

When artists fall: on admiring the immoral

It's raining men (hallelujah)! Splattering down from great heights, dragged down from their pedestals. Victims claim they feel justice has been served, but what are the consequences for us, the admirers? Is it still appropriate to admire Kevin Spacey? And similar questions remain from less recent cases: am I allowed to listen to The Smiths while Morrissey is an alleged racist? And is it appropriate to have Roman Polanski's films in your favorites list, while, for decades, he is known for raping a 13-year old girl?

Let us assume that it is wrong to admire someone *for* being immoral: for example it is considered wrong to admire Charles Manson for his world views and being a serial killer. The question is however, whether we can admire a person for their art *despite* being an immoral person. Bernard Williams argued that Paul Gauguin is admirable despite being immoral. According to William's description, Gauguin produced his best art after he abandoned his family to concentrate on his art. Williams finds Gauguin's treatment of his family immoral, but also finds that Gauguin is admirable for his art works.

I surely do not want to invoke a discussion about who did what and whether it was wrong. Suppose that Spacey, Morrissey and Polanski indeed have performed immoral acts, while at the same time making great art. First of all, how much the works of art are connected to the immoral person might make a difference in whether it is justified to admire the particular work of art. The series House of Cards involved hundreds of people besides Spacey and the production does not embody everything that is Kevin Spacey. The question in admiring these artworks might then become whether the series or songs embody the world views of the immoral people. Is there a racist undertone or message in songs like 'How soon is now?' Or in Polanski's case, do we really want to admire movies that portray the world views of an alleged rapist?

I suppose not. But isn't it possible to admire the *actor* Kevin Spacey without admiring the person? Can I admire qualities or traits of persons without admiring their personality? Love things *about* them, without loving the person? This might seem a convenient solution: I would be able to enjoy my favorite Smiths's songs without supporting a racist position.

Unfortunately there are two problems. First, admiration has a spreading nature. When admiring an artist, these feelings can cast a new light on the other aspects of the person being admired. Personally, I think this is not necessarily a bad thing, since we learn more about people and learn to appreciate different qualities. However, in the case of celebrities we tend to exaggerate a bit: a Radiohead fan might consider Thom York's clothing style suddenly incredibly stylish, while a random person wearing the same clothes on the street would not have caught her eye. We come to admire our heroes for qualities we normally don't usually admire people for. In the most extreme cases celebrities are admired for ordinary acts as having a baby or shopping at a particular store (the sensational media are full of it). The danger is that by admiring an artist we are normalizing or even admiring their other, sometimes immoral, qualities. Looking up to the great actor Kevin Spacey, you could judge his immoral acts as unproblematic while you would have condemned these traits in a person you do not admire. We hear ourselves make up excuses such as: "he must have had good reasons", "we all make mistakes" or even adjust our own world view to theirs: "he must know what is right". Making an objective judgment of the people you admire is somewhat problematic. By admiring Spacey we might implicitly endorse his actions by at least not caring about it enough.

Second, we *express* our admiration by listening to our heroes' music, watching their films, buying their art or going to a concert. Roman Polanski has received dozens of awards, *after* his immoral behavior became known to a wide public. Of course the argument is that the achievement is awarded, but not the person. Awarding Polanski an Oscar for only his aesthetics achievements, only being identified as an *aesthetic* exemplar, is the *intended* meaning of awarding. The public meaning might be entirely different, since we just saw that admiration has a spreading nature. Publicly admiring Polanski, may come across as implicit approval of everything that Polanski has done and the kind of person he is.

Before reading this you might not have heard of the immoral acts of Morrissey or Polanski (sorry...), precisely because of the public admiration they have received, which kind of blurs the immoral acts.

What is most important about this is that it subordinates the victims. Quite painful to see the person that raped you receive several prestigious awards for their work. Polanski's victims claim they feel that people find Polanski's aesthetic achievements more important than the harm that he has done to them. For them it is painful to see that ordinary people admire Polanski's movies, but it is extremely painful that he is awarded by an authority on the matter. But I would guess that even when people would not express their admiration, secretly admiring Kevin Spacey seems disrespectful against the victim, regardless of the consequences.

What to do? We are reluctant to let go of our heroes, but in each new case we could keep some questions in mind. Can I admire the work but not the artist? How much is the person involved in the artwork? How can I express my admiration in a responsible way? This might be a case of easier said than done, since the people we admire often become a part of our identity. That is why we are so shocked of their immoral acts in the first place.

An even bigger problem for the ethicist might be that some artists precisely make such great art *because* of their immoral behavior. We are back to Williams about Gauguin: Williams holds that Gauguin's admirable traits are precisely those that led to his immoral behavior. He argues that the moral does not always trump the non-moral meaning that the value of Gauguin's art trumps the suffering of his family. The tormented artist, only able to create art when being a bit twisted, poses a problem for morality. And I would surely agree that it is impossible to create great art without suffering, or at least a little bit of twisted character. The question is, however, how much can *other* people suffer for the sake of art?

This was a free translation of and some response to Archer, A., & Matheson, B. (2019). When Artists Fall: Honoring and Admiring the Immoral. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 5(2), 246-265.

This blog was previously published on lottespreeuwenberg.wordpress.com