

## Aesthetic Sins of Commission and Omission<sup>1</sup>

Critical Notice: Erich Hatala Matthes, *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2022)

*Drawing the Line* asks whether and how we should engage with immoral artists and their work. I will begin with some observations about the book as a whole. I will then turn to that part of it dealing with aesthetic value and offer some critical reflections.

The book might easily have been called ‘Walking the Line’ for two reasons. First, it speaks, as few philosophical works do, to both academic and lay audiences. Balancing exposition and argument, it draws from both popular and academic sources and gives each of these two muses an equal voice. While ostensibly an introductory work mapping out several prominent controversies in the public discourse, it also stakes out its own positions on these topics. Matthes carefully explains which parts of the philosophical topography are less hospitable than others. Second, Matthes embraces intellectual compromise, especially where his own positions get most political, as he notes in the foreword (2). He distances himself from the strident positions that seem to dominate public discussion, or at least public attention, on these topics. Caricaturing a bit, but *just* a bit, there are the moral purists on the one hand, who would eradicate all morally compromised artists and their work. On the other are the apologists, happy to tolerate any crime, however vile, in the name of aesthetic value or free expression. Between these discursive flanks, scorched bare by relentless hot takes, Matthes treads a shaded path, availing himself of only as much warmth as reason requires.

Engaging, personal, and limpid, the book is a delight to read. Matthes proves himself to be not only a clear communicator of sometimes intricate ideas, but a deft one too. The text ripples with vivid examples, offbeat quips, instructive metaphors, and personal reflections, which animate the problems it covers. For example, Matthes helpfully compares asking whether to reject or accept cancel culture wholesale to asking whether one should always keep or scrap a broken-down car. In each instance, one must check under the bonnet (78). His illustration of how meaning can be contextually determined is memorable; Matthes imagines someone being asked how many slices of pie they would like, only to express their desire for one slice by holding up their middle finger (54-55). And his use of ‘emotional torque’ to capture our diverging moral and aesthetic allegiances is charming, even beautiful (135). Yet, while the writing feels carefree, it is clearly born of meticulous editing and a good ear. When Matthes describes the ‘dead end’

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Erich Hatala Matthes and Robbie Kubala for their quick feedback.

of ‘hitching our understanding’ to something simplistic (35), the mixed metaphor weirdly confirms just how carefully the rest of the prose has been crafted.

If the book delivers a moral, it is twofold. First, things are more complicated than the most vociferous voices in the public square would have us believe. This is a message one should expect. If philosophy does anything well, it is to problematize what at first seems simple. *Drawing the Line* continues this venerated Socratic tradition. Second, as Matthes puts it halfway through the book, ‘the attitude we take toward art and artists is often more important than whether we engage with them’ (88-89). In short, we cannot always banish immoral artists and their work to the memory hole and nor should we. Sometimes, we have to engage and remind ourselves that engagement is not acquiescence when done right. Matthes’ guiding thought uniting these morals is something like this. What we should ask ourselves when faced with the work of problematic artists is, quite generally, what we should do about it. Doing so presents a potentially infinite number of options about whose constellations we can make some useful generalizations. In this regard, the problem of immoral artists is continuous with practical problems of other kinds. What we should not do, ordinarily, is to choose binarily between engaging and disengaging with, or ‘cancelling’ and refusing to cancel, the artist or her work. While these are sometimes appropriate options, they represent only a tiny fraction of the practical possibilities before us and often extreme ones at that.

So, what of the arguments’ substance? On the whole, whether defending a particular claim or laying out the competing considerations bearing on a question, the book is convincing. In considering what are often politically charged questions, Matthes manages to strike a judicious tone throughout, some might say *too* judicious. He grants both those with a moralizing and a permissive disposition their due without indulging either’s more absurd commitments. In this way, the book fans a cool breeze promising to displace so much accumulated hot air.

The book is not flawless. There are rare moments when the author’s gavel hammers a little more carelessly than usual. While discussing ‘cancel culture’, for example, Matthes divides immoral artists roughly into ‘predators and bigots’ (96). Predators are those who commit immoral acts, bigots those who espouse immoral views. Unlike predators, he argues, cancelling bigots is not an effective strategy. We might reasonably expect to keep sexual predators from committing further crimes by diluting their celebrity. After all, predators often exploit the power, access, and cover their celebrity grants them to prey on victims. With bigotry, things are less clear. Racism, for instance, is a systemic problem. To think we will end racism by cancelling a bigot, Matthes argues, is naive (97).

The two cases are hardly analogous, however, at least as described. Sexual violence is also a systemic problem, to say nothing of misogyny, as Matthes surely grants. Neither of these will be eliminated by cancelling an artist either, even if doing so

might prevent individual sexual offences. True, cancelling a racist artist will not eliminate racism as an oppressive system. However, it is likely to reduce exposure to individual expressions of racist views, not to mention signal disapproval of them. In this respect, then, bigotry and predation are comparable. Matthes could, of course, argue that individual acts of sexual predation are more serious than widely received expressions of bigotry. Whether this is true as a general claim I cannot say. Certainly, it is widely accepted that the former often counts as literal violence as the latter does not, thereby warranting blunter intervention. In any case, this is a different argument to the one Matthes offers.

Matthes poses two sets of questions, one ethical, one aesthetic. The ethical questions occupy the last three quarters of the book. But though the book tours an intellectual estate offering the ethicist more than the aesthetician, the grounds are densely populated with works of art. Matthes' ethical questions are these: should we enjoy the work of immoral artists (chapter two)? Should these artists be 'cancelled' (chapter three)? And how should we engage with them emotionally (chapter four)? The aesthetic question (chapter one) asks whether an artist's immorality affects their work's aesthetic value—should we appreciate their works differently in light of this immorality? It is to this aesthetic discussion that I turn in what follows.

I should note that this first chapter provides an elegant introduction to a literature that begins in earnest with the work of Marcia Eaton and Noël Carroll (it would serve well as a teaching resource, as indeed most of the book would). This literature grapples with the relevance of artworks' ethical values to their aesthetic value. But the chapter also builds on this literature, even though the author's interest is less in what effect an artwork's immorality has on its aesthetic value than in what effect an immoral *artist* has on it.

Matthes' view is that an artist's immorality can help determine her artwork's aesthetic value under certain conditions. The position on which he settles is among a cluster of views arguably closest to establishing an orthodoxy in this emerging field.<sup>2</sup> Matthes captures it in various ways. Sometimes he speaks of the artist's immorality mattering aesthetically when it alters our reasons for (or against) responding as the artwork enjoins us to do (27); sometimes of its mattering when it changes how we ought to interpret the work's meaning (39); sometimes of when the immorality and the artwork are thematically related in the right way (36). All of these lines unite at the same point: an artist's immorality, along with other contextual features, matters aesthetically to an artwork when it manifests itself in the work—when, as some put it, it leaves a 'trace'. The basic idea is that, where an artist's immorality has nothing to do with the aims or subject matter of a work, the aesthetic value is left unblemished. When R. Kelly brazenly writes and produces

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Gaut (2007), Bartel (2019), and Nannicelli (2020).

*Age Ain't Nothing But a Number* for his child bride to sing, by contrast, his child abuse informs the song's message (creepy as hell), whether we should take it up (no bloody way), and thereby the song's aesthetic value (worse!).

Matthes compares the artistic case to athletic achievement to motivate this idea. Where the achievement is related to the athlete's immorality, this degrades the achievement. Here he wheels out disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong, who doped his way to several prestigious cycling victories, as an example. Where the achievement and the vice bear no interesting relation, however, we have no such reason to think less of the achievement. Here he offers the example of superb quarterback and total bastard Michael Vick, who was jailed for orchestrating dog-fights.

Matthes does not intend the comparison to go the distance, argumentatively. And it is clear that, like Armstrong, it would need a little juice to get over the line. In the athletic case, attention is restricted to the achievement. But in the aesthetic case, we are interested in far more than the artistic achievement; we are interested in aesthetic value writ large. There might be all sorts of ways the immorality of the artist could affect the artwork that has nothing to do with achievement.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the analogy is not intended to bear much argumentative weight. Still, the idea that an artist's crimes must connect thematically with the work to spark an aesthetic flaw is one that clearly drives Matthes' thinking and the examples with which he illustrates it. The problem with the view, much like the problem with focusing on achievement, is that it is too restrictive.

There are potentially many more ways that an artists' immorality can determine her work's aesthetic value. Indeed, to show the breadth of possibilities, I outline a proposal in what follows in which works are aesthetically marred in virtue of making precisely *no* thematic contact with their creator's vices. This proposal is at odds with at least one facet of Matthes' account. Furthermore, it suggests that the circumstances under which the artist's immorality conditions the aesthetic value of her work are extremely common. Ultimately, my position is that connections between an artist's immorality and her work's aesthetic value are *very* easy to come by for methodological reasons I touch on shortly.

In fact, these connections are so easy to come by that *immoralist* connections—those allowing that an artist's immorality could redound to the aesthetic improvement of her work—are also possible. Indeed, Matthes identifies just such a connection along lines laid down in an influential article by Anne Eaton. According to Eaton, an artwork's being immoral can make securing the audience's sympathy difficult. This poses an interesting artistic challenge. Overcoming this

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<sup>3</sup> This is true, even if one thinks that aesthetic value in art is significantly bound up with achievement. See, for instance, Walton (1993) and Lopes (2014, 96-101).

challenge counts as an artistic achievement, says Eaton, and so an aesthetic merit. Specifically, Eaton considers works with 'rough heroes'. These are morally flawed, Eaton argues, in virtue of casting irredeemably vicious protagonists with whom the audience is nonetheless meant to identify. Getting audiences to sympathize against all odds with these vile protagonists, then, counts as an aesthetic merit in such a work (Eaton 2012). Matthes considers the analogous case for works by immoral artists. He asks, rhetorically, whether it is not also possible for an immoral artist to accomplish something similar by getting audiences to appreciate a work while never forgetting the vileness of her crimes. Matthes presents this potential implication of his view as a mark against it, although, I was left wondering why. After all, it seems right that if an R. Kelly-type got us to bop along to a paedophilic ballad then, horrible as this may be, this would, or at least could, represent an artistic achievement.

So much for immoralism, now for the proposal. It begins by taking seriously the idea that, at least where one or few authors are involved, an important function of artworks is manifesting some important feature of the artist's character. This is not the oft-derided descriptive or conceptual claim that art is expression. Rather, it is the normative claim that, all things equal, art failing to express something of importance to its artist is, if not always, then at least often aesthetically flawed. By this I mean art that fails to reckon earnestly with the artist's existential preoccupations or the central themes of her life. The ensuing flaw can take one of two forms. First, the work is often comparatively empty, shallow, and inauthentic; it is not rooted in the artist's profoundest thoughts and experiences concerning meaning, value, and what we sometimes call 'the human condition'. Works by immoral artists failing to grapple with their vice, then, might suffer aesthetically in this way, particularly where the artists' misdeeds are pronounced. Take a genocidal dictator who produces a fusty still life painting. Such a painting is akin to an autobiography in which the dictator omits all mention of mass-murder in favour of exalting preferred brands of underwear. The thought is that there is something deeply inauthentic or trivial about what they have produced. Second, where the artist is guilty of significant immorality, such art might function as apologetics-by-distraction; the work's failure to grapple with the artist's crimes, however intended, serves to misrepresent them as non-existent and the artist as unblemished. The work is manipulative.

On this proposal, then, artworks can be aesthetically flawed not merely when they make thematic contact with the artist's moral flaws, as in the R. Kelly case. They can also be flawed in virtue of having *nothing* to do with the artist's immorality.

Matthes gets close to a similar view when discussing a bit by comedian Louis CK in which CK jokes about the very type of wrong of which, as later came out, he is

guilty.<sup>4</sup> ‘What grates about Louis CK’s masturbation joke’, Matthes writes, ‘is that he *doesn’t think he did anything wrong*’ (25). In addressing the subject matter of his moral shortcoming so flippantly, the thought is, there is a failure to reckon appropriately with it. There is a failure to take it and the situation in which it has subsequently placed the comedian seriously. What I am proposing is that this can also occur when an artwork’s subject matter makes no contact at all with the artist’s crimes. Not always, perhaps, but surely sometimes. Artists who *avoid* reckoning with their moral crimes in their art are much like Louis CK. In failing to own up to, grapple with, or try to make amends for them, they also fail to take them seriously.<sup>5</sup> They are, to put it colourfully, like someone who walks into your house, defecates on the dining table, and then engages in small-talk as if nothing had happened. Such art, like such conduct, is marred by omission (the conduct is also marred by having, you know, shat on someone’s table). And, ultimately, it does not much matter whether the omissive small-talk is about the weather or last night’s game.

One might question the idea on which this proposal rests—namely, that the best artworks are fundamentally expressions of the artist’s deepest being. Indeed, Matthes might appear to preempt my proposal when he raises doubts about the idea that artworks express or manifest the artist’s soul. The worry? ‘[T]his again forces us back to the idea that Hitler’s watercolours contain some hidden darkness and there’s no clear reason to think that unless we assume the central tenets of this expression theory’ (35). However, the proposal is not that Hitler’s watercolours need manifest his inner darkness in order that his immorality mar them aesthetically. The proposal is that the works may be tainted by concealing it; they are tainted not by *expressing* the artist’s vice, but by *suppressing* it.

Ultimately, it should not come as a surprise that an artist’s immorality can affect the aesthetic value of a work in many ways. Matthes places few constraints on what sort of connection must obtain between an artist’s immorality and her work’s aesthetic value. All that is required is that the vice should change something about the work, its ‘meaning’, and thus, how we ought to respond to it, where these things cannot be straightforwardly read off the responses of actual audiences. If what we are looking for is just *some* connection of this kind, be it causal, constitutive, or normative, then the constraints on what we are looking for are pretty lax. So lax, in fact, that we should expect to find all manner of connections. Here, for instance, is another:

An artist’s immorality can alter the appreciator’s evidence for how sophisticated her art is. This is clearest to see in the case of ‘bigots’. In 2013, Jeremy Irons landed

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<sup>4</sup> The discussion of Bill Cosby’s comedy as having become meaningless in light of Cosby’s crimes (131-133) could be read in a similar way, too.

<sup>5</sup> Since his offences were publicly exposed in 2017, Louis CK has addressed them in his comedy as elsewhere. Whether he has done so adequately, I leave readers to decide.

on a bed of nettles when he mused about homosexual marriage potentially ‘debas[ing] marriage’s meaning. In the same discussion, gripped by passing stupidity, the actor wondered aloud whether homosexual marriage would allow fathers to secure tax benefits by marrying their sons (Battersby 2013). Though irresponsible, as he would later concede, Irons’ comments were clearly made in the candid, if blundering, spirit of free inquiry. Still, even a small misstep like this can justify a reevaluation of an artist’s oeuvre, particularly where mastery of the artform, in this case acting, requires a certain inner dexterity.

This sort of case is much clearer when the intellectual rot has set in for good. Morrissey, erstwhile singer for indie rock band The Smiths, is widely regarded as one of the most gifted lyricists of his generation. Later in life, however, he has championed far-right causes, such as the now defunct political party ‘For Britain’ (Morrissey 2018). In its 2022 manifesto, For Britain called to ‘freeze legal immigration for at least 5 years’ (For Britain 2022, 16).<sup>6</sup> Learning this about Morrissey is, albeit to a lesser extent, a little like learning that Pat Lipsky’s colour fields were all in fact painted by a five-year-old. Morrissey’s manifestation of moral idiocy gives one license to wonder just how deep his lyrics can really be and perhaps even to revise one’s original judgements.

These sorts of more or less systematic and interesting connections between the artist and their work will abound. This, again, is because there is no real constraint being placed on what gets to count as a relevant determining relation between them. We might just as easily ask whether an artist’s being colour-blind, a mother, or a contemporary German could help shape the aesthetic value of her work. The answer in each case is ‘well, sure!’. Being a contemporary German, for instance, could causally affect an artist’s objectively and subjectively viable artistic choices; constitutively, it could settle the plausible frameworks for interpreting her work; normatively, it could constrain whether or not the artist responds, fails to respond, or even ought to do either, to political themes particular to the German context, such as post-war shame, reunification, and a proto-federal Europe. All of these things and more might help determine a work’s aesthetic value and do so in virtue of conditioning the work’s meaning, among other things.

If these connections are so easy to come by, then is there something wrong with, or at least philosophically uninteresting about, the question inviting them?<sup>7</sup> Are there more interesting types of connection one could try to establish? How could one restrict the search? In the parallel debate about whether an *artwork*’s immorality ever determines its aesthetic value, there is a straightforward way to make the inquiry more philosophically interesting: we can ask whether the work’s immorality

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<sup>6</sup> If you disagree that the manifesto pledge is idiotic, then you may substitute your own example, after which you may don a conical hat with a big D on it, sit yourself in the corner, and enjoy a view of the blank walls.

<sup>7</sup> My thoughts on this issue are outlined in Stear (2022).

*as such* is ever aesthetically good- or bad-making.<sup>8</sup> Does the immorality itself ever bring the work's aesthetic value up or down, rather than in virtue of realizing some further feature of the work (e.g. being inauthentic, funny, manipulative, etc.)? In the present case, we are interested in the relation between the immorality of the *artist* and her work's aesthetic value. And while the work's immorality is a property of the work, the artist's is not. As such, perhaps one would have to ask whether the property *having-been-made-by-an-immoral-artist* is itself aesthetically valenced to refine the original question in similar fashion. I leave this here as a suggestion.

Serious though I think these theoretical worries are, I also think Matthes had good reason for doing things as he did. The book is, as he notes, not meant to be comprehensive (3). It is concerned with practical questions designed to inform a broad readership, less with methodological intricacies of interest to a few academics. The book is a gourmet hamburger: rich, yet down-to-earth, and unlikely to benefit from my unsolicited garnish of saffron and truffle oil. I encourage anyone vexed by immoral artists to tuck in.

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Matthes appears initially to frame the parallel inquiry in these terms, too (8).



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