

# ANALYTIC AESTHETICS FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE? REPLY TO VIDMAR JOVANOVIĆ

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## **ABSTRACT**

Iris Vidmar Jovanović's (2021) 'Applied Ethical Criticism of Narrative Art' has a goal the significance of which can hardly be overestimated, the development of an analytic aesthetic framework for a publicly relevant ethical criticism. She employs *public relevance* to delineate a critique that is confined to neither the value interaction debate (VID) nor the debate about aesthetic cognitivism (AC), both of which are unique to analytic aesthetics and have little impact beyond the discipline of philosophy, let alone beyond academia. In drawing attention to the relationship between applied ethical criticism on the one hand and the VID and AC on the other, Vidmar Jovanović levels a scathing indictment against the majority of philosophers of art, who are for the most part disinterested in the social and political implications of their theoretical research. In this brief reply, I begin by setting out the practical limitations of analytic aesthetics, endorsing and extending her critique. I then discuss Vidmar Jovanović's criticism of my own contribution to AC (McGregor 2018). I conclude with her proposed framework, which makes an insightful and urgent appeal for an analytic aesthetics rooted in both interdisciplinary and phenomenological research.

## **KEYWORDS**

Aesthetic cognitivism, artistic value, empirical evidence, ethical criticism, metaphilosophy

## **ESOTERIC EVALUATIONS?**

Neither the VID nor AC can be explained without first defining at least three of the many and varied values of narrative representations, namely: aesthetic value, cognitive value, and ethical value. Aesthetic value is usually regarded as either identical with or a significant component of artistic value. My own view is that the aesthetic value of a narrative representation is the pleasure or satisfaction of the experience of that narrative, which is a function of the simultaneous and interactive activation of one's senses, one's imagination, one's emotions, and one's intellect (McGregor 2016). The cognitive and ethical values of a narrative are functions of

its narrative framework, i.e. of the representation's perspective on reality.<sup>1</sup> *Cognitive value* is the extent to which the narrative representation provides knowledge of the reality that it represents (Vidmar 2019). The ethical value of a narrative representation is a function of its attitudinal structure, the attitude that is embodied, enacted, or endorsed by the framework and which the audience is invited to adopt or accept.<sup>2</sup> The *ethical value* of a narrative representation is thus the extent to which its attitudinal structure provides an evaluation of personal conduct and character (Gibson 2018).

The VID was initiated by Noël Carroll (1996) with his article 'Moderate Moralism' and is concerned with the interaction of ethical value and aesthetic value in art, understood in terms of the relationship between ethical defects and merits on the one hand and aesthetic defects and merits on the other. Specifically, the discussion has focused on the following two hypotheses, with an emphasis on the first:

- (1) An ethical defect in a work of art is (also) an aesthetic defect.
- (2) An ethical merit in a work of art is (also) an aesthetic merit.

Three positions have endured the quarter-century of debate: moderate moralism, moderate autonomism, and robust immoralism. Carroll's (1996) moderate moralism holds that an ethical defect in a narrative is an aesthetic defect when the attitudinal structure of the representation proscribes its own acceptance or adoption (aesthetic defect) in virtue of its immorality (ethical defect). James Anderson and Jeffrey Dean's (1998) moderate autonomism holds that an ethical defect is never an aesthetic defect because Carroll's theory demonstrates precisely that there are two separate evaluations being made, the representation's failure to achieve acceptance or adoption (aesthetic defect) and the immorality of the representation's attitudinal structure (ethical defect). Finally, Anne Eaton's (2012) robust immoralism holds that an ethical defect is an aesthetic merit when a narrative succeeds in achieving the acceptance of an ethically abhorrent character (ethical defect) because it solves the aesthetic problem of challenging its audience emotionally (aesthetic merit). The crucial divide is between moderate autonomism on the one hand and moderate moralism and robust immoralism on the other because while moderate autonomists reject the idea of interaction between ethical and aesthetic values, both moderate moralists and robust immoralists accept a causal relationship between them.

Vidmar Jovanović's (2021) critique is particularly penetrating and although she does not employ these exact terms, I shall summarise it as follows: the VID either requires empirical evidence for verification or it collapses into AC. In other words, philosophers of art must either provide evidence of the psychological or

<sup>1</sup> 'Cognitive' and 'epistemic' are often employed as synonyms, as are 'ethical' and 'moral', and I shall follow suit in this reply.

<sup>2</sup> I shall use 'audience' to describe the people who engage with a narrative representation, regardless of the medium in which that representation is experienced.

behavioural impact of attitudinal structures on audiences or must reduce their claims about ethical value to claims about cognitive value, i.e. the ethical knowledge provided by narrative representations. Vidmar Jovanović shares my scepticism of empirical evidence for the ethical impact of narrative representations on audiences, most of which has conjectured changes in empathy. My doubts are based on the possibility rather than the existence of empirical evidence, on what Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp (2013: 3) refer to as the ‘absolute sleeper effect’. The idea is that the effects of reading or watching fiction (if they exist) take time and the problem is the increase in the likelihood of one or more confounding variables as the interval between exposure and measurement increases. My position is that until this tension is resolved those seeking empirical evidence of the ethical impact of narratives must either attempt to measure an insignificant effect accurately or attempt to measure a significant effect inaccurately. As neither of these options are satisfactory, it seems preferable to abandon the VID for AC, which Katherine Thomson-Jones (2005: 376) defines in terms of two questions: ‘(1) Can art provide knowledge? And, if it can, (2) how is this aesthetically relevant?’ The aesthetic cognitivist answers the first question in the affirmative, meeting the epistemic criterion (1). In order to meet the aesthetic criterion (2), a causal relation between the work’s aesthetic and cognitive values must be established. With respect to narrative art, AC has typically focused on knowledge-what (something is like) rather than knowledge-that (such and such is so) or knowledge-how (to perform some act). I shall employ my previous definition of the first of these, *phenomenological knowledge*, which is (McGregor 2018: 75): ‘The realisation of what a particular lived experience is like.’ Vidmar Jovanović is also – once again correctly – critical of AC and I shall focus on her criticisms of my own contribution.

## NARRATIVE JUSTICE?

My theory of AC, which is a theory of narrative cognitivism, is *narrative justice*, which holds that (McGregor 2018: 106): ‘criminal inhumanity can be reduced by the cultivation of narrative sensibility (i.e., the cultivation of narrative sensibility reduces criminal inhumanity).’ *Criminal inhumanity* refers to serious crimes committed by a state or non-state actor against a government, public, or civilian population for ideological reasons.<sup>3</sup> *Narrative sensibility* can be understood as the awareness of narrative values and sensitivity to the ways in which cognitive, ethical, and political

<sup>3</sup> I use ‘ideological’ to denote a systematic scheme of ideas or set of beliefs that govern conduct rather than the more specific Marxist denotation as the means by which the most powerful class maintains the dominance of their own ideas or beliefs in society.

values are realised in and attributed to narrative representations.<sup>4</sup> My proposal is that an individual who experiences, researches, or produces narratives becomes more sensitive to the form of narratives, the content of narratives, and the interaction of narrative form and narrative content in ways that are cognitively, ethically, and politically valuable. Criminal inhumanity is a category of crime that is justified by ethical principles, which provide the foundation for ideological motivation. Narratives are essentially ethically valuable in virtue of their narrativity, i.e. their combination of agency, event, and temporality. Ethical value is thus what links narrative (the aesthetic) to criminal inhumanity (the political) and, as such, narrative justice is an instantiation of J.C. Friedrich von Schiller's (1794) aesthetic education, the thesis that there is a tripartite relationship among the aesthetic, ethical, and political spheres of value such that the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility develops political harmony. There are two concepts at the core of narrative justice:

*Phenomenological Ethical Knowledge (PEK)*: the realisation of what a particular lived ethical experience is like.

*Lucid Phenomenological Knowledge (LPEK)*: the realisation of what a particular lived ethical experience is like by means of the reproduction of that experience in an audience.

LPEK is the strongest evidence for narrative justice, albeit occurring much less frequently than PEK. LPEK is derived from Tzachi Zamir's (2006: 147) conception of *conveying*, 'a mode of telling that [...] reenacts an experiential structure that overlaps and resembles the experience it describes (though is not identical to it).' LPEK also bears a resemblance to Karen Simecek's (2019: 513) concept of 'intimacy through sharing', albeit produced in a completely different way. The narrative examples I deploy in *Narrative Justice* are: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007); Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1595), appropriated from Zamir; Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000); and Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995).

Vidmar Jovanović (2021: 449) provides a largely accurate summary of narrative justice as follows:

ethical improvement takes place when "exemplary works" manage to enable one to undergo the relevant experience described in the work and to thus gain "lucid phenomenal knowledge" of how certain things feel. Such knowledge enables one to gain an understanding of the sources of morally problematic behavior, which in turn enables one to modify one's behavior so as not to commit moral harm.

The exemplary works are complex narrative representations such as those listed above and the relevant experience is represented by the work and reproduced for

<sup>4</sup> The *political value* of a narrative representation is the extent to which its attitudinal structure provides an evaluation of social organisation and administration.

the audience in their experience of the work. In consequence of my views on the possibility of empirical evidence, I do not make any claims about changes in audience character or behaviour and the link from increased narrative sensibility to decreased criminal inhumanity is subtle (perhaps too much so): crime reduction begins with aetiological explanation and narrative sensibility enhances the understanding of the causes of criminal inhumanity. As such (and this is probably the reason why no criminologists have adopted it), the thesis is restricted to the theoretical rather than the practical level. The reduction of criminal inhumanity is in virtue of the enhanced understanding of the philosopher or criminologist, who is able to establish an aetiology of criminal inhumanity, which can then be developed into policy and practice. Significantly, I make no claims about the cultivation of narrative sensibility decreasing the philosopher or criminologist's own predilections for criminal inhumanity – it probably does, but there is no reliable way of knowing. I shall, however, take Vidmar Jovanović to be focusing on the first part of narrative justice, which is that the cultivation of narrative sensibility enhances ethical understanding (which then, in the second part, enhances understanding of the causes of criminal inhumanity).

Vidmar Jovanović's (2021: 449) main criticism of my claim that the cultivation of narrative sensibility enhances ethical understanding is that 'it is not necessarily so that a spectator indeed undergoes the relevant experience and gains lucid phenomenal knowledge.' She unpacks this criticism into two parts:

(1) I need to demonstrate that the audience is committed to moral improvement before I can maintain that their ethical understanding is enhanced by LPEK and I fail to make this demonstration.

(2a) If the audience is committed to moral improvement, then they are already enhancing their ethical understanding and have little to gain from LPEK.

(2b) If the audience is not committed to moral improvement, then their ethical understanding may well be reduced by LPEK, recalling Plato's concerns about the harm of poets in the polis.

Let me begin by agreeing with Vidmar Jovanović. There is no necessary relation between a spectator watching a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* and that spectator acquiring the LPEK of what it is like to forget someone that is important (reproducing Romeo's forgetting of Rosaline). There are at least three criteria for the acquisition of LPEK: (i) the audience must have sufficient narrative sensibility to be able to appreciate the narrative; (ii) the audience must adopt the attitudinal structure of the narrative in whole or in part; and (iii) the audience must undergo what I call 'audience-anagnorisis', in which they recognise the reproduction of the protagonist's experience in themselves (McGregor 2018: 82). Many people who watch the performance will be lacking in one or more of (i) to (iii) and will not acquire the LPEK.

This does not mean that narrative sensibility does not enhance ethical understanding only that there is an important role for philosophers and critics to play in the process, i.e. drawing attention to the ways in which cognitive, ethical, and political values are realised in narrative representations.

With respect to (1), I am not sure that I do need to demonstrate this commitment on the part of the audience. What is significant about LPEK is that, unlike PEK, it can be verified. If the audience forgot about Rosaline, then they have acquired the LPEK. If they did not, then they have not. I do not need to be dedicated to moral improvement to acquire the knowledge and dedication to moral improvement is no guarantee of acquisition of the knowledge. The dedication to moral improvement (or its absence) may determine what I do with the knowledge, but not whether I acquire it. I find (2a) a curious claim from Vidmar Jovanović, difficult to take seriously because of her own nuanced and sophisticated version of AC. To take just one example of many, she argues that works of narrative art can be works of philosophy when they achieve a hermeneutic breakthrough by means of the recognition requirement (Vidmar Jovanović 2019: 160):

in that a certain novel, cognitively enriched conceptualization of a phenomenon is identified and brought into the referential framework of a community of knowers. Richer hermeneutic resources are provided, more efficient in addressing the layers of reality, natural and social world and human practices, which carry greater potential to explicate human experience and to improve the overall conditions in which humans live.

It is hard to reconcile this complex and provocative conception of the cognitive value of narrative with a conception of ethical value in which watching *Romeo and Juliet* can do nothing for me if I am already committed to moral improvement. Surely moral improvement is itself a hermeneutic process, that occurs in increments and is never completed?

I am, yet again, in agreement with (2b), which is not in fact an objection to narrative justice. I do not see how one could rationally acknowledge that the experience of narrative representations could either improve one morally or communicate moral knowledge without also acknowledging that it could have the opposite effects (or, indeed, no effects at all in certain circumstances). This is, I think, one of the few ways in which the VID remains useful to both philosophers and critics. Recall from my discussion above that the core issue is *interaction*, i.e. whether or not ethical value and aesthetic value are independent of each other. This is why the key division among the three prevalent views is between moderate autonomism on the one hand (no interaction) and moderate moralism and robust immoralism on the other hand (interaction, but of different kinds). I elucidate what I (admittedly briefly) refer to as '*narrative injustice*' immediately prior to defining narrative justice and my

definition is in fact introduced with the caveat that criminal inhumanity can not only be reduced but increased in consequence of knowledge acquired from narrative representations (McGregor 2018: 106). The point is that it is the philosopher or critic's task to determine which narratives provide knowledge that is ethical and which narratives provide knowledge that is unethical, i.e. Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) not Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939); Petter Næss' *Into the White* (2012) not Karl Ritter's (1943) *Besatzung Dora* (1943); and James Foley's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) not Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

## FINDING THE RIGHT FRAME

There is, as my reply thus far evinces, far more on which Vidmar Jovanović and I agree than disagree and I think her article has great value in both identifying a crucial flaw in the analytic aesthetic research programme and providing a compelling delineation of a new direction for that research programme. Not only are philosophers of art overwhelmingly disinterested in the practical application of their theoretical research, but analytic aesthetics provides no pathway from theory to either the applied ethical level or the public and political sphere more generally. We cannot, for example, determine whether Carroll is committed to censorship or Eaton against it from their positions in the VID notwithstanding the apparent relevance of ethical defects to censorship legislation.<sup>5</sup> Vidmar Jovanović concludes her critique with an authoritative sketch of the form of a future applied ethical criticism, focusing on two features: (1) a more substantial engagement with and recognition of the wider (historical, social, and political) context of artistic creation and reception; and (2) developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenology of art. In keeping with the stated aim of the article, she explains the changes required in order to establish a framework for a publicly relevant ethical criticism, such as interdisciplinary work along the lines of my own in *Narrative Justice* (McGregor 2018) for (1) and a more empirical approach, such as that employed by Jonathan Gilmore (2020) in *Apt Imaginings: Feelings for Fictions and Other Creatures of the Mind*, for (2).

Regarding (1), I think the priority for philosophers of art should be to create a bridge between analytic aesthetics and art criticism and to then extend that reciprocity to other disciplines, including criminology as well as anthropology, sociology, and history (recommended by Vidmar Jovanović). In spite of my agreement on the significance of interdisciplinary research, I am convinced that there will be resistance and that the imperative will need to be initiated by those philosophers of art whose expertise has already been recognised globally.<sup>6</sup> If I may take my own oeuvre as

<sup>5</sup> I use Carroll and Eaton as examples because they are two of the few philosophers of art whose research is concerned with the public sphere (beyond the confines of their contributions to the VID).

<sup>6</sup> John Gibson (2007, 2018) is a paradigmatic example.

typical of a mid-career academic with a limited international profile: while all four of my published monographs have been essentially rather than superficially interdisciplinary – philosophy-literary studies (McGregor 2016), philosophy-criminology (McGregor 2018), criminology-philosophy (McGregor 2021a), and criminology-literary studies (McGregor 2021b) – none have been acknowledged as making a contribution to more than a single discipline. This may well be due to my own failings, but it is consistent with contemporary concerns about academic over-specialisation (Herman 2018) and a related controversy that Lewis Gordon (2014) calls *disciplinary decadence*. Disciplinary decadence ‘is the phenomenon of turning away from living thought, which engages reality and recognises its own limitations, to a deontologised or absolute conception of disciplinary life’ (Gordon 2014: 86). Disciplinary decadence is thus instantiated when an academic views the world – or, more charitably, academic debate – exclusively from the perspective of her own discipline. Ultimately, Vidmar Jovanović is calling for a radical reconception of the purpose and scope of analytic aesthetics, which will be difficult to achieve.

Vidmar Jovanović’s route to (2) is by means of cognitive science and empirical psychology and although I agree that phenomenology is key to understanding the values of narrative representation, I remain concerned about the extent to which that phenomenology can be measured. Anticipating this kind of opposition, Vidmar Jovanović (2021: 456) states: ‘While there are philosophers who object to philosophy’s turning to these disciplines or adopting their methodologies, the research within these areas seems promising when it comes to settling out the EC [empirical challenge].’ I am not an objector, but I am less optimistic about the research to which she refers. In consequence, I think the development of a deeper understanding of the phenomenology of art could – and should – be pursued without an exclusive focus on the empirical. A paradigmatic example is Zamir’s (2006, 2014, 2020) focus on experiential pathways in his literary criticism and existential amplification in his literary criticism and philosophy of acting. Experiential pathways are concerned with the way in which literary texts configure particular responses and the relationship between the configuration of responses and the communication of conceptual insights (Zamir 2006, 2020). Existential amplification is concerned with the way in which the reader or actor extends her living possibilities and exceeds her habitual conceptualisations, often – but not only – by means of empathy (Zamir 2014, 2020). Zamir’s research programme is experiential rather than empirical, but it serves as, first, an important complement to empirical research and, second, an alternative in the event that empirical research fails to shed light on the phenomenology of art. In summary, Vidmar Jovanović succeeds in both identifying a major problem in analytic aesthetics and sketching a solution to that problem. I suspect that many philosophers of art will ignore the critique, but I would take great pleasure in being wrong and seeing this momentous and inspiring article receive the recognition it deserves.

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