Aesthetics and Ethics: On the Power of Aesthetic Features

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Abstract

The relation between ethical and aesthetic values is among the most prominent debates within analytic aesthetics. Recently, the discussion has been focusing on the extent to which the ethical properties expressed by a given work can 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. My analysis will primarily rely on non-narrative works and aesthetic practices and stems from the consideration of studies in everyday aesthetics and somaesthetics. 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.

Keywords: ethics and aesthetics, somaesthetics, architecture, motion pictures, narrative, everyday aesthetics.

Introduction

The relation between ethical and aesthetic values is one of the most prominent debates within analytic aesthetics. Most recently, 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,[1] moderate autonomism, as in the version advocated by James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean,[2] moderate moralism, Noël Carroll's[3] milder version of ethicism, and cognitive immoralism, Matthew Kieran's[4] response to ethicism, all gauge the extent to which ethical values and properties expressed by a given work can 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

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interested, to clarify, in examining the extent to which aesthetic representations and stylistic choices can affect the reception, understanding, and 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 only two. The first, which applies mostly to literary and filmic works, is to rely on narrative and on its ability to suggest a given disposition (such as a sense of ethical allegiance) to the audience. 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 highlight the impact of aesthetic features on the understanding of ethical values and the ensuing ability to express moral deliberations.

A different answer, which I will defend in this paper, is to research alternative modalities through which artworks can engage our imagination, modalities that, while harder to pin down, are based on a more openly experience-based account of aesthetics, specifically, somaesthetics and everyday 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 rendering. 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.

Morality and Art: An Overview

It is important, before introducing my argument, to consider some of the ways in which aesthetic features can interact with the ethical content of a work. More narrowly, I will focus on two positions: 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 they are 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 from the audience, responses that can, 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"[5]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 makes his view more amenable to narrative works. For narratives are an excellent way of prescribing attitudes: narratives are responsible for the ordering of events, for their 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 connected to evaluative processes among which is the endorsement, or rejection, of moral attitudes.

Before assessing this position, allow me to 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. However, despite such consensus, there is no unanimous agreement on *how* artworks convey knowledge. Responses abound. Think, for example, of Martha Nussbaum's argument for the role of emotions and imagination in delivering ethical knowledge;[6] of Noël Carroll's claim that literary works can trigger our imagination by acting as thought experiments,[7] and, more recently, of Matthew Kieran's defense of cognitive immoralism[8] which is grounded in the ability of artworks to deepen our moral knowledge by promoting imaginative understanding.[9]

Are these two solutions, the ability of narrative to prompt moral evaluation and the capacity of art to invite imaginative responses, enough to describe the influence of aesthetic features in the debate on the relation between ethics and aesthetics? Not quite. A first set of objections comes from the limitations that are inherent to the reliance on narrative works. Because 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 tendency toward an intentionalist stance 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 work, 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 warranted? While I am not inclined to defend a complete abandonment of

intentionality a la Roland Barthes,[10] 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. Relying on the intentions expressed by the work is also problematic in cases where the audience is asked to partly take over the interpretation of a work as it appears to be the case in puzzle narratives, or in what Thomas Elsaesser[11] has defined as mind-game films.

The second strategy introduced, namely to rely on the ability of a work to stimulate our imagination, appears to employ a more rounded, flexible understanding of the role played by art in eliciting ethical reflection. 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,[12] relates imaginative understanding to the mechanism of make-believe that facilitates the audience's engagement with fictional works. However, this solution may be too broad. 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. One is left wondering, differently put, whether the make-believe activity inspired by artworks is any different from the one we routinely engage in our daily life.

Additionally, and more pressingly, 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: there seems to be a gap, to reiterate, 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 situations analogous to thought experiments,[13] 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. However, by restricting his 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[14] 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 characters and on how it allows the audience to entertain their positions and thus "grow," morally, with them, appears to cover a broader spectrum of aesthetic features. Yet, while imaginative understanding is given a more complex treatment, Nussbaum's account appeals almost exclusively to literature, thus falling back into the objections I mentioned in relation to narrative works.

Aesthetic Power

My interest in how artworks "move us" (a fairly vague, but hard to encapsulate expression) is an interest, primarily, in the overall *experience* of artworks and in how such an experience can both engage our imagination and affect our dispositions toward the values expressed by artworks. In this sense, my analysis is closer to 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 historians such as Meyer Shapiro,[15] 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[16]– and as one of the standpoints for the analysis of contemporary art, Dewey's account remains a prominent source.

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[17] has defined as the "Dewey effect," which is based on the highlighting, in the "Artworld," of moral and political demands, but Dewey's influence is perhaps most visible in Yuriko Saito's everyday aesthetics and Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics, on which I will focus for the remainder of this paper.

While different in their means and analysis, these positions share a certain sentiment against openly 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 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.

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 the question of whether ethical dispositions ought to affect the aesthetic assessment of a work. On the other hand, and in line with Dewey's concept of art as experience, we instead have a reflection on the intertwined nature of the two and on how art can hardly be thought of without a recognition of its ethical and socio-culturally engaged dimension. In the former case, the conundrum is on the "effects" of morality on art, in the latter, we are simply stating their coexistence in the experience of artworks.

But there is a problem with this line of thinking: it is fundamentally reductive. For the coexistence of an aesthetic and moral dimension is anything 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 surely complement the discussion on the importance of ethical values that has been carried on during the past decades 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.[18]

By no means do I deny the role played by narrative in making the audience attend to what expressed by a work, and yet, sometimes, such a role is overstated. Overstated, 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 the imagination.

While I cannot here do justice to the scope of these features – 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 studies in everyday aesthetics, looks at architecture and, more broadly, urbanism. The second focuses instead on fashion and on how somaesthetics can contribute to its analysis. In both cases, the goal is to show how aesthetic choices can affect, destabilize, confirm, and reshape moral standards.

Shigeru Ban's Refugee's Shelters

In this paper, I am advancing the view according to which aesthetic features and choices can not only affect moral evaluation, but, more radically, reshape the contours of morals, 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.

Theoretically, support for this view has been provided by advocates of everyday aesthetics such as Yuriko Saito and Tom Leddy. Saito, in her pivotal article on the tenets of everyday aesthetics,[19] notes, for example, how aesthetic sensibility and aesthetic choices affect the moral dimension of daily life and the decisions we make: from our relation to the environment, to the products that we purchase, to how we fashion our appearance, etc. These considerations are carried on in her recent book, *Aesthetics of the Familiar*,[20] where she highlights the potential for everyday aesthetics to engage in the normative discourse, a potential that can translate in actions toward better world-making.[21]

Saito elaborates these tenets in relation to nature aesthetics, specifically by using the example of wind farms, but the normative potential of everyday aesthetics is also easily captured by urban planning and architecture. Both can contribute to the establishment of what may amount to "morals of living:" moral values that depend, for their existence, on the aesthetic choices initiated by architects and carried on in the experiential process of inhabiting a city. There are cases, in other words, 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 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 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 an 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 isJane Jacobs. In her ground-breaking *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,[22] Jacobs, a 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.[23] 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 Japanese Metabolist movement, architecture, today, is consciously 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.[24]Built with light and inexpensive materials, most notably cardboard, the tents are

harmonious and 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 the 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 example 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. Allow me to consider a second example.

The Aesthetic Power of Fashion

Both connected to the everyday and to the establishment of individual and collective values, fashion, and, in general, fashioning oneself are prime examples of the power of aesthetics. Similarly to architecture and urbanism, fashion is better understood in an experiential framework. Clothes are objects, discrete objects, but they would not be what they are were they not *experienced*: worn, carried, folded, washed, ruined, etc. A second point of connection between architecture and fashion is that the experience of fashion is ongoing. Virtually everyone wears clothes or some kind of adornment, getting dressed and undressed is an everyday ritual, something we become accustomed to since a very early age. It is also, importantly, a physical experience: fashion is intrinsically related to the body, to becoming aware of our bodies. Clothes can expose it, cover it, they can also modify it in radical ways: binding feet, high heels, and plastic surgery are often mentioned examples, but one can also think of athletic clothing and of how they can enhance the body's performance.

The centrality of the body and the importance of paying attention to aesthetic experience are two of Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics and Shusterman himself has both written and experimented with fashion in ways that, indirectly but I believe visibly, can inform the discussion on the relation between aesthetics and ethics and on the ability of aesthetics to shape the moral field.

Shusterman's analysis of fashion is also interesting for it primarily focuses on his personal experience, and an autobiographical slant is central to philosophical analyses of fashion. There is a connection between fashion and the establishment of personal and collective identity, an establishment that should be seen as both experiential and experimental.

I will focus here on two instances in which Shusterman has addressed fashion. The first is an autobiographical piece "Fits of Fashion: The Somaesthetics of Style,"[25] in which he utilizes his personal experience as a fit model to reflect on the conflictual nature of fashion, one that tends to put together, side by side, opposite characterizations. The second case, *The Adventures of the Man in Gold: Paths Between Art and Life*,[26] is instead a book in which Shusterman "becomes" or, better, alternates natures: the philosopher and the charmingly delicate "man in gold".

Most people, Shusterman remarks, are not aware of the existence of fit models. They are not the ones we see on magazine covers or fashion runways. Fit models represent what is perceived as being the standard: average height, weight, average proportions. They are essential to the fashion industry because they set a standard for what consumers are likely to purchase. But the fit model is also ultimately a paradox. Shusterman reveals the paradoxical nature of the fit model by noting how while an average size allows one to wear virtually anything, to have an average size also appears to imply a certain indistinguishableness. To be a fit model wearing an average size, he confesses, made him "feel" average. Additionally, is an average size a concept we can so easily grasp? Is average in New York, where Shusterman used to live, average elsewhere? Do things, and especially bodies, *stay* average? The fit model ends up embodying some kind of a blurry aesthetic ideal. It is a "mathematical ideal of virtual forms," but virtual forms that are not people's forms: virtual forms are not material bodies.[27]

The paradoxical nature of the fit model is an opening to a reflection on the paradoxical nature of fashion itself: generic and particular, descriptive and evaluative, individual and group-based, inclusive and exclusive, ephemeral and permanent, formal and causal, revealing and covering, etc. Fashion embraces, from an aesthetic standpoint, a growing number of ambiguities, it is based on those ambiguities: it is a dynamic of opposites, of clashing aesthetic categories.

The duality of fashion is echoed in Shusterman's 'Man in Gold'. Shusterman's book is a philosophical tale: it combines some of the tenets of somaesthetics with his personal love for the arts and, in interesting ways, with his desire to create art, or, more intriguingly, to become a work of art. *The Adventures of the Man in Gold* is a subtle reflection on identity, the nature of art, and on our somatic involvement with it, themes familiars to somaesthetics scholars, but to which I cannot do justice here. But it can also be seen as a testament to the aesthetic power of fashion. For Shusterman

transforms into the man in gold in the moment in which he wears a golden shimmering suit, tight to his body, elf-like, dream-like, and yet perfectly physical, embodied, material. It first appears as a bizarre choice of outfit and yet, on further reflection, the outfit is not far from being a metaphor of the nature of fashion. It is ornate and yet simple in its lines; it reveals but also covers the body, it is empowering but it also attracts ridicule, it is comfortable but also difficult to wear or take off, it allows for the man in gold to appear, it makes Shusterman disappear.

But in what ways do these examples illustrate the importance of aesthetics in the making on ethical judgments?

The initial reason justifying the power of fashion choices on ethical values and deliberations resides in the personal nature of fashion and in its connection to identity. In this paper, I have remarked how ethical values and dispositions can change, shift over time, assume different contours. Fashion is the epitome of change. There is a parallel, differently put, between the morphing nature of fashion, and how such morphing can affect identity, and the possibility of shifts within our moral compass and value systems. Specifically, fashion seems to have a twofold power: on the one hand, by allowing for a large degree of experimentation (think of how we can play with make-up, outfits, costumes, and even uniforms) it trains the aesthetic eye to the possibility and plausibility of change. On the other hand, it relates aesthetic change to the ethical sphere.

The aesthetic choices we make when getting dressed are attached to value systems. Formal suits, uniforms, athletic gear, provocative or conservative clothing are hardly devoid on moral connotations. In fact, they often stand in lieu of those. At times those choices signal collective identity, belonging to a group, a class, sharing a sexual orientation. They signify those values making them recognizable.

But, importantly, aesthetic choices in fashion can also subvert moral values and introduce novel ones. There is, in a way, a revolutionary side to it. Fashion and fashion choices are grounded in experimentation, they confront us with different visions of who we are or might want to be. Designers like Bathesva Hay have taken revalued, through their creation, a sense of modesty and elegance in women's dresses, making the wearers thinking ethically and not just aesthetically about their bodies and appearance; Virgil Abloh, the current, now the artistic director of Louis Vuitton has made street style chic and prompted a conservative pool of consumers to endorse counter-culture. In his book *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*[28], Paul Taylor traces the ethical connotations of aesthetic choices in African American women's hair: fashion here can signal a shift, from submission to Caucasian standards to the recognition of an identity that begins with aesthetic choices and that is ultimately an empowerment of one's own culture.

Fashion, as a daily practice, leads to both confirmation of ethical values and to their subversion. It is, once again, experiential and experimental.

Sometimes diverging from one's traditional choices in clothes and attire can be done superficially, as if to wear a mask or a costume; but there is no reason to believe that fashion experimentations may not last, that they may not affect, change, and shift who we are in ways that are both ethically and aesthetically significant.

Two Objections

In this section, I consider two objections to my defense of the ability of aesthetic features to channel and even alter moral judgments and dispositions.

The first objection is that, quite simply, this is a dangerous power and one to be wary of. Plato attacked the arts in the *Ion* and *The Republic*, showing how perilous imitation can be and how easily it is to negatively steer the audience's emotions. Plato's argument was rebuked by Aristotle, who instead praised the arts' ability to express universal concepts while also attuning us to a broader set of emotions, but a certain hesitance toward allowing aesthetics to assume a normative role remains, and it is often justified.

The bold strokes, clashing colors, and the beautification of the war and its tools that characterizes much the aesthetics of futurism – think of Tommaso Martinetti's poetry, or Umberto Boccioni cubist sculptures – were crucial to the spread of fascism; fashion, to return to the previous topic, can promote personal identity, but it can also justify superficial homogeneity thus making a sense authenticity an unattainable (and perhaps undesirable) goal. Prominent contemporary artists are also often faced with related criticisms. Kara Walker's silhouettes and the ways in which she humors racial stereotypes have at times (while I believe wrongly) been criticized as perpetrating the very distorted views they try to expose and denounce.

But are these and similar cases sufficient to resist the importance of aesthetics? Are we to counteract its potential? Are aesthetic choices too risky to be taken as normative choices?

While it is impossible to deny that these are serious concerns, I do not believe they should taint the normative mission of aesthetics. Two responses can be provided. The first is that these worries can also be raised with respect to the ability of certain ethical dispositions to exercise normative force. Deviations from a coherent, rational, and progressive ethical reflection are numerous; we monitor them in everyday life, and we see how quickly they assume terrifying normative power. The past years have seen the rise of fake news, neo-Nazi movements, hate speech, etc. where forms of socio-political brutality are encouraged. These positions are outrageous, but they are powerful and have gained and appear to continue to be gaining traction.

If anything, renewed attention to aesthetics can counteract these trends. Becoming aware of the aesthetic dimension of the everyday can expose large groups of people, and, as Saito has remarked, non-professional people, to more nuanced, kinder, and attentive standards of ethical deliberation. Aesthetics

can promote social and cultural engagement and it is possible to imagine how aesthetic sensibility can become a way of both pointing to moral aberrations and of developing a finer and more progressive approach to morality.

A second objection to my insistence on the normative value of aesthetics may come from a defender of ethicism. As briefly mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in its strong form, ethicism defends the view according to which ethically commendable works are aesthetically commendable and, conversely, works that express ethically reprehensible attitudes are for this reason aesthetically lamentable. There is, in this view, no room for the normative value of aesthetic choices, nor is it open to ways in which aesthetic choices can contribute to the identification, questioning, and assessment of morals.

But ethicism is overly assertive. It is advisable, instead, to opt for a conciliatory view in which ethics and aesthetic cooperate. Responses to the arts as well as responses to everyday life are entrenched in the overall context of daily experience and experience is inherently multi-faceted. Furthermore, a conciliatory view that looks at a cooperation, on the normative front, of ethics and aesthetics, has the crucial advantage of allowing for a more critical analysis and assessment of what, in the first place, we take as morally meritorious and aesthetically praiseworthy.

Ethicism presupposes a shared understanding of what is morally meritorious and morally despicable, an understanding on the basis of which aesthetic judgments are made. But is such a shared understanding unquestionable? While a broadly relativistic view is certainly mistaken, we must also be wary of the reification of ethical as well as aesthetic considerations. They are often contextual, they change over time, and are hardly clear-cut. By allowing both ethics and aesthetics to operate on a normative level, we allow for more fluidity and for an informed dialogue on the nature of ethical and aesthetic values in the arts as well as in everyday life. In this paper, I used examples from architecture and fashion, but others can be provided. A notable one is the work of Ghana-born artist El Anatsui. Anatsui's large sculptural installations, built with found and discarded materials are stunning, vibrant, and perceptually engaging. Their aesthetic value is bound to make us ponder over consumerism, environmental concerns, and, more broadly, on colonialism and the complex nature of Africa's history and traditions. A less well-known example is the work of Mark Dion. Currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, The *Life of a Dead Tree*, is an ongoing installation in which a deceased, fully grown tree is treated as a human body and given what resembles an autopsy. The bacteria, indigenous and invasive, infesting it are photographed and catalogued. Scientists, museum staff, curators, and Dion himself are at work on the tree during museum hours and visitors are encouraged to ask questions and engage in conversation. The work is captivating in its display of the tree – a body on an autopsy table immediately comes to mind – but the result would

not be so intriguing without the associations brought up by the work, from the status of the environment, to its connection to our lives, to the very issue of life and death. As in El Anatsui's work, ethics and aesthetic inform each other in unconventional ways asking for an assessment, or re-assessment of both: both have normative value.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, I proposed what can be seen as a merging of different debates within aesthetics, a merging centered on the nature of the interaction between ethics and aesthetics. Specifically, I argued that a more rounded understanding of the way in which aesthetic features guide our moral responses to artworks can 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 such as everyday aesthetics and somaesthetics. 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 conceptions of moral values and shape the contours of ethical reflection. It has been typical to see the realm of 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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Notes

[1] 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.

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

[3] 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.

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

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

[6] 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.

[7] 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.

[8] 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.

[9] 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.

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

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

[12] 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.

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

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

[15] Mayer Shapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Century*. New York: George Braziller, 1978.

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

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

[18] 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

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

[20] Yuriko Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World Making*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

[21] Saito, 2017: 199.

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

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

[24] 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

[25] Richard Shusterman, "Fits of Fashion: The Somaesthetics of Style," in Giovanni Matteucci & Stefano Marino (eds.) *Philosophical Perspectives on Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

[26] *Adventures of the Man in Gold/Les Aventures de L'Hommeen Or*. Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2016 - Bilingual edition English/French with images by Yann Toma.

[27] Shusterman, 2017: 94.

[28] Paul Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2016.