PHI 3240: Philosophy of Art

Session 22
November 25th, 2015

Devereaux on Immoral Art
Today we’ll put the theories of moralism & autonomism to work in analyzing a classic example of immoral art.

Mary Devereaux examines the moral/aesthetic conflict in Triumph of the Will, a Nazi propaganda film made in 1935 by director Leni Riefenstahl.

• “At once masterful and morally repugnant, this deeply troubling film epitomizes a general problem that arises with art. It is both beautiful and evil.

• I shall argue that it is this conjunction of beauty and evil that explains why the film is so disturbing.

  – …Having looked at this case in detail, I want
    • to draw some broader conclusions about the inadequacy of the usual solution to the problem of beauty and evil in art
    • and to suggest the direction we should move in to develop an account of aesthetic value rich enough to handle cases as difficult as TotW.” (347)

• She will end up arguing that autonomism cannot adequately explain the way that moral & aesthetic attributes are harnessed together in artworks with religious or political messages.
**Triumph of the Will** “was made at Hitler’s personal request & with his support.

- Hitler himself gave the film its title...
  - He also went to Nuremberg to help with the preproduction planning, carefully orchestrating the spectacle that would involve thousands of troops, marching bands, and ordinary citizens.
    - (Note that this alone shouldn’t be enough to condemn the film: that would be an *ad hominem* criticism of the artwork)

“Like the [1934 Nazi] rally, the film’s production was a large, well-organized event.

- …Scenes were rehearsed beforehand, and the front ranks of the Labor Service men were trained to speak in unison.

- …Riefenstahl rejected the static format and voice-over commentary of the conventional newsreel.
  - Instead, she adopted and expands methods of mobile photography…”, which “enabled Riefenstahl to infuse shots of her frequently stationary subjects with action and motion…”

“The result, in both style & effect, was a radical departure from the standard newsreel.

- An innovation in documentary filmmaking, *Triumph of the Will* was also, as is generally recognized, a major contribution to the history of film.” (348)
When the film premiered in March 1935,
• “some party members thought the film ‘too artistic’,
  – though whether the objective was to artistic technique itself or to the film’s suitability for political use isn’t clear.
• Others, especially members of the army, were angry at Riefenstahl’s omission of most of the military exercises…
  – Hitler, however, was delighted with the film.
  – …[It] apparently enjoyed some popular success, despite the German public’s preference for entertainment films.”

*Triumph of the Will* won several awards:
• 1935 National Film Prize in Germany
• Gold Medal at Venice Film Festival
• Grand Prix at 1937 Paris Film Festival
“Clearly, *Triumph of the Will* is a troubling film.

- My claim is that it is so *because of its conjunction of beauty and evil*,
  - because it presents as beautiful a vision of Hitler and the New Germany that is morally repugnant.

She considers an objection:

- “**But might not there be a simpler, more straightforward explanation of the film’s disturbing nature?**
  - Can’t it be wholly explained by the fact that the film is a *documentary*?

- As a documentary film, *TotW* is disquieting because the events it portrays are themselves disquieting
  - ...[it] conveys the sheer immediacy of these events ...as if they were happening *now*.
  - And our knowledge that what we are seeing stands in a causal chain of events that led to the Second World War and the Holocaust makes this immediacy chilling.

- It is as if we were watching the buds of these horrors unfold before our eyes.” (351)
She replies to the documentary objection:

- **“But Riefenstahl’s film does more than document historical events.**
  - And it is more than an ordinary documentary.
- **TotW** is also troubling because it is a work of Nazi propaganda…
  - it is designed to propagate the Nazi faith
    - and mobilize the German people.
  - …Its images, ideas, and narrative all aim at establishing the tenets of that religion: Hitler is a messianic leader, Germany is one Volk, and the Third Reich will endure for a thousand years.

It may come as some surprise, then, to learn that the film’s status as propaganda is controversial.

- Amazingly, Riefenstahl and her supporters deny that **TotW** is a work of propaganda…
  - [they] contend that her concerns in **TotW** – as in all her films – were aesthetic, not political: that it was the cult of beauty, not the cult of the *Führer*, that Riefenstahl worshipped.
  - The claim is that stylistic devices…were *just* that:
    - stylistic devices meant to avoid newsreel reportage, enrich the film artistically, and nothing more.” (351)
“Certainly Riefenstahl was preoccupied with beauty in TotW,” as she was in the rest of her films.

- But the claim that a concern for beauty and stylistic innovation is the only thing going on in TotW is undermined by the film itself.
  - As we have seen, the film is aimed not simply at stylistic innovation and formally beautiful images, but at using these means to create a particular vision of Hitler and National Socialism.

The pure-aestheticism defense is also belied by the historical record.

- Riefenstahl was, as she willingly admits, a great admirer of Hitler…
  - To this day, Riefenstahl has never distanced herself from the political content of Triumph of the Will or any of the other films she made for Hitler.
  - Nor, despite years of ostracism and public controversy, has she shown – or even feigned – remorse for her artistic & personal association with many members of the Nazi party.

It might be added that Riefenstahl agreed to film the 1934 Nuremberg rally only on condition that she be given complete artistic control over the project

- …She demanded, and got, final cut.
  - Thus, we can assume that the film Riefenstahl made…is the film she chose to make”: she wasn’t forced by Hitler to glorify him in the film.
“The film’s history also supports its status as propaganda.

- Goebbels, who as minister for People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda, was largely responsible for the creation of the *Fuhrer* myth, though the film a great achievement, unprecedented in its representation of Hitler…
- …Indeed, so successful was *TotW* in articulating the *Fuhrerprinzip* that, as one historian of German propaganda put it,
  - ‘there was no need to make another film about Hitler…’

Nevertheless, **Riefenstahl maintains that the film “is purely historical…**

- **It reflects the truth that was then, in 1934, history. It is therefore a documentary. Not a propaganda film.”**

  ➢ Devereaux points out that **this claim is inconsistent with Riefenstahl’s other defense, “that the film’s concerns are purely aesthetic.**

  - She wants, on the one hand, to tout her considerable artistic accomplishments…& on the other hand, to maintain that she did little but record events as they unfolded…
  - Can she really have it both ways?**

  ➢ The non-chronological ordering & thematic control Riefenstahl exercised in her selective editing is difficult to reconcile with her claim to be making a pure documentary.
Devereaux adds that
• “The pure-documentary defense also conveniently overlooks certain crucial features of the relation between the film and its subject matter.
  – One of the most remarkable facts about *Triumph of the Will* is that the *reality it records is a reality it helped to create*.
• …Riefenstahl, in other words, helped to set up the spectacle her film was designed to document.
  – …this real event did not just ‘unfold’; it was constructed in part to be the subject of her film.
    » …Furthermore, in filming this event, Riefenstahl gave form to Hitler’s vision of Germany’s future.
    » …[She] used her considerable talent and her art to create an image that helped further and sustain the vision of National Socialism shared by Hitler.” (352)

Devereaux asserts that “*ToTW* is a work of Nazi propaganda”,
• because what makes something propaganda isn’t the maker’s intentions for the work to be *recognized* as propaganda,
  – but rather the intention to present something in a way that does the work of propaganda, i.e., mobilizes political support for a person or cause.
Devereaux insists that what’s so disturbing and problematic about the film is that it “portrays National Socialism (something morally evil) as beautiful.”

• (Recall our discussion last class about whether it is a problem for an artwork to display an approving attitude toward something evil,
• or whether evil could be aesthetically appealing in itself, independent of our interest in seeing evil conquered by good)

“If this is right, it raises a question about how we are to respond to this film.

• Its every detail is designed to advance a morally repugnant vision of Hitler…

• Enjoying this film – recognizing that we may be caught up, if only slightly, in its pomp & pageantry or be stirred by its beauty – is likely to make us ask,
  • ‘What kind of person am I to enjoy or be moved by this film?’

• …This worry arises because TotW presents National Socialism as attractive and, in so doing, aims to make us think of National Socialism as good.
• Hitler and what he stood for are commended.” (353)
“The concern is not only that if I enjoy such a film, I may be led to act badly…

- but also that certain kinds of enjoyment, regardless of their effects, may themselves be problematic.

- E.g., Aristotle believed that moral virtue consists partly “in taking pleasure in the right things and not in the wrong things”:

  - perhaps if we allow ourselves to take pleasure in the vices displayed in the film,
  - that reflects poorly upon our moral character.

ToTW also raises pressing questions about the attitude we should adopt toward the film as art.

- Should we praise it for its widely acclaimed aesthetic qualities despite its celebration of National Socialism?
- …Alternatively, should we insist that the moral implications of Riefenstahl’s work undermine its aesthetic value?

» Or is the formulation of the problem too simple?”
Devereaux explains, as Carroll did, that

- the **standard response to morally ambiguous art is the autonomist recommendation** that we look at art with “an attitude of **aesthetic distance**
  - [which] allows us to set aside the practical concerns of everyday life,
    - including questions of a work’s origins, its moral effects, and so on,
  - and **concentrate exclusively on the work of art itself,** specifically its **formal features.**

...The **basic strategy here is simple:**

- **when approaching a work of art that raises moral issues,**
- sever aesthetic evaluation from moral evaluation and **evaluate the work in aesthetic (i.e. formal) terms alone.**

  ➢ This is the **formalist [a.k.a. autonomist] response to the problem of beauty & evil**

  ➢ “It allows us to say that,
    - evaluated morally, **Triumph of the Will** is bad
    - but, evaluated aesthetically, it is good.”
Devereaux suggests that formalism _may seem like a good approach to_ *TotW*,

– because “the Nazi content of Riefenstahl’s film is threatening…
  • …without some measure of distance, we risk being too overcome with emotion or too caught up in what is morally objectionable to attend to what makes the work aesthetically good.

– Viewing the film from a disinterested…point of view gives us a way of setting aside the components that make it morally objectionable.

However, Devereaux believes that

• _“in the case of* TotW,* the formalist strategy fails_
  – …[because] distancing ourselves from the morally objectionable elements of the film…means distancing ourselves from the features that make it the work of art it is.

• _If we distance ourselves from these features of the film, we will not be in a position to understand its artistic value_
  – that is, why this length film of political speeches & endless marching is correctly regarded as a cinematic masterpiece.

• _We will also miss the beauty* (horrifying though it is) _of its vision_ of Hitler.” (354)
One might counter that
– **a more refined version of formalism,**
– with “a more complex understanding of aesthetic distance…
– **does not require us to bracket an artwork’s content.**”

**Sophisticated formalism** says

• “understanding a work of art consists in grasping & appreciating the relationship between its form and content,
• that is, the connection between the message and the means used to convey it.

– …On this subtler view, we can’t just ignore the content of art or its message.
  • …A work’s aesthetic achievement consists in the skill with which it expresses its content.

**Sophisticated formalism tells us to judge not the message but its expression.**

• …Our finding the message conveyed by *Triumph of the Will* repulsive (or attractive) should not therefore affect our aesthetic judgment.”

– On this approach, “We can distance ourselves from – that is, set aside – the moral dimension of the work’s content while still paying attention to… the way in which the film’s content figures in its expressive task.” (355)
Devereaux says that

- for any artworks with religious or political messages,
  - ‘bracketing’ that message (setting it aside) would mean that “we omit an essential dimension of the film, and an essential dimension of its beauty.

To see ToTW for the work of art it is and to fully grasp its beauty,

- we need to pay attention to its content – to just those elements of the film that formalism directs us to set aside.
  - “If taking an attitude of aesthetic distance means paying attention only to the formal aspects of the work (to the image and not what it means),
  - then aesthetic distance fails in the case of Triumph of the Will because it requires us to ignore the essence of the film.” (Ø
  - So traditional formalism fails, because it ignores content.
  - “…Sophisticated formalism doesn’t ignore content, but it does aestheticize it.
    - …From its perspective, the content of the film (its vision) is relevant to evaluation only insofar as it is expressed well or badly.
    - Thus, even on sophisticated varieties of formalism, essential elements of Triumph of the Will remain irrelevant to its aesthetic evaluation.”
  - So even sophisticated formalism fails to do justice to ToTW.
Two alternatives to formalism:

1) “We can say that **there is more to art than aesthetics**, 
   - ...[that] questions of political meaning, of truth and falsity, good and evil, 
     right and wrong fall outside the category of the aesthetic.
     - ...since there are works of art that raise these issues, 
       *the category of the artistic outstrips the category of the aesthetic*.

2) ...or that **there is more to aesthetics than beauty and form** 
   - ...which broadens the concept of the aesthetic beyond its traditional boundaries.
     - It says that **we are responding to a work of art ‘aesthetically’** 
       not only when we respond to its formal elements or to the relationship 
       between its formal elements and its content, 
     - but also **whenever we respond to a feature that makes a work** 
       **the work of art it is**. 
       - ...*the aesthetic is understood in such a way as to track the artistic*”

 » “It is this second route that I recommend:
   - ...opting for this broader conception of the aesthetic 
     gives us a more inclusive category, 
   - one more adequate to what art is in all of its historical & 
     cultural manifestations & to the full range of its values.” (356)
“The failure of formalism shows that **the problem of beauty & evil is real**. …the question we considered before – *How are we to respond to TotW?* – can’t be evaded.

* …there are **really two questions** here,
  – one about us, one about how we are to evaluate the film as art.

1) “**What does it mean about us if we find this film beautiful?**”

   ➢ …The answer…depends on what, in finding the film beautiful, we are responding to.

   » **One can respond to the formal elements of the film without supporting the work’s message.**
     • If we are responding not to the film’s content *per se*, but only to how that content is *presented*,
     • then here too, we are not endorsing the film’s message.

   » **But…my analysis implies that **appreciating the film as a work of art requires responding to the beauty of this vision of National Socialism.**
     • It is not immediately obvious that we can find this vision beautiful without endorsing fascism or the doctrines of National Socialism.” (357)
• “There is a step between finding the film’s concrete artistic vision beautiful and endorsing the doctrines and ideals of National Socialism.

• The step is a moral one,
  ➢ a step we need not (and, of course, should not) take.

So it is possible to appreciate the beauty of the film’s vision without compromising ourselves morally.

• But, it is importantly to note, one of the central aims of TotW is to move its audiences to take this step…
  – Part of the evil of the film consists in the fact that it is designed to move us in this way – in the direction of evil.”
2) “How should the fact that the film is evil figure in our evaluation of it as a work of art? 

- ...Should we then say that *TotW* is a terrific work of art, despite its insidiousness?

  - Here I think we should hesitate.
  - For all its accomplishments, *TotW* is flawed.
  - It is flawed because its vision is flawed
    - ...it misrepresents the character of Hitler and National Socialism and because it presents as beautiful and good things that are evil...

> If that vision is flawed, then so is the work of art.”

Devereaux suggests that “the unity of beauty and goodness is a standard by which art should be measured.

- If good art must not only please the senses, but also engage and satisfy us intellectually and emotionally,
  - then we are, I suggest, justified in criticizing *TotW* for rendering something evil beautiful.”
“This is not to say
• that works of art should only show good people doing good things, or that they are meant to endorse only conventional conceptions of goodness.

...But **there is reason**, I am claiming,
• to withhold the highest aesthetic praise from works of art the present as beautiful, attractive, and good what, on reflection, can be seen to be evil.”

Devereaux concludes that *TotW should be watched*, despite its flaws, **because of its historical & sociological importance:**

- "...we may watch *TotW* for much the same reason some feminists examine works of pornography:
  • so that **in confronting these works we may learn something about a way of seeing the world we reject.**

- ...Deciding not to ban (or avoid) materials like *TotW* means learning not to deny, but to live with the historical reality of the Third Reich.

  • **...confronting the film’s vision** of National Socialism may allow us ...to confront, and come a little closer to comprehending, both the real and potential tendencies that have come to define **human evil.**” (358)