



Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism by Ted Nannicelli

Monika Bokiniec 
University of Gdańsk, PL

BOOK REVIEW

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

A book review of Ted Nannicelli, *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 288 pp. ISBN 9780197507247.

In philosophical aesthetics, the debate on art and morality is usually phrased as a question of whether the moral value of an artwork has any bearing on its aesthetic value. In his *Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism*, Nannicelli offers an explanation for this focus. According to him, the scholars who initially contributed to the debate anchored the discussion in the interpretation of literature. As a result, they typically advocated a position that Nannicelli calls perspectivism – namely, an interpretation-centred approach that aims at morally evaluating the ethical perspective that an artwork expresses, endorses, or prescribes to its audience. Another reason for the focus has arisen from associating this approach with the aesthetic cognitivism debate, framed by the question of whether art can be a source of moral knowledge. While important, the exclusive focus on the relationship between moral and aesthetic values sidesteps many other equally significant questions, such as those about the creation and production of art, the effects that art may have on the audience, the moral and social consequences of art, and issues pertaining to censorship. Nannicelli's work brings some of these questions to focus, especially the ethical issues related to the production process of artworks.

The perspectivist approach to the relationship between morality and art has, it seems, passed its momentum. The map of potentially defensible positions has instead been drawn along the moralism–autonomism–immoralism axis. Nannicelli's book contributes to the revival of the debate on artworks' moral and aesthetic evaluation. It does so by highlighting themes and art forms that have, up to recently, remained in the margins of the debate. In this regard, Nannicelli's book compares to another contribution to

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Monika Bokiniec

University of Gdańsk, PL
monika.bokiniec@ug.edu.pl

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bokiniec, Monika. 'Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism by Ted Nannicelli.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LIX/XV, no. 1 (2022): pp. 80–84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.323>

the theme – namely, James Harold's *Dangerous Art: On Moral Criticism of Artworks* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Both Nannicelli and Harold subscribe to entrenched positions within the traditional debate on aesthetic and moral value by identifying as a moderate moralist and a moderate autonomist, respectively. However, the primary focus of these two books lies elsewhere. Their most outstanding achievements consist in their treatment of questions that are relevant for the wider public and thus pave the way for philosophy to contribute to social life. The core question addressed by both books is: what is the proper object of the ethical criticism of art? In contrast to the traditional framing of the debate, both Nannicelli and Harold propose a shift of focus, Harold by emphasizing the effects of art, Nannicelli by turning to the process of artistic production. This review explores the proposal offered by Nannicelli.¹

Nannicelli advocates a 'production-based account' as a viable and often more fruitful alternative to perspectivism both in philosophical aesthetics and ethical criticism of art:² instead of focusing on the work itself, we should turn to its production and its circumstances, such as the treatment of human subjects (especially in photography), animals, the environment, or the bearing of the artist's moral character on creating artworks.

The first part of his book is dedicated to investigating the objections to perspectivism and the potential benefits of a production-based approach. Perspectivism faces several challenges. Despite its prominence among academics and critics (or generally 'the cognoscenti of the art world', p. 105), it rarely has any bearing on everyday encounters with art or public policies, partly because of its connection to aesthetic cognitivism, which, according to Nannicelli, relies on empirical claims unsubstantiated by evidence.

Moreover, perspectivism assumes agreement about the work's meaning (called, by Nannicelli, 'local critical monism', p. 39), which, however, is practically unattainable. The same artwork may allow interpretations suggesting its moral praiseworthiness and reprehensibility, depending on the reading. As long as the artwork's meaning is not settled, its moral valence remains unsettled as well. In Nannicelli's view, critical pluralism, which recognizes 'reasonable interpretive disagreements among equally informed critics' (p. 11), supports the production-oriented approach. It allows for more objective evaluation since we might not be able to be of the same mind regarding the interpretation of the work but can still agree on the moral evaluation of specific actions the artist has taken, especially if we consider potential harm done by their actions (for example, taking a photograph of a naked child or having a shark hunted and killed for the purpose of creating an artwork).

Nannicelli points out that the feasibility of perspectivism depends mainly on the domain of its application: 'the medium of the artwork is partly determinative of the sorts of ethical criticism to which it is open' (p. 72). Perspectivism can only be applied to artworks with identifiable perspectives or attitudes. However, many artistic domains, such as some non-representational and non-narrative instances of installations, performance art or land art, do not fall into this category. Even if the artwork presents identifiable perspectives, it remains open to production-oriented criticism. Therefore, Nannicelli aims not to reject perspectivism but rather to explore other meaningful

1 For a discussion of the former, see Iris Vidmar Jovanović and Valentina Marianna Stupnik, 'Critical Note on Harold's *Dangerous Art*', this issue of *Estetika*.

2 Nannicelli deliberately uses 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably.

ways to practice ethical criticism. In his view, perspectivism and production-oriented approaches are 'more or less appropriate in different contexts' (p. 72).

The need to go beyond perspectivism in the ethical criticism of art becomes even more pressing if we want it to have an actual impact on people's lives, as Nannicelli does: to answer vital practical questions that people, especially amid the controversies of the 'post-#metoo' era, legitimately have about the moral aspects of art. In Nannicelli's words, 'this was not merely an academic matter' (p. 1) but something 'people want to know' (p. 3). His goal is not to answer any specific moral questions but rather to sort out the possible, sound, and valuable ways of answering them. Perspectivism, which has dominated the philosophical debate, fails to respond to such concerns, at least not to most of them.

The production-oriented approach, rooted in virtue ethics and contextualism, is closer to our daily ethical evaluation practice – not only in the context of art but also in general. Artworks are products of intentional actions, and these actions should be taken into account in the evaluation of the outcome. After developing a conceptual foundation for his production-oriented approach, Nannicelli devotes the second part of his book to showing how the approach can be fruitfully applied to various fields of art, such as photography, environmental art, and stand-up comedy.

Even in cases where the artwork is representational and thus more readily open to interpretation in terms of its perspective, there is a proper place for the production-oriented approach. In this sense, perspectivism and the production-oriented approach may be complementary. However, there are situations in art production in which the two approaches are not treated as complementary; in such cases, Nannicelli argues, the production-oriented approach should take precedence. Nannicelli illustrates this point with examples from photography, where our overall assessment of the work includes the way in which human subjects have been treated in the production process. Sometimes, 'in our overall assessments of the relative ethical value or disvalue of photographs, the ethical value (or disvalue) we ascribe to a photograph from a production-oriented point overrides the ethical value (or disvalue) we ascribe to a photograph from a perspectivist approach' (p. 72). In evaluating photographs, we should, for example, take into account whether the human subjects portrayed have been in the position of giving informed consent to being photographed in certain situations.

This line of argument can be extended to other art forms. For example, if we assume that we have moral obligations to animals and the natural environment, moral questions involved in art production become essential for assessing artworks created in fields like bio art or land art. As Nannicelli observes, here the discrepancy becomes even more striking between the perspectivist approach, which is influential among theorists and critics, and the production-oriented focus of the art-interested public. The moral question behind many artworks discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 is whether artists have the right to treat living and feeling creatures as props in their art-making process. Although this question is, according to Nannicelli, the main concern of the general public, it is often either overlooked by critics who adopt perspectivism or noted but considered irrelevant in comparison with the work's meaning.

The failure to take the production process seriously enough is partly motivated by the common idea that the product, an artwork, is something independent of that process. However, Nannicelli claims this is not always obvious and depends mainly on the medium. Performance art or action art would serve as examples of domains where the process is evidently a part of the work's identity and thus remains a valid object of

ethical criticism. Nevertheless, as is also the case in artworks with different 'ontological stripes' (p. 119), the process may become part of the work's artistic identity, even if not in an obviously straightforward way. Discussing Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), Nannicelli concludes:

[I]f killing and preserving a shark in formaldehyde in a particular art-historical context is part of the identity of Hirst's work and imbues it with artistic value, then there is no principled reason by which we can deny that the very same action also affects the work's ethical value. To the extent that hunting a shark for the purposes of creating art is unethical, it yields a *pro tanto* ethical flaw in Hirst's artwork. (p. 122)

He makes a similar argument for the importance of the moral evaluation of artistic interventions in the natural environment, such as land art, which appropriates part of the land as an element of its identity. If the land was harmed during the making of the work, then the ethical flaw of this work becomes its aesthetic flaw.

Finally, Nannicelli discusses the question of the extent to which the artist's character legitimately bears upon the moral judgement of artworks they produce. He approaches the question in two ways: by examining the relationship between the artist's character and their work in the specific case of stand-up comedy (Chapter 8) and by discussing the more general question known as the 'wicked artist problem', focusing on examples from music and painting (Chapter 9). In stand-up comedy, the answer seems relatively straightforward. Insofar as the comedian's character and what we know about the comic's actual life is constitutive of the interlocutory force of their works through their on-stage persona, the artists' character matters in our overall artistic evaluation of their performance.

Does this entail that the entire body of work produced by an artist with a questionable moral character would be 'tainted' morally and thus artistically? As Nannicelli observes, the general public often calls for the rejection of the artist's entire work based on some newly acquired facts about their misconduct. Nannicelli disagrees with this conclusion: the artist's character and actions are relevant only in cases in which we can demonstrate that they are featured into the work and explain how. As he concludes:

For the moral character of the artist to legitimately bear upon our appreciation of the artwork qua art, features of their moral character must figure into a causal explanation of the work's artistic features such that if the work had been created by someone with a different moral character, it would have substantively different artistic properties. (p. 238)

In other words, we must have artistic reasons to suspect that a particular artwork is morally tainted and provide a causal explanation of the work's formal or content features.

One issue in the book that raises potential doubts is our ability to establish the correct view on how the work was produced and on the artist's intentional actions while creating it. In the production-oriented approach, these are the primary grounds for evaluating artworks morally. The problem is even more visible when there is a time gap between the contexts of creation and reception³ – a point that Nannicelli recognizes

3 Nannicelli illustrates this problem with D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and controversies surrounding the film's reception today.

but does not satisfactorily settle. In fact, it seems that the argument he develops against perspectivism by questioning the possibility of a unique interpretation of an artwork might be equally applicable to the production-oriented approach. While it may be easier to determine facts about the artist's actions in some cases of artistic production and take them into account in our overall appraisal of the work, such as those involving the problematic use of animals or other forms of abuse, other cases are less straightforward. As we move towards the artist's character or motivation for creating the artwork, the univocal evaluation of relevant 'facts' may be as inaccessible to us as agreement about the work's perspective in the case of interpretation-oriented approaches. Accordingly, appealing to them as grounds for ethical criticism may be just as relative as in the case of perspectivism.

Finally, although Nannicelli addresses problems that are a matter of public debate (such as the exploitation of animals or children, or the artist's character), how his book actually takes part in this debate remains a matter for discussion. Nevertheless, for a reader willing to engage with Nannicelli's philosophically intricate language and complex consideration of the theme, the book will serve as a reservoir for informed arguments and examples.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Bokiniec, Monika. 'Artistic Creation and Ethical Criticism by Ted Nannicelli.'
Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics
LIX/XV, no. 1 (2022): pp. 80–84. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.323>

Published: 15 March 2022

COPYRIGHT:
© 2022 The Author(s).
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.