Even more openly, it is easy to observe how ethical dispositions are expressed when a narrative is altogether forsaken. In Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups*, which Richard Brody has described as the Hollywood movie that most faithfully follows the movement of memory, solutions other than narrative are responsible for the moral undertone of the film.[24] *Knight*

[24] Richard Brody, "Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups* Challenges Hollywood to Do Better," *The New Yorker*, March 7, 2016. Accessed on August 12:

of Cups is a self-reflective film, a spectacle of cinematography, a film lit to the Los Angeles light that inspired Robert Irwin and that Joan Didion has so lovingly described, but it is not only that. The tremendous aesthetic power of Malick's work is also capable to not only initiate, but also shape an ethical response – of a special kind. Because in *Knight of Cups* ethical attitudes and dispositions are never clear cut;[25] their boundaries are fringes and not demarcating lines and they are powerful precisely because of this quality. For rather than pushing us toward a given moral assessment, these films have a way of including the audience by making it participate in the complexity, and difficulty, that often accompany moral evaluations.

The sheer beauty of a film like *Knight of Cups* is likely to steer the audience away for a more traditional disdain for the lust and unfaithfulness shown by the main character, Rick; Emmanuel Lubezki's cinematography engages the imagination allowing it to relate the events to a reflection on memory and identity, almost adorning morals with an air of metaphysical abstraction that is bound to say, or just whisper, something on how we evaluate our past and, ultimately, who we are. In this sense, the film is *adding* something to an ethical conception of agency: it is giving it an actual "look," a visual and perceptual counterpart that is essential to the ethical appreciation of the film.

There are, to summarize, two points that I am tentatively trying to make. The first is that narrative, most obviously in non-strictly narrative films, but also in narrative works, is not the only or necessarily the most relevant means through which ethical dispositions can be communicated. The second is that, more contentiously, more detailed insights into the broad spectrum of aesthetic means used by artworks can lead to a better understanding of the role of the imagination in affecting our moral judgment. For aesthetic means such as the quality of a performance, as in the case of Huppert, or the role played by cinematography, as in Malick's work, can lead to far more complex ethical dispositions. We do not simply

http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/terrence-malicks-knight-of-cups-challenges-hollywood-to-do-better

[25] Arguably, a but a similar case can be made for directors such as Haneke, Asghari, Assayas, Honoré, and others.

endorse or condemn the moral attitudes we observe, and we rarely take such a clear stance when those attitudes are expressed by artworks, for, if it were, they would be largely uninteresting. Works of art, in other words, do not simply suggest a moral evaluation, they do not just "command" an uptake; what they often do, as the example presented show, is to make us question and ponder over those attitudes, at times hinting at their prismatic nature and at the very difficulty of upholding a moral evaluation.

Yet, this is not, I believe, the only way in which aesthetic features can affect moral evaluation. As mentioned in my introduction, I believe that it is possible, in certain cases, to defend a much stronger thesis according to which aesthetic features may, more radically, shape the contours of morals and remodel and even introduce new strands to the ethical debate. The aesthetic sphere can, in this sense, be seen as responsible for the very nature and establishment of our ethical judgments.

This view is not entirely new in aesthetics and it has been entertained by advocates of everyday aesthetics. Yuriko Saito, in her famous article on the tenets of everyday aesthetics,[26] notes, for example, how aesthetic considerations and sensibility have enormous consequences on the moral dimension of our daily life and on the decisions we make: from our relation to the environment, to the products that we purchase, to how we fashion our appearance, etc.

An important development of these theses can, I believe, be seen in the interest on urbanism and on how architectural works can contribute to the establishment of what may amount to "morals of living:" to moral values that depend, for their existence, on the aesthetic choices initiated by architects and carried on through the experiential process of inhabiting a city. For, I aim to show, there are cases in which a given design can shape our sense of moral identity and community living, thus confirming the ability of certain aesthetic features to affect the creation and establishment of moral values.

One of the main reasons for choosing to discuss examples taken from architecture and urbanism is because of the central role played, in both

[26] Yuriko Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics," *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 1. April 2001: 87-95.

cases, by direct experience, an experience that is likely to stretch over time (think, in this sense, of the experience of living in a city for a prolonged period of time) and that is thus constantly morphing. Urban planning is based on the acknowledgment of such continuous and changing experience: the aesthetic of urbanism is then to be seen both in the planning and in the ways in which a urban plan, once established, leads to the creation, and supports the evolution, of an environment, a city.

An early advocate of the dynamic evolution of urban environments (and of the importance of such dynamism for their flourishing), is, famously, Jane Jacobs. In her ground-breaking *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,[27] Jacobs, a supremely talented observer, saw how simple aesthetic solutions such as short blocks, population density, and what she called the "sidewalk ballet" can be effective means to the establishment of a sense of community within cities that, as New York, are economically, culturally, and socially varied. Jacobs is most definitely not alone in her beliefs. A couple of decades after the publication of Jacobs' book, a radically different movement, the New Urbanism, criticized as it often is, reached similar conclusions. The design and specific aesthetic of towns such as Celebration or Seaside affected those living and choosing to live there thus introducing a set of moral standards for sub-urban life that is still tremendously powerful and widespread in the United States.[28] The array of aesthetic solutions chosen by architects and urban planners actively transformed daily life instilling novel community values, values that are, in turn, closely tied to the moral sphere and even capable of altering its contours.

Furthermore, new directions of research in urbanism and architecture seem to support the line advocated in this paper, highlighting the role of aesthetic solutions in the shaping of morals. Less concerned with formalist standards or with the postmodern brilliance of architects such as Rem Koolhaas or the Metabolist movement, architecture, today, is consciously

[27] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961)

[28] Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998) had, as its main location, the town of Seaside in Florida.

moving closer to a reflection on some of the most pressing moral issues of contemporary society. Shigeru Ban's tents which were used as emergency shelters in Rwanda, Haiti, and Nepal are a clear example of this stance.[29] Built with light and inexpensive materials, most notably cardboard, the tents are harmonious, even beautiful, while also easy to build. Ban's aesthetic choices in design and materials contribute to the ethical mission behind his work by allowing us to reflect not only on the emergency conditions they address, but also on a basic human need for shelter and for the dignity that comes with it.

Aesthetic solutions such as the ones used by Ban directly relate to phenomena like global warming and immigration that are today among the most significant global concerns and areas of ethical debate. The aesthetic of these works is redefining notions such as belonging to a place or a community, property ownership, and the overall stability of urban centers. The creative and innovative nature of these projects is introducing us to values that did not belong to more traditional forms of dwelling and is making us discover something new about the moral landscape of living in our world under the pressure of our current global situation.

I am not claiming that all works of art are capable of moral reflection, nor am I claiming that moral reflection is necessarily dependent on aesthetic features and choices; yet, there are significant cases, such as in the examples suggested in this section, in which moral considerations are tied to such features in a strong sense: morals are not without an aesthetic nature and, at times, they fully depend on it.

4. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, I proposed what can be seen as a merging of different debates within aesthetics in reference to the issue of how aesthetics and ethics interact. Specifically, I argued that a more rounded understanding of the way in which aesthetic features guide our moral responses to artworks can

[29] See, for example, Dana Goodyear "Paper Palaces: The Architect of the Dispossessed Meets the One Percent," *The New Yor*ker, August 11-18 2014. Accessed on August 12: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/paper-palaces

add considerable depth to the debate focused on assessing the weight of such responses in the aesthetic evaluation of a work.

Beginning with two of the most frequently described mechanism through which aesthetic features convey a moral message, narrative and imaginative understanding, I further attempted to show how both can be complemented by philosophical perspectives within aesthetics that focus on the importance of aesthetic experience. These solutions, while often requiring a case by case analysis, can not only affect the way in which moral values are perceived, they can also, in certain cases, challenge accepted conception of moral values and shape the contours of ethical reflection. It has been typical to see the realm of the aesthetics in a somewhat ancillary role where artworks can, at best, help the understanding of moral values. I am arguing here that they can do more and that: at times, moral values depend, for their establishment and confirmation, on their aesthetic representation.

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