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# The triple alliance among art, ethics and politics:

A tension between universal communicability and fleeting political views

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## Introduction

Should ethical values play a role in aesthetical judgment? This topic has been hotly debated among philosophers of art, artists, art historians, and art critics for a long time. Although Gaut (2001) declared that ethicism, which asserts that aesthetical values of art are dependent on whether the message embedded in the work is morally right or wrong, has won in the long debate over art and ethics. I, however, think that this issue is far from reaching a conclusive closure. It is not the intention of this essay to resolve this question once and for all. Neither will it pour new wine into the old bottle. Rather, this article is a humble attempt to give some thoughts for artists and art critics to consider.

Granted that moral goodness or badness of certain works of art would affect their aesthetical quality, but is it always the case that this kind of ethical-aesthetical association is influenced by one's political orientation? The term "triple alliance" in the title does not imply that art, ethics, and politics always go together. While ethical judgments are not necessarily political judgments, political views expressed in art always carry a strong moral undertone. For example, an art critic may dislike a movie for its violent and obscene content. In this case his moral statements are not political unless the critic relates these issues to gun control and feminist movement. On the other hand, political statements are inevitably "moral." In politics the polarity of "us vs. them" can be found everywhere. It is true that confrontations also happen outside the political domain. A quantitative researcher and a qualitative researcher could disagree with each other, but it is extremely rare to see one researcher to consider the other side morally wrong rather than methodologically wrong. Similarly, we would be hard pressed to find a Fisherian statistician call a Bayesian "evil" or vice versa. However, usually political commentaries, no matter where they are expressed--in words or artwork--, articulate the argument by presenting how morally right the proponents are and how morally wrong the rivals are. If moral values are relevant to artistic values and the ethical standard is fused with certain political views, we should scrutinize the meanings of this triple alliance. In scientific inquiry it is a common practice to examine many rival models by asking "what-if" questions. By the same token, as political views are fleeting all the time, art critics might also construct "alternate realities" to evaluate whether the triple alliance among art, ethics, and politics is necessary or contingent.

Images of Germany and Italy in art

### **Triumph of the Will**

The example cited by Gaut to support his notion of art-ethics interdependence is a political one: Leni Riefenstahl's famous film, *Triumph of the Will*, is a glowingly enthusiastic account of the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi Party rally. Needless to say, the film is today charged as bad art because it is nothing more than propaganda for Adolf Hitler. The case is definitely clear-cut; Nazi Germany was defeated and its ideology was completely discredited. It is important to emphasize that I am not a Nazi sympathizer. But just for the sake of philosophical argument, let's ask a question in a counterfactual manner: What would have happened if Nazi Germany had won World War Two, or forced a truce with the Allied powers and thus the regime had continued? Would *Triumph of the Will* still be considered poor art?

### **Schindler's List**

Interestingly enough, anti-Nazi movies are considered inappropriate for different political reasons in different national contexts. For example, *Schindler's List* directed by Steven Spielberg in 1993 presents the true story of Nazi party member Oskar Schindler who saved over 1,100 Jews from concentration camps during the Holocaust. Who can argue against the moral goodness of this film? Indeed, the movie was not welcome in several Islamic countries, and Malaysia banned it for alleging it as Zionist propaganda, evidenced by its depiction of the Jews as "stout-hearted" and "intelligent" (New York Times, 1994). In the eyes of Malaysian Muslims, perhaps *Schindler's List* could even be morally and aesthetically equated with *Triumph of the Will*. Consider this thought experiment: Had Israel never established a nation in 1948, would the movie be universally accepted as a masterpiece today?

### **The Great Dictator**

Before the Axis of power was destroyed, artworks portraying Germany and Italy in a negative fashion were a taboo. When Charlie Chaplin announced his plan in 1939 to make the movie *The Great Dictator*, which is a mockery of Adolf Hitler, the British government tried to persuade him to cancel the project, because the government was afraid that this insulting film would antagonize Hitler and provoke further confrontation between England and Germany. Similarly, today any satirical movie of Kim Jong II might be considered sensitive and even damaging. In spite of the pressure, Chaplin went on to produce *The Great Dictator* and released the film in 1940. But on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, several Chicago theaters refused to show this movie because it might enrage the German population in Illinois. American Communist movement also denounced the film as Stalin had signed the non-aggression pact with Hitler before the release of the film (Malan, 1989). But after the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States joined hand in hand to fight the Nazis, suddenly the movie was highly regarded. It was shown in London during the Battle of Britain for boosting morale. General Eisenhower asked the French ally to dub films acted by Chaplin for distribution in France after France was liberated. No doubt today *The Great Dictator* has elevated to the status of seminal classic. It is true that none of the initial rejections of *The Great Dictator* is based upon aesthetics. But is it fair to say that to some extent subsequent and current aesthetical praises of this Chaplin movie can be attributed to its moral righteousness, which is tied to its once unpopular political view? How would this movie have been received in the American context if the US did not enter WWII?

### **A Farewell to Arms**

Before the breakout of World War Two, it was also politically incorrect

to insult Italy. In Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms*, Italy was presented in a non-desirable fashion. Before World War I, Italy was an ally of Germany and Austria. However, the Allies lured Italy to switch sides by promising Italy the land it had requested from Austria. In return to the promised reward, the mission of Italy's army was to hinder the Austrian troops from helping the Germans in France. But since the Italian army was ill equipped, the battle caused the death of 500,000 Italian soldiers in 1916 alone. This was the setting of *A Farewell to Arms*. In 1929 Italy banned the novel due to its account of the disastrous Italian retreat following the Battle of Caporetto. Americans did not take this insult to their ally in World War I lightly. In the same year five issues of *Scribner's Magazine* were prohibited to be sold in Boston because they printed the story of *A Farewell to Arms* (Haight, & Grannis, 1978). Needless to say, during and after World War II the American view of *A Farewell to Arms* made a 180-degree turn-around. However, had Italy switched sides again in World War II, would this novel still have been considered politically incorrect?

#### **Cases in American movies**

##### **The Spirit of 1776**

Next, consider two movies made in the United States during the early 20th century. In 1917, with all good intentions a German-Jewish immigrant named Goldstein produced a movie entitled *The Spirit of 1776* as paying tribute to the founding fathers of America. It is logical to think that no one could dispute the ethical goodness and politically correctness of this movie. However, Goldstein made a fatal mistake by demonizing the British Empire when America decided to give a hand to England in fighting against Kaiser's Germany. President Wilson banned the film using the Sedition Act as his legal base. In support of the seizure of the film, Judge Beldsoe wrote, "History is history and fact is fact . . . the United States is confronted with . . . the greatest emergency . . . [its] history. There is now required . . . the greatest devotion to a common cause . . . this is no time . . . for souring dissension among [the] people, and of creating animosity . . . [with the] allies." Goldstein was arrested and convicted of espionage in having attempted to incite a mutiny of the U.S. Armed Forces (Collins, 2001). Had Mel Gibson acted in *Patriots* in 1917 or 1941, would he have been another Robert Goldstein?

##### **The Birth of a Nation**

Unlike *The Spirit of 1776*, in 1915, another movie entitled *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith and aimed to promote American cultural heritage, received a much nicer treatment. By today's standard, this movie is far more ethically and politically controversial than *The Spirit of 1776*. Although the film is highly ranked in the US film history for its technical innovations, it is clear that the message of the film has strong elements of white supremacy. However, over the next twenty years *The Birth of a Nation* became one of the most admired and profitable films ever produced by Hollywood until it was dethroned by *Gone with the Wind* in 1940. In 1992 the United States Library of Congress deemed it "culturally significant" and selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry (Lang, 1994; Michele, 2003). If the film had offended one of key allies of America rather than "Negros," could it have easily gotten away with such a portrayal?

#### **Discussion**

At first glance, the above examples seem to promote some form of relativism or to dissociate political views from moral judgment, and thus deny ethicism. Actually, it is beyond dispute that Holocaust, Nanking

Massacre, Gulag, and Red Khmer are absolute evils, and any artworks that glorify these crimes should never be artistically appreciated. However, please keep in mind that people affirm their final judgment long after the dust has settled. But in 1934 could Leni Riefenstahl foresee the Holocaust and World War II while making *The Triumph of the Will*? In 1939 when the Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany were at peace, how could Communists endorse *The Great Dictator*?

Being partially inspired by Kant (Allison, 2001), I treat contentment in the beautiful as a disinterested and free satisfaction. To be specific, our liking of art, if it is to be aesthetical, must be free from all interests, including political interests. If we look at art aesthetically, we should not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of thing either for ourselves or for any one else. Further, an aesthetical judgment is a judgment without a concept, especially political ideology. When we find an object beautiful, we need no definite concept or rule of it. Moreover, some Kantians are opposed to the distraction by emotion of an art. What those Kantians looks for in an aesthetically valuable object is *universal communicability*, regardless of whether one is a capitalist, a communist, a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, an American, a German, or a Chinese. It does not mean that every one must agree that the object is beautiful; instead, the particular judgment invites universal assent: it claims that every one ought to give his approval to the object in question and also describe it as beautiful. It presupposes a "common sense"—the state of mind resulting from the free play of our cognitive powers and imagination. If readers object to the preceding idea, it is fine. We are aesthetically, epistemologically, and methodologically different, not morally different.

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