

# Separating Art from the Artist: Good v. Virtuous

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When it comes to the arts (movies, music, books, etc.), people often turn to them for entertainment, but sometimes, people turn to them for moral support. Art can inspire us to be strong, tell us that we are worthwhile, and show us how we find good in a world of darkness. However, the world of darkness creates these arts, and as we have discovered in the past 20 years, through social media-shared news and efforts like the #MeToo movement, our favorite directors, singers, and writers have often been racists, sexual predators, or transphobes. How can the people continue to pay for and take in these works when the creator has done hurtful things to others? Fans often defend their fandoms by saying, “Separate the art from the artist.” I want to enjoy my favorite movies without worrying about the outside world. Still, with how atrocious the artists have been, one cannot ignore the possibly harmful ideas that are accepted. Can we forget bigotry? Can we forget rape? Can we really say it is okay to let criminals profit because their work was too good?

This is mainly concerned about fandoms and their relationships to their favorite works and the celebrities behind them. Cambridge Dictionary defines a “fandom” as “a group of fans of someone or something, especially very enthusiastic ones.” These people don’t just enjoy the arts; they are passionate about them. It is hard to tell them that appreciating their fandom is immoral when it means so much to them; they are going to do mind gymnastics or wave aside the crimes of the creator aside to keep their art intact. Cambridge also defines a “celebrity” as, “someone who is famous, especially in the entertainment business.” This kind of “laborer” doesn’t just work any old job; they are known by millions, and these fandoms adore them as role models. How people react to a broken pedestal can be indicative of how they view sins such as bigotry and assault.

Some say we need to stop taking in these arts when the artist has gone too far. In her article for WBUR, For Once And For All, Stop Asking Us To Separate Art From The Artists, when discussing Michael Jackson's music after his pedophilic crimes came to light, Maria Garcis says, “I know excising his music from my life won't hurt his family's financial interests, especially given how little his music has suffered since the documentary. But for my son's sake. What message am I sending to him if we continue to bask in fandom for a man accused of brutalizing the most vulnerable?” While listening to music on YouTube or Spotify often financially supports the singer, that is not the biggest issue. What is more concerning is that when someone thinks of Michael Jackson, we are more likely to remember Thriller than his sexual abuse of minors. Thriller is not an evil song; that and many of Jackson’s pieces are catchy, classic bops to jam out to for a good time. However, it isn’t necessarily a “virtuous” song. It doesn't directly touch on social issues or mental stability; it is more of a distraction from life’s stress. While it is a good distraction,

it cannot distract us from the immorality of Jackson's life. Garcis says, "I choose to honor the truths that have been silenced — of victims, of women, of people of color, of those abused and then tossed by the industry of art." It is not just a mistake that we should move past; this is a crime against humanity, and by forgetting what he did, we forget the pain his victims went through, and in an age where sexual assault victims are still not listened to, this does not bode well for how we will continue.

Another possibility is that we are allowed to enjoy the art, but we keep it private. In his article for *The Outline*, *Separating the Art from the Artist Isn't so Hard*, when discussing movies made by rapists like Roman Polanski, Jeremy Gordon says, "If it's out there, we must find a way of coexisting with it, and so I'm proposing what a more clever friend called 'the incognito window theory of art.' It's the idea that it should be fine to experience a piece of art by a bad person, and even enjoy it, as long as you do it in the privacy of your own home, without burdening other people with your fandom." We still turn to art for escape or therapeutic reasons, so it is hard to let go. However, if a stranger is praising the movie by a pedophile, you don't necessarily know how they feel about the issue or if they support the victims' healing. *Chinatown* is considered a masterpiece for its excellent filmmaking techniques and a beautiful story of tragedy; it probably has inspired someone out there to either create art or find another way to help others. Still, Polanski sexually assaulted minors, and it would be cruel to dismiss these crimes like nothing happened to the victims. With this method, love for the movie can continue, but it doesn't overshadow articles and discussions on harassment and abuse of the moviemaker. Like Gordon says, "Nobody is proposing some kind of fascistic law barring the consumption of artwork made by alleged deviants." However, "It's just that there's an increased social penalty for broadcasting your pleasure while acting glib about what they did, compared with years past, and with good cause: a long-overdue societal reckoning with the bad behavior of powerful men..." Fans won't be framed as supporting the criminal director, but they must understand that the director is a criminal.

A very different approach is to purposefully ignore the creators when taking in their work to maintain control of the story ourselves. In his *Vox* article, *What Do We Do When the Art We Love Was Created by a Monster?*, when discussing how to appreciate *Edward Scissorhands* despite Johnny Depp's allegations of abusing Amber Heard (at the time), Constance Grady says "...it's my critical duty to stop thinking of *Edward Scissorhands* as a Burton-Depp movie and to remember how much of it was created by other people — how much my enjoyment of it depends on Dianne Wiest's performance and Tom Duffield's art direction and Colleen Atwood's costumes. Because the more we remember that a movie doesn't depend on Johnny Depp, this argument goes, the less power he has available to him to protect himself from the consequences of his alleged actions." This is the exact opposite of supporting criminal artists. Instead, we lower the credit we give them, realize the hard work of other, more innocent artists from the same project, and, when all is said and done, the terrible crimes cannot be masked by their contributions to the arts. We will look at the abuser as an abuser that was part of some projects, not "an artist that made a mistake."

However, Johnny Depp does not work as an example anymore for criminal artists after the reveal of more-backed allegations that Amber Heard was the one abusing Depp, so

Scissorhands is safe to enjoy (The first Aquaman movie can still be enjoyed since, again, many other artists worked on it, but we do need to stay critical of Heard.) This is a case that shows the dangers of “cancel culture”; sometimes, we will go against someone innocent and do damage, or we will go against someone who is remorseful for their sins and legitimately trying to do better, so we need to be cautious with how much we lash out at the defendant and be ready to make amends, just like former bigots.

A case with colder, harder evidence against the creator is J.K. Rowling, author of Harry Potter. Rowling has displayed explicit transphobia; she had many chances to correct herself, but instead she has doubled down by implying trans women are “men” that want to assault cisgender women and “appropriate” women’s culture, and she has even promoted a transphobic store with similar principles. She has deeply hurt the trans community, and as of now, she cannot be forgiven. This has been where the Potter fandom stepped in. Taken from the Vanity Fair article by Jordan Hoffman, “Renae McBrian, who helps maintain MuggleNet, put it simply, saying that while Rowling ‘gave us this world, [w]e created the fandom, and we created the magic and community in that fandom. That is ours to keep,’” and “Talia Franks, a nonbinary member of the Harry Potter Alliance advocacy group, was far more blunt, stating ‘I don’t need J.K. Rowling at all.’” When I have scrolled through Potter and LGBTQ+ posts on Instagram, I see fans offer similar fantasy stories, provide support for fellow fans that are trans, jokingly pretend Daniel Radcliffe wrote the series instead, analyze the books for their flawed takes on human identities, and overall make the fandom magical; even with all that, they still allow themselves to indulge in the novels, movies, cosplay, and the legend overall. Some fans even boycott new franchise merchandise, instead getting their fill by “attending meet-ups, listening to podcasts, reading fan fiction, describing yourself via Hogwarts houses, and revisiting what’s already on your shelf,” justified with what trans Potter fan, Roti Porter, said, “I don’t want to give J.K. Rowling the satisfaction of taking away from me something that I loved as a kid.” Harry Potter is the story of an underdog realizing that they have value, they are loveable, and they can fight against the evil and suffering in life, and that story has saved multiple readers from depression, anxiety, and existentialism. These “Potterheads” fought against bigotry and took back their beloved books as pieces that celebrate humanity, no matter how different. No one can take away their love for this wizard society...especially Rowling.

After reading many articles with many opinions, it is highly unlikely there is an easy solution. In fact, there are so many pieces of media and so many creators with different levels of good and evil, there likely is no one solution. The question is no longer if we can separate art from the artist, but when? When do we stop supporting artists and find work that will contribute better ideas to society, and when do we take back the things we love from monsters, let them be remembered as monsters, and turn their art into a force for good? In the end, it doesn’t come down to the technicalities, but about the effort. If a piece of art offers good support to the underdogs of society (racial minorities, gender minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, the neurodiverse, the disabled, and victims of assault), either through advocating for equality/needs or dealing with mental and emotional health, then there is enough to reason to keep enjoying it. However, to truly stand by the values of hope and justice these arts promote, then we must also critique the artists that abuse

their status by hurting the very underdogs they are supposed to help. We can call them out on bigoted commentary or arresting them for sexual abuse. If they still make money from a project (like as an author), then we should consider putting our money elsewhere. We can invest in new movies/songs/books with similar ideals and/or support organizations that support the oppressed. Maybe one day, we can put revenue generated for a criminal artist towards organizations that assist victims of bigotry and assault. There is no need to feel guilty over being emotionally invested in the artwork, but there is a need to channel that energy into positive changes in society.

As long as we stand against injustices, pay attention to how the media and celebrities influence us, remember the victims and their wishes, and just do our best to make a better world for others, we can tackle the relationship between a piece of art and a troubling artist one at a time.

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