

# Is the beautiful moral? Lars von Trier, Schiller and Kant on morality of the work of art

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**Abstract.** The point of departure is a film by Lars von Trier, *The House That Jack Built* (2018). The most striking aspect of this film is that Jack has grounds for his actions. By committing a serial murder he is creating a work of art. He has his own primitive philosophy and affirms two theses: firstly, that art is the highest type of human activity and, secondly, that to be moral means to belong to the human herd. In spite of the primitiveness of these theses it is hard to disprove them. The common thesis in the Enlightenment was formulated by Diderot, Shaftesbury, and Winckelmann who claimed that aesthetic education favours morality. Schiller in his work, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), espouses the same view but tries to ground the position in philosophy, showing that beauty is a balance between reality and form. We can explain modern art. If a painter is only interested in the formal aspects, he is producing abstract art and not engaged in the moral aspects at all. Then I turn to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and reformulate his categorical imperative from the point of view of aesthetics: *Create only according to the principle that the result of your creation will have universal acceptance!* We can agree that it will not be achievable because the most important element for every artist is the freedom of creation. I insist that the most appropriate way is to analyse genius as the unifying form of human creative action.

**Keywords:** Kant, Schiller, Lars von Trier, genius, beautiful, moral

## 1 Introduction

I would like to start by calling attention to one modern film, whose subject matter corresponds with the topic of my paper very closely. The film evokes mixed emotions. When the film was shown for the first time more than 100 people left the cinema. Live action of the players, the artistic performance and the operator's performance are ambiguous. The title of the film is *The House That Jack Built* by Lars von Trier. I am not going to make an analysis of the film. There is no reason to paraphrase the subject of the film in the text. I would like only to mention the most important events. The central point here is the question of fundamental virtue. The main actor in the film, Jack, is a serial murderer. There are five scenes in the

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movie where Jack carries out his killings. The film is cruel, the scenes are cruel and, as is usual for most films of Lars von Trier, they are on the verge of good and evil. More remarkable is that Jack himself has grounds for his deeds. Surprisingly, his justification of serial killing is of aesthetic character. He supposes that he is making art in his serial murders. Jack is making art by cruel and sophisticated murders and trying to support his deeds by philosophical arguments. These are: art is above everything else; and art does not correspond to ethics, because following morals is the conduct of a human herd.

We see that killing for Jack is an aesthetic act. The material for his art work is human lives (at the end of the film Jack mentions 60 people he has killed). The first reaction to Jack's statements is emotional: it cannot be true because beauty and cruelty are not correlated with each other. The relation between them can be only contradictory because they are of a different nature.

Jack's philosophical arguments are unconvincing and merely proclamations without a detailed substantiation of each thesis, and the common human reaction towards interpreting art works as a type of serial murders is negative. However, we need to examine the philosophical groundings of Jack's statements and take a decision if beauty is moral. One needs to say in advance that the connection between morality and beauty (beauty cannot be cruel, immoral as in Jack's case) does not lie on the surface. The film of Lars von Trier is only a starting point for the discussion of the more general question: "Is beauty moral?"

In some respects we accept and encounter certain statements in our common life, that are usual and similar to Jack's theses and do not twist the knife. In our word usage such phrases as "art of war", "art of fencing", "Roman holiday" (as a special military art), "samurai" at least do not elicit a response like that of serial murders. It is a common thing that all these cultural phenomena that are directly or indirectly connected with killing can be named as a specific kind of art. The ultimate result of the art of war is the same: many people are killed. We can ask with reason if Jack in fact does not believe it when he asserts that his serial killing is a special kind of the highest art style. What is the difference between serial killing and killing in war and what allows one to pronounce the phrase "art of war" but not "art of serial killing"? Can we assert the same about "thiefship"? Can we assert that it is an art, because this activity needs a lot of skills and keenness of wit? We need to find a special ethical criterion which allows us to say that this cannot be an artwork because it is immoral. We can propose in advance a preliminary thesis (which has to be substantiated): the immoral is not aesthetic. It only remains to provide a theoretical background for the verification of the thesis. Can we do it on the theoretical level beyond the emotional assertion, "It cannot be because it is awful"?

The topic of the conference is the Enlightenment. Let us start with a common assumption, typical for the epoch: an aesthetic education favours the education of manners. This thesis was formulated in different ways by Diderot, Shaftesbury, Winckelmann, Rousseau and Herder (Deligiorgi, 2005, p. 11). In my paper I will concentrate on a conception of the aesthetic influence on moral feeling by Schiller. For the rest, the theoretical conclusion of my paper will be a central aesthetical work by Kant: the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

I would like to stress that the film by Trier is not an object of my investigation; rather it is a precedent, a starting point to open a discussion concerning the problem of the connection between morality and aesthetics in the Enlightenment. The general question of the paper is formulated as above: "Is the beautiful moral?"

## 2 Schiller on the influence of aesthetics on moral education

The film *The House That Jack Built* is a sample of a modern art and differs from the aesthetic principles of the Enlightenment. It is dated 2018. Schiller wrote his aesthetic texts at the end of the eighteenth century. In his small paper *The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners* from

1796, he formulates some initial principles. The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* by Kant was already written by this time and Schiller was acquainted with the text.

Let us follow the initial principle of the article. Schiller (1895, p. 126) writes: “[...] but it is evident that a strong and pure feeling for the beautiful ought to exercise a salutary influence upon the moral life [...]”. This is a central idea of Schiller’s moral philosophy and highlights the main principles of the Enlightenment about the purpose and scope of aesthetic education. As we can see, it is completely opposite to Jack’s position. We have a lot of questions concerning this simple thesis of Schiller’s. What is the nature of the connection between aesthetics and morals? Is this connection necessary? Is this connection reciprocal: aesthetic education influences morals and manners, and vice versa moral education is conducive to the development of aesthetic sense (Deligiorgi, 2005, p. 134). Let us follow Schiller’s argumentation and substantiation of the thesis.

I will demonstrate the argumentation by inserting a quotation: “[...] morality could never have any other foundation than her own. Taste can be favorable to morality in conduct, as I hope to point out in the present essay; but alone, and by its unaided influence, it could never produce anything moral” (Schiller, 1895, p. 126). The preliminary reply to one of our questions is that the moral itself is a hermetic area which does not suffer any influence from outside. The influence of aesthetic feelings on morals and manners is indirect and not necessary. Schiller tries to demonstrate and describe in the article this indirect, circumstantial effect of aesthetics on morals. This is to say that the indirect influence on manners has an aesthetic taste. How does it work according to Schiller?

Taste is understood by a German writer as an aesthetic category like soul sophistication. The influence of the aesthetic taste consists in substitution (!) in the same cases of goodness, if a person does not have any goodness at all. One could equate both goodness and aesthetic taste, but the aesthetic feeling cannot substantiate the moral principles. It favours rather our behavior loyalty, in other words, it favours the social moral norms. One cannot *be* moral, but due to an aesthetic taste behaviour can be in accordance with the social moral public norms. We can say that a conversion of beauty into morals and vice versa is not transparent and self-evident. Beauty is not able to produce morals (Maftei, 2014, p. 172). One needs to feel oneself free to act both in art and in everyday life, in order to be able to choose between the beautiful and the disgraceful, between morality and evil. If we would like to thematise freedom further we should say that exactly at this point we can find some indications of a possible connection between the moral and the aesthetic. An artist creates in freedom and this is the very nature of the creativity process (Beiser, 2005, p. 150).

We see here a great difference between Schiller’s conception and one of Jack’s theses: Jack supposes that morality has no connection with the creation of an artwork. The ethical, the moral is something like ties binding people.

In some senses the role of the aesthetic in the article is reduced to a propaedeutic art: taste is an aesthetic category and does not influence moral standards, and yet at the same time it helps in softening the manners by civilising the feelings. But Schiller does not discuss the question if the aesthetic has to be moral from the start. The propaedeutic role and scope of art is resumed in the following quotation: “In a similar manner it is an obligation for us to seek the salutary bonds which religion and the aesthetic laws present to us, in order that during the crisis when our passion is dominant it shall not injure the physical order. It is not unintentionally that I have placed religion and taste in one and the same class; the reason is that both one and the other have the merit, similar in effect, although dissimilar in principle and in value, to take the place of virtue properly so called, and to assure legality where there is no possibility to hope for morality” (Schiller, 1895, p. 135).

Schiller’s idea is simple and clear. At the same time we need a philosophical substitution of this thesis which is usual for the Enlightenment. In some respects more substituted arguments can be found in his well-known work *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795).

Schiller remarks he was under the influence of Kant's aesthetics when writing this text. He states that the main goal of his investigation was to find out how we can be moral. To achieve the main goal of creating a moral state one needs to humanise the character of the citizen (Schiller, 2004, p. 38). Schiller writes repeatedly: "the developed feeling for Beauty refines manners" (*ibid.*, p. 41). But in the *Letters*, as compared with *The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners*, he uses a specific dialectic of the sense of beauty: the beautiful is a balance between reality and form (*ibid.*, p. 58). Reality is given to us in our perception and is changeable in time, but by the form is meant an ideal world, i.e. ideas that are not changeable. Beauty is something like a balance point between reality and form. Here we have to do with a new type of the form – substance dialectic, usual in the history of philosophy. We see that Schiller's idea corresponds with a classical view. An interest only in the form of art can have a crucial effect: not only reality is rejected, but also morality and truth.

At the same time there is an original point of view in Schiller's *Letters*. He warns already in the eighteenth century: "taste pays heed only to form and never to content, it finally gives the soul a dangerous tendency to neglect all reality entirely and to sacrifice truth and morality to an attractive façade" (*ibid.*, p. 42). With propaedeutic power Schiller points at an explicit danger. Nowadays it means that an artist is doing abstract art which is separated from the real world and schematises only an abstract art form. In this case one does not take into account whether it is aesthetic truth or moral. Schiller himself only states the question but does not discuss the problems carefully.

Having developed the philosophical analysis let us turn to the legacy of Kant, whose works were in the background of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

### 3 Kant on the morality of the aesthetic act

The main theses of Kant's third critique are well known. Let us take into account the main motives which correspond to our topic. Have we faced the problem of how we can substantiate a connection between morals and art? What can we say about the beauty of the moral act (Baker, 2005, p. 533)? Is this connection necessary?

The problem is very relevant to Kant's criticism because the second critique was a bridge between the first (cognitive-conceptual) and the third (aesthetic) critiques. If we repeat the main ideas in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* we will get the connection but we will not be able to get an answer to the question we are interested in: Is the work of art necessarily moral? Kant does not give a direct answer to the question. Nevertheless, the main outline of his third critique means that the beautiful can have an influence on morals because aesthetic ideas help to represent the moral ideas (Leung, 2018, p. 88).

In answering the question, we can analyse three points. The first point is a judgment of beauty in quantity, the second is sublimity, the third is Kant's reasoning about genius.

#### 3.1 Judgment of beauty into quantity

I would like to call to mind the formulation of Kant's second principle concerning the beautiful: "The beautiful is that which, without concepts, is represented as the object of a *universal* satisfaction" (*KU*, AA 05: 211; Kant, 2000, p. 96). Exactly in the principle a difference between aesthetic and moral acts is defined more exactly: "With regard to the good, to be sure, judgments also rightly lay claim to validity for everyone; but the good is represented as an object of a universal satisfaction only **through a concept**, which is not the case either with the agreeable or with the beautiful" (*KU*, AA 05: 213; Kant, 2000, p. 98). The question is analysed in the context of a well-known problem: How can a subjective opinion, e.g. a judgment concerning beauty or the moral, become a status or a universally recognised one? The universal status of morality is explained through the categorical

imperative. In the aesthetic area the universal status of the aesthetic judgment is explained through the above-mentioned principle. To connect these two areas, moral and aesthetic, is not simple. We can at least show some possible ways to solve the problem. The main moral principle is human freedom. This is not understood as arbitrary, as following on egoistic motives, rather as following the categorical imperative. The main principle of the genius who is making fine art lies in the possibility of realisation of his creative intentions. Can we reformulate the categorical imperative in the following way (I will try to generate it)? *Create a work of art in such a way for the result of your creation to have the status of a universally recognised masterpiece!* At first view it seems as if the creator by doing his work of art intrinsically follows the newly formulated art imperative. A masterpiece has to be universally recognised, otherwise it cannot be recognised as a masterpiece.

I will highlight some problems that follow from the new innovative art imperative:

1. The categorical imperative presupposes a limitation of arbitrary action. Is this true for the art of creation? In other words: isn't creative freedom a goal in itself, and the possible result of creation (universal recognition) secondary for a creative genius? A reply to the question is not evident. Every artist aims for recognition. Nevertheless, more important for him are conditions for self-realisation. And here we can see the danger that was pointed out by Schiller. The danger is two-sided: either an artist can transfer to the area of pure forms, to negotiate reality, or the artist can use freedom understood in all contexts, in terms of the categorical imperative and in terms of following egotistic motives. In the first case we have to do with bleeding edge art, in the second case we have to do with the special case of Lars von Trier, when an artwork is drawn from human lives.

Is there a factor in an artwork that can consolidate freedom from an area of morality with freedom from an area of art creation? It seems to be genius.

2. What can be interpreted as a work of art in Kant's tradition? A reply to the question is more functional because Kant prescribes the conditions for the arising of art taste. A criterion of art feeling is a pleasure, when the manifold of sense data is led by reflective judgment to general legislation. In other words, we have pleasure as far as we can accumulate the difference of different sensations and feelings in our own sense. We have a clear understanding of the main goal of all these sensations. There is more legislation in the real state of things than the legislation of human reasoning. In this sense every meeting with art work is in some sense a revelation of a new world.

We see that this function formulation of the art work is very abstract. Let us see if there is a place for morality in the formulation. The feeling of pleasure is similar to the feeling of an officious bystander. Can we apply the principle to the film of Lars von Trier? Obviously we cannot. For example, Jack tells us in the film the story about a bunch of grapes. Grapes have to die and rot to produce a beautiful wine. From the philosophical point of view this thesis is not substantiated. At the same time, Jack repeats constantly that he is between passion and delight. We can see that this is not coordinated with a position of Kant's aesthetic disinterested observer.

### 3.2 The sublime

Perhaps we can find an answer to the question concerning the connection of the work of art with morality, because it is a central idea of Kant's that the sublime is connected with morality more than beauty. He writes, for example: "Thus, just as the aesthetic power of judgment in judging the beautiful relates the imagination in its free play to the **understanding**, in order to agree with its **concepts** in general (without determination of them), so in judging a thing to be sublime the same faculty is related to **reason**, in order to correspond subjectively with its **ideas** (though which is undetermined), i.e. in order to produce a disposition of the mind which is in conformity with them and compatible with that

which the influence of determinate (practical) ideas on feeling would produce” (*KU*, AA 05: 256; Kant, 2000, p. 139).

In some respects, we have to deal with a translation of Schiller’s ideas into Kantian language. Kant writes here about notions and ideas. A sublime act is sensitive to ideas that are given in imagination. The possibility to grasp ideas is double-sided. First, we have a common notion in aesthetics: the main task of an artist is to display the ideas of the work of art. The common understanding in the aesthetic conceptions is that the ideas are understood in the Platonic sense. How an artist expresses the ideas depends on his genius-inspired providence and depends on philosophical interpretation. The ideas are understood in this context as art forms. Otherwise, the ideas can be interpreted in the context of Kant’s first critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as transcendental ideas, as notions that do not have any sensibility (despite the fact that precisely aesthetics has to do with sensibility). We can obviously identify similarities with the cosmological idea concerning the existence of free occasion. Precisely this antinomy is very close to moral problems. The important principle of freedom (creativity and freedom of genius) turns out to be as important for the category of the sublime as for pure reason, that processes transcendental ideas. Such an abstract word combination as “imaginary freedom” that is the basis of every creative act includes in itself a principle of necessity: an artist creates on the basis of an inner aesthetic imperative.

### 3.3 Genius

Previously, I made a logical substantiation of the emotional evaluation of Jack’s deeds in the film of Lars von Trier. The topic of correlation between genius and villainy is rather popular. We have already seen that Schiller asserts a correlation between morality and aesthetic taste. But this connection according to Schiller is not necessary. Aesthetics improves morals and manners but there is not a necessary influence on them. We cannot assert what is moral is beautiful and vice versa. Up until Kant, who influenced the works of Schiller, we find no indication of a solution to the problem. Nevertheless, let us formulate the question: Can we find in Kant’s theoretical legacy an indication if a genius-inspired work of art is moral? It seems that we have a preliminary answer in the *The Critique of Pure Reason* in the paragraphs on genius. Kant writes in paragraph 59 the following: “Now I say that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and also that only in this respect (that of a relation that is natural to everyone, and that is also expected of everyone else as a duty) does it please with a claim to the assent of everyone else, in which the mind is at the same time aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions, and also esteems the value of others in accordance with a similar maxim of their power of judgment. That is the **intelligible**, toward which [...] taste looks, with which, namely, even our higher faculties of cognition agree, and without which glaring contradictions would emerge between their nature and the claims that taste makes” (*KU*, AA 05: 353; Kant, 2000, p. 227). In some respect this quotation is a reply to a question we are interested in. The third *Critique* is a bridge between two capabilities of reasoning, between theoretical and practical. Precisely beauty is in the position that guarantees that our world perception has an aesthetic colour and is connected with morality. In this paragraph the connection between beauty and morality is described in an indirect way. But the problem arises in one aspect. Kant asserts that the similarity between the aesthetic and the moral is not direct but analogous. It means that we have to do with phenomena of different kinds. They are not similar but at the same time we can provide analogous similarities between the

moral and beauty. The analogical relation connects two things (the Kantian example was an analogy between a despotic state and a hand-mill) that are of different kinds.<sup>1</sup>

The compared phenomena are of different kinds and otherwise the beautiful is a product of a man's creativity which Kant names genius. I would like to mention a well-known definition of genius by Kant. He writes: “**Genius** is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. [...] **Genius** is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) **through which** nature gives the rule to art” (*KU*, AA 05: 307; Kant, 2000, p. 186).

We see from this quotation that genius implements the rules of nature. But it is only possible because he creates his art work in a situation of total freedom. This freedom has a character of impartialness. We are very good scholars of Kant's moral doctrine and know very well that freedom is not arbitrary with respect to the goals but in accordance with the law of freedom (Kalinnikov, 2001, p. 149). In case of aesthetics the genius has to create his work of art in total freedom. But at the same time this freedom corresponds to *a priori* principles in the same way as in the practical philosophy of Kant. The freedom (in both the practical and aesthetic sense) is a subjective freedom. It is not an arbitrary act but in accordance with the law of freedom. It implements the imperative character of genius: the absolute freedom of creativity is equal to an absolute duty.

## 4 Conclusion

In this short paper I have tried to analyse Jack's thesis (that an artwork stands above morality) from the theoretical positions of Schiller and Kant. The correlation between morality and aesthetic taste for Schiller had a propaedeutic character. If we turn to Kant's legacy we can assert (taking into account Kant's analysis of the sublime and genius) that a genius creates his art work owing to duty, be it an aesthetic or moral one.

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<sup>1</sup> “A crucial problem may arise here: If the symbol, being determined by analogy, indicates a certain similarity between one object and another, which is (according to the above quote from Kant) an ‘entirely different object’ from the other (*ganz anderer Gegenstand*) or an ‘entirely different concept’ (*ganz anderer Begriff*), and if these two objects (as formulated in § 90) can be ‘heterogeneous’ (*ungleichartig, different in kind*), then the issue of similarity or analogy between them is unclear, as it were, for they are seemingly ‘entirely other’ to one another” (Tauber, 2006, p. 25).

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