

THE PROBLEM WITH SENTIMENTAL ART

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I. INTRODUCTION

If we feel confident in criticizing art for being sentimental, we ought to be able to precisely state how and why sentimentality is an aesthetic fault. This entails demonstrating that sentimental art fails to perform some function that is essential to art. In this paper I will argue that any critique of sentimental art that does not satisfy such a condition is not a legitimate aesthetic critique. Additionally I will put forth a genuinely aesthetic critique of sentimental art, establishing why sentimentality is an aesthetic fault and why art will be aesthetically flawed to the extent that it is sentimental.

Sentimentality is an ambiguous concept and my first step will be to crystallize working definitions of sentimentality and of sentimental art. Sentimentality will be

defined as an emotional disposition that idealizes its object for the sake of emotional gratification and that is inherently corrupt because it is grounded in epistemic and moral error. Sentimental art will be defined as art that, whether or not by design, evokes a sentimental response. Various critiques of sentimentality—as a general emotional disposition—are focused on its epistemic and moral shortcomings. However, I will argue, the critique of sentimental art for epistemic and moral reasons is not clear-cut because of the incongruity between our epistemic and moral expectation of art and of real-life. As the focal point of this discussion I will use the Socialist Realist painting *Roses for Stalin* by Boris Vladimirsky, which I take to be an exceptional example of sentimental art.

In the final section of the paper I propose my own aesthetic criticism of sentimentality. I will show that the moral and epistemic defectiveness of sentimentality does prove aesthetically detrimental to sentimental art. My argument draws on Noël Carroll's "clarificationist" thesis, by which he suggests a way of conceiving of the relationship between art and moral understanding. Carroll contends that an important function of narrative (and, I add, figurative) art, is its ability to clarify and reorganize our moral attitudes by engaging our morally grounded emotions. Clearly, the fact that sentimental art appeals to sentimental emotions (i.e. emotions that are not based on sound moral or epistemic judgments) effectively undercuts the possibility of its providing moral clarification.

I argue that in the case of works like *Roses for Stalin*—that present themselves *precisely as* morally significant artworks—their sentimentality is tantamount to their aesthetic failure. This is because the aesthetic value of such works is meant to derive from their power to evoke morally "clarifying" emotional experiences of the type that Carroll describes. However, not all sentimental artworks are the complete aesthetic failures that *Roses for Stalin* is. Sentimental artworks, even if they do not purport to moral seriousness, are nevertheless aesthetically flawed because in being sentimental they offer exactly the opposite of moral clarification. I argue that if facilitating moral clarification is an aesthetic virtue it follows that encouraging the indulgence of sentimental emotions is a fault. Thus, any artwork will be aesthetically flawed, at least to some extent, insofar as it is sentimental.

II. SENTIMENTALITY AND SENTIMENTAL ART

There is a philosophical debate over the exact nature of sentimentality. On one side are those who maintain that sentimentality can be identified with a distinct set of characteristically sweet and innocuous emotions. Mark Jefferson defines sentimentality by its “emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotion’s objects.”¹ On the other side are those who believe that sentimental emotions can be of many kinds. Among these is Anthony Savile, who contends that all standard feelings (e.g. grief, pity, love) can be sentimental if they are “felt and entertained in a particular way.”²

In this paper I will adopt the latter view. There are two reasons for this: First, I do not accept that the only kind of emotional engagement we might have with sweet, vulnerable or cute objects is a sentimental one. Secondly, these objects are by no means exhaustive of what can be given a sentimental treatment. For example, the film *Rocky* sentimentalizes the lead character’s scrappy underdog spirit. War memorials sentimentalize nationalism and the glory of battle. A suitable definition of sentimentality would have to account for examples such as these.

Sentimental emotions differ from standard emotions in an important way. Savile and others (most notably David Pugmire) take sentimental emotions to be corrupted versions of their standard counterparts, arguing that sentimentality is by definition a type of defect. To understand this position it is necessary to recognize that it presupposes a judgment theory of emotion. A judgment theory of emotion holds that all emotions have intentional objects and are rooted in a subject’s beliefs and judgments about the object. Accordingly, different emotions are defined by the type of object they have and the judgments or beliefs held by a subject with respect to this object. Thus, to borrow Robert Solomon’s examples, the intentional object of anger is a responsible agent who one judges to have committed an offense against oneself.³ On the other hand the intentional object of indignation is an individual who is thought to have transgressed a moral principle and it entails the subject’s judgment of her own moral superiority.⁴ Accordingly, describing an emotional response as appropriate means recognizing that it genuinely stems from a sound judgment about its object.

¹ Jefferson (1983), p. 526.

² Savile (2002), p. 315.

³ Solomon (1993), p. 228.

⁴ Solomon (1993), p. 270-1.

Sentimental emotions are defective because they are not rooted in sound emotional reasoning. When we take a sentimental view of Rocky Balboa's gritty rise from wash-up to championship contender, we overlook the extreme improbability of the event in order to preserve the good feelings it rouses. A war memorial is sentimental when it is designed with a particular response in mind (e.g. admiration, pride) if this response overlooks or contradicts the true facts of the event it memorializes. In both cases these sentimental feelings require us to hold distorted views of the objects we sentimentalize. The distorted view is adopted and maintained for the sake of the emotion, which—for whatever reason—is thought desirable in itself. Savile stresses that this misrepresentation usually involves an *idealized* view of an object “under the guidance of a desire for gratification and reassurance.”⁵ Of great significance is the fact that in holding fast to these idealized views we adopt a method of emotional reasoning that upsets the causal priority of judgment and belief over emotion. This makes sentimental emotions corrupt on a most basic level.

Sentimental art is art that provokes a sentimental response.⁶ It is often—but not necessarily—designed for this purpose. It follows from our definition of sentimentality that if an artwork prompts a sentimental response it must do so by presenting its subject in a manner that is conducive of such a response—i.e. an idealized and distorted view. *Roses for Stalin* is a sentimental artwork. This work is sentimental because the manner in which it represents Stalin is intended to support a very specific and unambiguous set of emotions. This representation is designed for this purpose and Stalin would have been depicted in a manner conducive of this end regardless of what Stalin was, in reality, actually like. Representational fidelity is not the goal of this painting. One may see many aesthetic flaws in the painting. It might appear compositionally simplistic, or its symbolism may seem heavy-handed. These are legitimate aesthetic criticisms of the work, but neither one directly addresses the fact of the work's sentimentality. These flaws may be consequences of the work's sentimentality—Vladimirsky probably made these choices so as to avoid any interpretational ambiguity—however, they are not *necessary* consequences of its sentimentality. It would have been possible for the work to have been more sophisticated and still sentimental.

⁵ Savile (2002), p. 316.

⁶ My discussion of sentimental art will cover only representational artworks. This is because the definition of sentimentality used in this discussion cannot coherently be applied to non-representational works.

The aim of this discussion is to determine whether or not sentimentality *itself* is an aesthetic fault. As a corruption of the process of sound emotional reasoning, philosophers criticize sentimentality on epistemic and moral grounds. These criticisms are not necessarily focused on art, as sentimentality can be a feature of many aspects of life, e.g. greeting cards, political conventions, ticker-tape parades, graduation ceremonies, news reporting.⁷ These criticisms do not become legitimate aesthetic criticism simply by virtue of being focused on an artwork. *Roses for Stalin* may be epistemically and morally corrupt, but does *this* make it bad art? In the following section I will consider these criticisms and determine why they cannot legitimately serve as aesthetic criticisms.

III. THE EPISTEMIC AND MORAL CRITIQUES OF SENTIMENTALITY

Savile writes: “There is always something wrong with [sentimentality]...there are no situations the proper perception of which demands a sentimental response”.⁸ The essence of Savile’s criticism is epistemic. Judgments that are based on a sentimental disposition towards their objects are epistemically compromised because sentimentality consists of active misrepresentation of the world through falsity and lack of evidential justification.⁹ Wherever honesty, accuracy and truth are prized a sentimental disposition will be inappropriate.

However, we do not have these epistemic expectations of art. Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* and Fellini’s *Roma* are very selective, idealized and idiosyncratic representations of their respective namesakes and this is not regarded as a deficiency of either work. Artistic representations, such as these, that manifest a well defined point-of-view—and consequently prescribe a particular emotional response—are aesthetically enriched rather than marred by this. Leveling an epistemic criticism against either film for failing in its responsibility to faithfully document the city would be misunderstanding the artists’—artistically legitimate—motivations for making the films. There is no question that sentimental art misrepresents its subject and is therefore epistemically deficient. However, it cannot be this deficiency that is pointed to as its key aesthetic flaw.

⁷ Neill and Ridley (2002), p. 313.

⁸ Savile (2002), p. 315.

⁹ Savile (2002), pp. 316-17.

Roses for Stalin is anomalous, even among sentimental artworks, because the judgments it urges us to accept are so outrageous. Stalin's identity as a historical figure so sharply contradicts how he is represented in the painting that it renders this depiction preposterous, if not offensive. This is such an obtrusive and distracting feature of the work that it cancels out the possibility of any serious aesthetic engagement with it. Most significantly this undermines the painting's affective power—a savvy viewer cannot partake of the warm feelings it is meant to inspire. Insofar as this feeling is central to the design and meaning of the work, this falsity amounts to its aesthetic failure.

However, this does not provide an epistemic ground for the aesthetic critique of sentimentality. Possibly in the context in which this work first appeared it was not as transparent as it is to a contemporary audience. Thus, it may have possessed the affective power it was intended to and was not an aesthetic failure in the manner described. It was nevertheless sentimental and presumably aesthetically flawed to the degree that it was. A satisfactory aesthetic critique of sentimentality would have to account for this.

The moral critique of sentimentality is most extensively developed by David Pugmire, who claims that sentimentality is immoral because it is dishonest. Pugmire argues that in sentimentalizing we are deliberately entertaining a distorted perception of an object for the sake of a desired emotional experience, and we may very well be privy and indifferent to the fact that we are doing so. Moreover, sentimental emotions lack the psychological commitments of standard emotions. Therefore, in indulging these emotions we are also being dishonest about our own emotional state.¹⁰ Sentimental dishonesty consists in misplacing emotion “not through confusion or mere ignorance but through an indulgent and even insistent disregard for its misplacement.”¹¹

It would be gratuitously naïve to take *Roses for Stalin* to be an exception to this, and take the falsity that it propagates to be a consequence of Vladimirsky's unintentional misunderstanding of his subject matter. *Roses for Stalin* serves well as an example of profane, immoral sentimentality because insofar as the work is successful in creating positive feelings about its subject it distracts from his overriding negative qualities. Moreover, it was designed for this very purpose, as was most

¹⁰ Pugmire (2005), p. 128.

¹¹ Pugmire (2005), p. 127.

Stalin-era Soviet art, and was meant to conceal the actual failures and misdeeds of political leadership. The moral condemnation of *Roses for Stalin* in this context—as a tool for the dissemination of mendacious propaganda—is certainly justified. However, it does not necessarily follow from this that the work is aesthetically flawed. In order to show that it is aesthetically flawed it must be shown that by virtue of its sentimentality it does not or cannot fulfil some function that is essential to art. It is far too controversial to take for granted that being morally good is one of these.

To summarize, sentimental art evokes a desired emotional response by idealizing its subject, thereby obscuring factual and moral truths about it. It is a response that is based on corrupt emotional reasoning and that lacks the psychological commitments of genuine emotions. Establishing that these features of sentimental art compromise it aesthetically requires showing the following:

- (1) That art should be expected to reveal factual and moral truths about its subject,
- (2) An essential function of at least some art is to engage us in sound emotional responses that are properly related to our moral and epistemic judgements.

In the following section I will argue that both of these are true. In doing so I will make use of Noël Carroll's "clarificationist" criteria for making moral evaluations of narrative art. This points us towards what is really wrong with sentimental art.

IV. SENTIMENTALITY AND MORAL CLARIFICATION

Carroll argues that it is possible to make moral assessments of narrative art and situates his position in opposition to autonomism. Autonomism holds that moral evaluations of art are inappropriate and possibly unintelligible because art is completely removed from the real-life circumstances within which moral evaluations apply.¹² Carroll argues that it is not possible to separate art and life to the extent desired by autonomists because real world knowledge is required to understand most narrative artworks.¹³

An effective narrative, Carroll writes, is written with selectivity. It is impossible for a narrative to report every detail of the situation and characters it depicts. Thus, narratives are organized as a series of cues by which the audience references its own

¹² Carroll (1998), p. 134.

¹³ Carroll (1998), p. 135.

knowledge and beliefs.¹⁴ It is necessary to apply our knowledge of real world facts in understanding the text as well as our deductive and moral reasoning and language skills. Although Carroll limits his discussion to narrative art forms, there is a parallel case to be made for figurative artworks, like *Roses for Stalin*. One cannot understand *Roses for Stalin* if one does not recognize Stalin, recognize the children as young pioneers, and understand the significance of Stalin's persona for communist party ideology. A necessary condition of understanding the meaning of this painting is a familiarity with the real life counterparts of the represented objects.

Carroll argues that understanding narratives also requires having appropriate feelings towards what is represented. Thus, our understanding of narrative requires that we have the beliefs required to support these feelings. For example, understanding *Schindler's List* requires feeling admiration for what Schindler is doing, thus believing that the Nazis and their project are evil.¹⁵ Carroll contends that narratives do not introduce new moral beliefs but rather function by assuming that an audience shares a moral framework that they will reference according to the cues the work provides. Nonetheless, narratives can be educating because they can illuminate and clarify the moral beliefs that we have: they can reveal to us our moral and emotional investments and they give them resonance. He writes: "The narrative [is] an occasion for clarifying our emotions or, as Aristotle might put it, of learning to apply the right emotion to the appropriate objects with suitable intensity."¹⁶

The essence of the clarificationist position is that we understand and aesthetically appreciate morally heady artworks by undergoing this kind of illumination or reorganization of our values. The impact of these works lies in their ability to give us this experience, and having this experience is the reason we value these kinds of artworks. Carroll writes:

On the clarificationist view, learning from a narrative artwork through the enlargement or expansion of one's moral understanding is not well described as a consequence of engaging with the story. Understanding the work, enlarging one's moral understanding, and learning from the narrative are all part and parcel of the same process, which might be called comprehending or following the narrative.¹⁷

¹⁴ Carroll (1998), p. 138.

¹⁵ Carroll (1998), p. 140.

¹⁶ Carroll (1998), p. 144.

¹⁷ Carroll (1998), p. 145.

Sentimental art, which is designed to bring about a type of emotional response that is not grounded in sound epistemic and moral judgments about the world, cannot provide moral clarification. Sentimental art is designed to manipulate our emotional responses, and not only distract us from the moral and factual realities of which we ought to be mindful, but obscure the relationships that ought to inhere between our emotions and our beliefs and judgments. If we take the clarificationist position seriously it appears that this deficiency is a genuine aesthetic fault.

However, it cannot simply be the fact that sentimental art fails to bring about moral clarification that explains its aesthetic deficiency. There are countless artworks that have no moral content at all; these works are similarly lacking in this respect and we do not count this against them. Sentimental art is aesthetically flawed not because it is morally vacuous but because it is morally misleading. I contend that this is true of all sentimental art but it proves more aesthetically detrimental in some cases than others. What makes *Roses for Stalin* especially objectionable is the fact that it ostensibly derives its aesthetic power from its moral authority. The artwork is designed to impress upon us the virtues of the Soviet social and political order as symbolized by the powerful, father-like figure of Stalin and the humility and gratitude of the young pioneers who offer him flowers. We are meant to assent to and admire the rightness of this vision, our commitment to it being thereby made emotionally explicit. Correspondingly, the aesthetic merit of the work is meant to arise from its providing this type of experience—i.e. being a source of moral clarification. To the degree that the work purports to be a source of moral clarification its sentimentality results in its aesthetic failure. The work leads us to believe that veneration of Stalin's persona is identical to authentic political conviction, thus providing an emotionally superficial experience that is misleading and falls short of Aristotle's criteria on all three counts: it evokes emotions that are groundless, and directed towards an illegitimate object with inappropriate intensity. In so doing it fails to fulfil its chief task *qua* artwork.

However, it is not fair to conclude that sentimentality always precipitates *complete* aesthetic failure. There is no doubt that we genuinely enjoy some sentimental artworks—like *Rocky*—despite recognizing their sentimentality. I think this is because these works do not purport to moral seriousness and we do not expect this of them. Additionally, we may find other sources of aesthetic enjoyment in these works that override their sentimentality. Nevertheless, every sentimental artwork is equally guilty of confounding and obscuring our genuine moral commitments for the sake of

producing emotional gratification. *Rocky* exploits our admiration for courage, hard-work and kind-heartedness. Its depiction of these themes is sentimental because it is based on the equivocation of these virtues with the protagonist's rise from debt-collecting goon to national hero. While this is certainly a satisfying outcome it is one that greatly simplifies and misconstrues what is truly admirable about these virtues. The response the work is meant to evoke is grounded in unsound emotional reasoning and confuses, rather than clarifies, our moral commitments. To the degree that moral clarification is an aesthetically admirable quality this moral obfuscation is an aesthetic shortcoming. In this case as in others, sentimentality proves to be an aesthetic fault.

V. CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to establish how and why sentimentality is an aesthetic fault. As an alternative to the straight-forward moral and epistemic critique, I proposed Noël Carroll's clarificationist thesis, according to which he argues that a valuable function of narrative (and, I insist, figurative) art is its ability to elucidate our moral commitments. I maintained that this was the most cogent basis for the aesthetic critique of sentimentality. From this it followed that the moral obfuscation characteristic of sentimental art is an aesthetic fault. Moreover, I argued that artworks that purport to moral seriousness—offering a corrupted emotional experience in the guise of moral improvement—are thereby most aesthetically damaged by their sentimentality. This is what makes *Roses for Stalin* especially bad among sentimental artworks; its sentimentality constitutes its complete aesthetic failure.

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