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Racist Monuments: The Beauty is the Beast

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Abstract
While much has been said about what ought to be done about the statues and monuments of racist, colonial, and oppressive figures, a significantly undertheorised aspect of the debate is the aesthetics of commemorations. I believe that this philosophical oversight is rather unfortunate. I contend that taking the aesthetic value of commemorations seriously can help us (a) better understand *how* and *the extent to which* objectionable commemorations are objectionable, (b) properly formulate responses to aesthetic defences of objectionable commemorations, and c) help us explore aesthetic solutions—for example, artistic interventions as counterspeech—to objectionable commemorations. Here, I propose that the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can amplify the force of the objectionable messages conveyed, and the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations can hinder our appreciation of their aesthetic value. These two considerations shall help us answer the practical question of what to do about objectionable commemorations of apparently good aesthetic value. Both, I shall argue, give us further reason to remove, replace, recontextualise, or even vandalise objectionable commemorations. Sometimes we need to save the art from its own immorality to best respect its aesthetic value.

Keywords Commemorations · Statues and monuments · Hate speech · Art · Transitional justice · Emotions · Counterspeech

1 Introduction

The statues, monuments, memorials, or commemorations of racists, colonialists, and oppressors have become the centre of many controversies in recent years. The statue of Russian settler Alexander Baranov, the first chief manager of the Russian-American Company, was removed from Sitka, Alaska in 2020, due to the colonialist nature of Baranov. The statue of Christopher Columbus in Mexico City was removed in

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2020, and a group of anonymous feminists installed a wooden "anti-monument," *Antimonumenta Vivas Nos Queremos* (Anti-monument We Want Us Alive) that calls for justice against violence against women. This conflicted with the government's original plan to replace Columbus with a replica of the Young Woman of Amajac, in recognition of the indigenous women who suffered from colonisation, but after negotiations, the government agreed to retrospectively endorse the installation of the *Antimonumenta* and installed the Young Woman of Amajac in a nearby location. Many statues of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan are continuously targeted by protesters and defacement (Lai 2020).

Such contested and highly relevant social events have been subject to much philosophical theorisation. Noticeable effort has been dedicated to answering questions such as "why are certain commemorations objectionable?" "is removal a fitting response?" "is vandalism ever justifiable?" "how to best accommodate the (apparent) historical values of commemorations?" "what concessions must be made for the sake of social harmony and tolerance?" (Abrahams 2020, 2022; Archer 2024; Archer and Matheson 2021; Barczak and Thompson 2021; Bell 2022; Burch-Brown 2017, 2022; Demetriou and Wingo 2018; Eisikovits 2020; Enslin 2020; Friedell and Liao 2022; Frowe 2019; Fruh 2024; Kukla 2022; Lai 2020, 2024; Lim 2020a, 2020b; Matthes 2018; Miranda 2020; Nguyen 2019; Nili 2020; Rossi 2020; Schulz 2019; Shahvisi 2021; Timmerman 2020; Tsai 2016; Yun 2021. See also Lim and Lai 2024 for a recent survey of the literature). While the aesthetics of commemoration has started to receive some attention (e.g. Bicknell et al. 2023; Dixon 2019, 2022; Harold 2022; Lim, forthcoming; Shapshay 2021), to the best of my knowledge, the interaction between moral and aesthetic values specifically of commemorations has been largely undertheorised.

This theoretical lacuna is somewhat surprising. While commemorations serve commemorative functions and are often also political in nature, experts from different fields liberally refer to commemorations as art (Atkinson-Phillips 2018; Bicknell et al. 2023; Miles 1997; Nguyen 2019), even if not *pure* art. There is also a robust literature on the moral-aesthetics interaction, with clearly defined positions such as moralism or ethicism—some moral demerit can constitute aesthetic demerit (e.g. Gaut 2007), autonomism—art and aesthetic judgement are independent of morality (e.g. Clavel-Vazquez 2018; Harold 2011), and immoralism—some moral demerit can actually constitute aesthetic merit (e.g. Eaton 2012, see Harold (2020) for a survey of the landscape of the literature). It would seem that objectionable commemorations as contested artworks also warrant closer scrutiny.

I contend that without proper theorisation of the moral-aesthetic interaction, we would be unable to fully appreciate how objectionable certain commemorations are. Furthermore, some may worry that the removal and/or defacement of those commemorations may destroy things of significant and possibly irreplaceable aesthetic value. A proper account must be given to properly manage the risks of failing to respond to our aesthetic reasons (or even duties) (McGonigal 2018; Whiting 2021). Indeed, the appreciation of beauty may motivate us, other things being equal, to "protect it from being damaged should a threatening circumstance arise" (Paytas 2022: 9). The exploration of moral-aesthetic interaction would also open up the possibility of employing aesthetic solutions to the problems objectionable

commemorations. Most crucially, solutions may include artistic interventions as counterspeech (Dixon 2022; Lai 2020), e.g. through defacing or complete recontextualisation so as to render objectionable commemorations inert.

The aim of this paper is moral and political in nature. The primary contribution is to weigh in on how taking aesthetics seriously can help us answer the practical question of how we ought to deal with contested commemorations. This shall be done by accounting for how the aesthetic value and moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations may interact: The aesthetic value of certain objectionable commemorations may enhance their moral disvalue—in the sense of doing objectionable things more effectively—by effectively eliciting inapt emotions towards wrongdoing or establishing inappropriate positive associations to wrongdoers (Sect. 2), and the moral disvalue of certain objectionable commemorations may come back to muffle their aesthetic value by either directly undermining their aesthetic value or posing unjust barriers to appreciating their aesthetic value (Sect. 3). I later clarify how the above two claims do not contradict each other but help to explain the different wrongs perpetrated against different groups (Sect. 4), and how both offer further reasons to do something about objectionable commemorations (conclusion).

Some clarifications. First, I plan to build upon existing accounts of why certain commemorations are objectionable, instead of constructing a theory from scratch. Thus, for example, I will not reiterate the debate on whether the meaning of monuments change through time. That being said, I acknowledge that commemorations involve, using Ajume Wingo's (2003: 4–5) term, *political veils*: They can hide certain unsavoury aspects of past political figures, so that a more idealised version of these figures can be used to, in liberal societies, promote liberal values. Veiling, however, is deeply problematic in relation to objectionable commemorations. It makes a value judgement that certain details are less important, and can thus be ignored. When the victims' suffering and perspective are ignored, however, this amounts to a judgement that some things or persons are not even worth mentioning in a footnote. Victims are thus singled out as persons of less or no value by being rendered invisible. Moreover, while our contemporaries and current governments may not be those who have established objectionable commemorations, the choice to allow them to continue to stand in a place of honour, despite being clearly aware of the serious crimes (often crimes against humanity) of the honoured, is inconsistent with, for example, the state's duty to repudiate wrongdoing (Frowe 2019). Of course, even if certain theorisation of objectionable commemorations turns out to be implausible, my account may still have sufficiently clear implications on clearer cases. It should also be noted that I am not engaging with the problem of immoral artists (see, e.g. Archer and Matheson (2019), but with art that appears to be hate speech (Dixon 2022). Even if we can separate the art from the artist, we cannot easily separate art from its morally problematic expressive or communicative dimension.

Second, I avoid diving into the historical values of commemorations (but see Lai 2024; Lim 2020a, b). Third, I do not intend to define art. Insofar as certain commemorations (are believed to) instantiate aesthetic value, they are within the scope of discussion. Denying the aesthetic value of any given piece of commemoration, e.g. that of the ugly Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue previously in Nashville (removed in 2021 by the owner, the Battle of Nashville Trust, citing the ugliness), would

simply lead to the general conclusion I endorse: There is no aesthetic reason to refrain from removing the commemoration in question. Fourth, I encourage readers to search for the images of commemorations I discuss in this paper. Some are genuinely magnificent, while one is hilarious (hint: Nathan Bedford Forrest). Fifth, "if trauma theory is to adhere to its ethical aspirations, the sufferings of those belonging to non-Western or minority cultures must be given due recognition" (Craps 2013: 13). Here, I try to heed this recommendation and discuss cases from regions often absent from mainstream philosophical attention.

Lastly, and to reemphasise, the contribution of this paper is primarily moral and political, and done so by drawing important insights well developed in the philosophy of art to discuss commemorative statues and monuments. One possible interpretation of the conclusions of this paper may lend some support to moderate moralism—that moral demerit may affect the aesthetic value of art of a particular genre, namely commemorations. Yet, I also consider the possibility of another interpretation that has no such implication. The hope is that the paper can answer practical problems without epistemically trespassing—saying things outside one's expertise (Ballantyne 2019)—in this case, trespassing on the disciplines of art and aesthetics.

2 Amplifying Moral Disvalue

I contend that the more the aesthetic value an objectionable commemoration instantiates, the more it can forcefully do something objectionable, and the more moral disvaluable an objectionable commemoration is. Two arguments in support of this claim, one focusing on aesthetic value understood as the capacity to prescribe emotions, the other on how aesthetic values (not limited to the prescription of emotions) can lead us to form positive associations. In either case, since the aesthetic value enhances moral disvalue (or the ability to do immoral things), the more the aesthetic value, the stronger the reason to confront a certain piece of objectionable commemoration. To foreshadow, potential measures include removal, recontextualisation, and even vandalism.

2.1 Prescribing Inapt Emotions

While it is possible that certain genres of art don't obviously engage with our emotions, emotions and a wide range of genres of art are interconnected. For Plato, art, especially poetry, ought to be banned, as it stirs up irrational emotions. Aristotle, in contrast, believes that art can bring the catharsis of emotions. R. G. Collingwood (1958) proposes that art is the expression of emotions. Jesse Prinz (2007) theorises that the core emotion of aesthetic appreciation is "aesthetic wonder." Empirical research also shows that pieces of art tend to elicit the same emotions among different viewers (Tinio and Gartus 2018) and that brain areas—insula (Di Dio et al. 2007), OFC (Brown et al. 2011; Kawabata and Zeki 2004), and aMPFC (Chuan-Peng et al. 2020)—triggered by art just happen to be also responsible for processing emotions.

Here, I am interested in a specific claim: The aesthetic value of certain genres of art lies in their ability to elicit and prescribe certain emotions: Thrillers should be thrilling, tragedies should move us to pity their protagonists, jokes should be humorous, royal portraits should impart a sense of awe, and cathedrals should inspire religious reverence (Gaut 2007: 232, 235). (And *Star Wars*, I contend, should spark joy, where the *Rise of Skywalker* (2019) miserably fails.) Commemorations, depending on their purposes**,** if they are of good aesthetic value, will tend to enable us to feel in certain ways. A statue or monument that serves the role of honouring what it represents should inspire awe and admiration (Archer and Matheson 2021; Frowe 2019). A symbol of the (glorious) past should impart a sense of nostalgia and (national) identity, to let us reflect upon what has been and what can be. A memorial dedicated to the dead or lost causes should elicit sorrow, grief, and a sense of loss (Knight 2019; Young 2019). Most generally, commemorations of good aesthetic value elicit "monumental responses" that brings the audience to reflect "favorably upon the intended moral and political lesson embodied in the public, commemorative art" (Shapshay 2021: 152).

For instance, the Statue of Peace facing the Embassy of Japan in Seoul—a bronze statue of a Korean girl sitting on a chair with a look of determination on her face—commemorates East Asian women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Empire during WWII (Hu 2017). The statue invites us to feel the sorrow and anguish of the victims of war. Also consider the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. In the centre stands the Cenotaph, an arch-shaped structure "meant to shelter the souls of the victims" (Giamo 2003: 705) of the atomic bomb detonated in Hiroshima. Beneath the heavy structure lies a stone chest that contains the registry of the names of the 211,893 victims. The memorial allows us to feel the gravity of the lives lost, and the hope for long-lasting peace (Saito 2019). Both commemorations elicit emotions apt to the horrors of war.

Now, let's turn to objectionable commemorations. Commemorations can be objectionable when and because, according to different philosophers, they are expressive of racism (Burch-Brown 2017, 2022), cause psychological harm (Timmerman 2020) or express inapt contempt towards victims (Bell 2022), just to give a few examples. But how can things apparently designed to honour, memorialise, or commemorate certain individuals, groups, or political ideals do such nasty things to others? Elsewhere, I proposed that objectionable commemorations express problematic messages through a mechanism I call *derogatory pedestalling*:

> by saluting, glorifying, or honoring an unjust oppressor or ideology, speakers indirectly rank their target(s) as inferior, convey hostility, or implicitly insult and assault their target(s) (Lai 2020: 604).

The basic idea is that our commemorative practices can only make sense against certain backdrops. We sometimes honour certain figures *despite* or even *because of* their crimes against humanity. As an example of the former, consider statues of Churchill and the Bengal Famine. Here, statues honour a person as a whole (Frowe 2019). Yet, honouring Churchill as a whole, rather than focusing on his particular accomplishment in defeating the Third Reich, is in tension with his intentional mass killing via the famine. Regarding the latter, consider the

Monument to the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet and the actual conditions of human rights in Tibet, where the Tibetans not only suffer from forceful annexation and the denial of self-determination, but are also persecuted by the Chinese Government. Such practices only make sense if the victims matter less or not at all in our evaluation, or are even presumed to be liable to be repressed or killed. When we commemorate, we act as if these background conditions can be taken for granted, and thus convey the derogatory message(s).

I propose that there is also an emotional aspect to derogatory pedestalling. Commemorations prescribe certain emotions towards certain figures, political entities, or ideals. The prescription suggests that the corresponding emotions are apt, (where aptness could be understood as having the correct shape and size of emotions towards the targets (d'Arms and Jacobson 2000; Srinivasan 2018)). But emotions of monumental responses that bear pro-attitudes towards perpetrators of severe human rights violations are inapt (Frowe 2019). This is exactly where the aesthetic value of commemorations can lead us astray.

Good commemorations elicit emotions apt to the specific content. We admire the admirable, mourn the ill-fated, feel a sense of loss for those who struggled but failed to achieve worthy goals, and so on, partly because the aesthetic features of good commemorations effectively elicit such emotions. This is achieved by putting statues literally on pedestals, displayed in all their grandeur, with intricate details, in balance and harmony or with shock and discord, constructed with enduring material, depicted with confidence, determination, grief, or anguish on their faces, with the heaviness that reflects the gravity of the situation, with designs that help us to imagine ourselves being in the same situation, or with reflections that prompt us to reflect upon ourselves, etc. Similar aesthetic designs can also bring us emotionally on board with the unworthy, to admire them, to feel affinity towards them, to empathise with them, or to feel sorry that they were unable to achieve their goals.

For instance, the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo is undeniably beautiful. On entering, one is greeted by Japan's largest shrine gate and immersed in cherry blossoms in spring. One experiences harmony with nature while walking through the shrine. Near the main hall, there is the Yushukan Museum, wherein artefacts of war are displayed along with the tales of "brave" soldiers who died fighting for the Japanese Empire, including those who fought in WWII using suicide weapons such as human torpedoes and Kamikaze airplanes (Lee 2016). Among the deified individuals honoured and worshipped in the Yasukuni Shrine are the 14 Class A war criminals (Mochizuki 2010; Whitehall and Ishiwata 2012), perpetrators of crimes against peace, i.e. waging war (Boister 2010). Here, emotions such as admiration, gratitude, a sense of loss, grief, and belonging are effectively elicited.

Such emotions are inapt. But to prescribe them, effectively so with good artistic design, presumes that these emotions are apt. And the aptness of such emotions, as in the case of derogatory pedestalling, can only make sense if the immoral are in fact worthy of commemorating, and this in turn, again, presumes that the victims matter less or don't matter at all in our evaluation, or are even liable to be repressed or killed. This is effectively hate speech (or derogatory speech) (Lai 2020; Shahvisi 2021),

> speech that communicates or otherwise promotes the basic inferiority of its targets, due to their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other social group membership (Lepoutre 2022: 2. See also Langton 2018; Matsuda 1989; Waldron 2012),

but spoken with the elegance embedded in the artistic design. This is not unlike anti-Semitic propaganda spoken by the like of Joseph Goebbels. Where Goebbels employed his rhetoric skills to incite hatred, objectionable commemorations spread problematic ideologies with good aesthetic value that effectively prescribes inapt emotions.

To clarify, hate speech doesn't necessarily incite hateful attitudes towards its target. What matters, according to Waldron (2012), is the hateful effect of exclusion. For example, consider a male speaker starting an academic talk with the greeting "gentlemen, I'm here to talk about…" While this may not appear to be a paradigm case of hate speech, such an omission of persons of other genders can be reasonably interpreted as not recognising them as academic peers. This way of singling someone out by rendering them invisible is an act of excluding someone from the academic community (Lai 2019: 53). Similarly, while statues glorifying oppressors may not directly incite hatred towards the victims, it clearly indicates that the victims' perspectives were not taken into consideration when deciding who to honour. Having these commemorations continuing to stand tall and up high, even despite clear protests against them from their victims, further indicates that the victims' perspectives are still not taken seriously in the decision process. On top of being excluded from the decision process, living in a community where emotions of admiration and gratitude towards oppressors is widely considered to be apt is a deeply alienating experience. It is in this sense regarding the exclusionary effect of hate speech, commemorations can be instances of hate speech. (For how art in general can be speech acts, see also Dixon (2019) and Friedell and Liao (2022).)

Overall, the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations contributes to their ability to elicit certain emotional responses—emotional responses that only makes sense against the backdrop where certain immoral assumptions are taken for granted. The stronger the aesthetic value, the more effectively the audience will tend to be swayed by the prescribed problematic emotions. Since stronger the aesthetic value tends to imply greater moral disvalue, the more beautiful (or otherwise emotionally impactful) an objectionable commemoration, the stronger the moral reasons to confront it—to remove, relocate, or recontextualise it—will tend to be.

2.2 The Art Infusion Effect

Not all forms of aesthetic value lie in the ability to elicit and prescribe emotions. When it comes to commemorations, however, there is reason to suppose that the aesthetics in question is predominantly associated with emotions. Commemorations aren't typically pieces of pure art, but serve a commemorative function. Indeed, if a commemoration appears to be a pure object of aesthetic appreciation, it fails its commemorative function (Young 2019). That being said, it is still possible that commemorations instantiate certain forms of aesthetic value unrelated to emotions.

Perhaps some of the intricate details, the pure artistic forms of the design, or some other aspects of a certain objectionable commemoration constitute significant aesthetic merit unrelated to prescribing inapt emotions towards the immoral. Perhaps such forms of aesthetic value are morally neutral. I contend, however, that the otherwise morally neutral aesthetic value can nevertheless serve morally objectionable purposes. Here's why.

We, as human beings, are (at least partly) irrational. People form positive associations between beauty and apparently unrelated things. For instance, the physical attractiveness of political candidates gives them an unignorable edge in elections by making them appear more competent (Efran and Patterson 1976), especially among uninformed voters (Stockemer and Praino 2015). Attractive defendants also appear to be less deserving of punishment (Stewart 1980). Good-looking models prime potential customers to judge cars associated with the models as faster, better designed, and even safer (and people insist that the presence of the models bears no influence on their evaluation) (Smith and Engel 1968). Students rate university courses taught by physically more attracting academics higher (Hamermesh and Parker 2005). This type of irrationality is, unsurprisingly, exploited by marketing strategies. The *art infusion effect* is the phenomenon where the presence of visual art positively impacts how consumers evaluate products (Baumgarth and Wieker 2020; Hagtvedt and Patrick 2008; Logkizidou et al. 2019; Quach et al. 2022).

Given the variety of instances where aesthetic value contributes to establishing positive associations—as in the case of elections, criminal trials, car sales, and teaching evaluations—there is reason to be sceptical about how morally neutral apparently innocuous artistic designs can be when they are embedded into objectionable commemorations. They don't merely enable the objectionable commemorations to look good. They effectively serve as good-looking models for heinous individuals or problematic political ideals. Even if we can, after closer examination, overcome such irrationality, we don't always engage in such self-reflection (as we often don't even realise we are so manipulated). Thus, the more the aesthetic value a piece of objectionable commemoration instantiates, the more we have reasons to worry that it can propagate something problematic, e.g. some evaluation that can only make sense if certain people are inferior. This gives us further moral reason to confront objectionable commemorations that instantiates noticeable aesthetic value.

3 Muffling Aesthetic Value

I have argued that the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can amplify their moral disvalue. Now, I propose that the moral disvalue can come back to muffle the aesthetic value. By suffering from moral disvalue, the beauty of objectionable commemorations may become inappreciable or at least more difficult to appreciate. If they are so, there is weaker aesthetic reason to preserve them where they are, as they are. I will offer two arguments on how the moral disvalue can muffle the aesthetic value. I will then offer an argument on how the aesthetic value can demand us to confront its bearer.

In the following discussion, I will focus on commemorative art that prescribes monumental feelings towards actual perpetrators of irredeemable injustice—in contrast to that of fictional villains, e.g. the statue of the Lich King Arthas Menethil from the Warcraft franchise on the Calligraphy Greenway in Taichung, Taiwan—and elaborate on how in this particular genre moral and aesthetic value interact, especially in relation to existing victims and those who sympathise with them.

A special note before proceeding. None of my arguments, above or below, imply that immorality must always muffle aesthetic value in all genres of art. What I argue for doesn't, therefore, directly contradict, for example, *aesthetic immoralism*, the fascinating position that immorality of art may sometimes constitute aesthetic value in certain genres (for instance, literature that leads us to sympathise with rough heroes: morally unworthy but likable characters (Eaton 2012)). I believe that one interpretation of my following arguments would lend some support to moderate moralism, the view that sometimes moral disvalue constitutes aesthetic flaws. This would be incompatible with strong autonomism, the view that our moral judgements should never interfere with our aesthetic judgements. But my hope is that those who are sympathetic to autonomism can still appreciate my other arguments that don't engage with the question of whether moral disvalue compromise aesthetic value *per se*, and remain open to my discussion of aesthetic solutions and artistic interventions.

3.1 The Hindrance of Emotional Uptake

The aesthetic value of commemorations lies predominantly in the ability to successfully elicit emotions relevant to their commemorative functions, just like several other genres of art with their corresponding emotions. Sometimes, the ability to successfully prescribe the requisite emotions is muffled by the moral disvalue (see, for example Carroll (1996), or so I shall elaborate in the following. I will start by explaining how this is the case in a specific genre—jokes—and argue that something similar can happen to the aesthetic value of commemorations. While jokes are often not seen as the paradigm of *pure* art, the aesthetic of jokes is well theorised and can serve as a good starting point.

One way to understand the mechanism of jokes is to point to how the punchline works. The punch line is something incongruous with the overall context of the joke. Normally, incongruity provokes anxiety, but.

> upon almost immediate reflection, the listener realizes the incongruity in question presents no challenge. It is mere nonsense…From a state of reflexive preparation, we relax…That phenomenological sense of release or levity is an integral part of being comically amused (Carroll 2020: 543).

So, for example, here's a joke:

> You and your child are driving late at night along a deserted road. You come across a car full of money with the driver dead from an apparent heart attack. What lesson do you teach your child?

Response:

> Lift with your legs, not your back. (Response given by Facebook user "Greg Roberts.")

With the risk of undermining the humour, I will try to explain a bit more. There is a mismatch between the response and what one might have expected. Typically, when we think about lessons taught to one's child, we think about something moral, legal, or prudential. Advice regarding ergonomics seems out of place; that is until we connect the dots and realise that it is an instruction to help plunder illegitimate goods. But we know that this is mere nonsense. The situation is unlikely to occur, and even if it occurs, no serious and competent looter would announce their criminal tendencies on the internet. Whatever tension built up by the subversion of expectations or by the apparent inappropriateness of the response vanishes (unless there are children present who might mistake the advice seriously). This is mere comical relief.

Racist jokes, however, may be a different story. The punchlines of racist jokes often reproduce racial stereotypes (Anderson 2015; Morreall 2011). The reproduction of racial stereotypes can undercut the moment of comical relief by producing more anxiety and tension (Carroll 2020). For those who already suffer from racism, the reproduction of racial stereotypes may feel threatening. For those who are aware of the seriousness of racism, witnessing someone treating racial stereotypes casually may lead to anxiety, anger, and outrage. In short, the aesthetic value of the joke in question—its ability to produce comical relief—is muffled by its moral disvalue.

One interpretation of this type of phenomena is that the aesthetic value of the joke *per se* is internally undermined by immorality, and the joke becomes unfunny (or wasn't even funny in the first place). Another interpretation, in contrast, is that the joke is nevertheless funny but there are decisive moral reasons not to laugh, a possible explanation discussed by d'Arms and Jacobson (2000). (But also see Yao (2023) for a rejoinder, where she argues that the competent judge of jokes is a virtuous person.) Here, the aesthetic value is overshadowed by some external factor. To adopt more contemporary terminology, the immorality constitutes an aesthetic *dealbreaker*, where some audience is "*forced out* of the art experience" (Stoner 2023: 391, original emphasis). More generally, "when a person has a dealbreaker, they are emotionally close to an aspect of the work in such a way that they are blocked from embracing its positive features" (394, see also Strohl (2019). The main argument below doesn't hinge on which interpretation turns out to be correct.

Now let's turn back to commemorations. Recall that commemorations of good aesthetic value successfully prescribe emotions relevant to our commemorative practices: Awe, admiration, nostalgia, sorrow, grief, a sense of loss, and empathy, etc. I contend that the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can be blocked by their moral disvalue. The prescription of the relevant emotions can fail when the audiences are unable or unwilling to be emotionally brought on board (Carroll 1996).

Consider, as a starter, awe and admiration. We erect statues and put them on high pedestals, often in imposing postures, sometimes much larger than the real people they represent, so that people must literally look up to them. All this is designed to prescribe awe and admiration. But consider a statue of a known oppressor of one's

ethnic group. It is unlikely that one would feel awe or admiration when encountering the statue. More likely, one would feel threatened (Shapshay 2021) or angered. This sense of being threatened may come from being reminded of the traumatic experience one has gone through. It may also come from a sense of being disrespected and alienated. Not only has one suffered from oppression, but adding insult to injury, the society one lives in establishes and maintains this statue in honour of one's oppressor. For instance, consider the Major General Lachlan Macquarie Statue in Hyde Park, Sydney. Lachlan Macquarie was the man who declared martial law and massacred Aboriginal Australians. The statue is thus an insult and a painful reminder of the country's colonial history (Smith-Lathouris 2020). Here, to Aboriginal Australians, the memory of the oppression and the accompanying emotions serve as strong aesthetic dealbreakers that blocks the uptake of awe or admiration.

Or consider empathy. It is not uncommon for people to refuse to indulge in the emotions prescribed by immoral art (Gendler 2000; Kieran 2010). For instance, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* can fail miserably in soliciting admiration towards Adolf Hitler because we know what emotions are apt towards Hitler, and thus resist the call of the art. Similarly, one who has a distaste towards slavery may refuse to empathise with anyone represented or depicted by Confederate commemorations. Here, the immorality of the commemoration compels the knowledgeable audience to resist its emotional prescription.

In short, at least relative to specific audiences—the victims, members of the same group, and people who care about the demands of morality, etc.—the moral disvalue of certain commemorations can be dealbreakers, hinder the emotional uptake, and affect the (uptake of the) aesthetic value. In such an event, because the aesthetic value is muffled, there appears to be less reason that speaks in favour of preservation.

One may rightfully wonder whether the aesthetic value *per se* is compromised, or whether the aesthetic value is merely *externally* overshadowed by the moral disvalue. The implication of the intrinsic interpretation would be that objectionable commemorations were less or not beautiful, and thus there is less or no aesthetic reason to preserve them. If the moral disvalue turns out to be an external distraction, the implications would be rather interesting: There would be even more reason to confront objectionable commemorations, something I will explore in Sect. 3.3.

3.2 The Inequality of Access

Some may hold that objectionable commemorations of good aesthetic value can nevertheless serve as good public art, and this gives us reasons to retain them. I contend that objectionable commemorations serve as poor public art in the sense that fewer can appreciate their beauty in comparison to their innocuous counterparts. It is unjustly inaccessible (or at least less accessible) to the victims of oppression, and the inaccessibility is not due to any fault on the victim's part, i.e. not due to their own endorsement of racism or closed-mindedness. (Furthermore, the inaccessibility isn't because the art is "too deep" to be appreciated by the untrained or impatient audience, as in the case of the *Mandalorian* (2019; 2020) vs *Andor* (2022). While both are excellent, the latter requires a lot more attention to details on part of the

audience to be rewarding.) Not being accessible to a reasonable range of audiences is a failure of something as *public* art. Art galleries and museums must be accessible to those who live with physical (Rendell 2006) or mental disabilities (Rosenberg 2009). Some museums also work to integrate technology to enable people with visual impairments to enjoy visual art (Asakawa et al. 2018; Mesquita and Carneiro 2016). Entry fees should also be abolished or reduced so as to not pose financial obstacles to the appreciation of art (Thebaut 2007). Indeed, public art should be public. It is (often) funded by the public and/or established and maintained by the state, and the state should not (sponsor entities that) discriminate against its citizens (Hume 2023). (See also Brettschneider (2012) on why the state shouldn't express discriminatory views and Hemel and Ouellette (2017) for how accepted donations displayed on state property is viewed as state speech.) The removal of accessibility barriers is paramount, however, not just for equality in the sense of social justice, but also in the equality of being able to enjoy good art. The choice to display public art that is unjustly inaccessible would amount to a failure to respond to aesthetic value: fewer would be able to appreciate the beauty compared to a scenario where an artwork that is both beautiful and accessible were displayed.

Objectionable commemorations suffer from accessibility problems in a way that isn't easily fixable. To understand this, we only need to briefly review one of the problems of hate speech, and show that objectionable commemorations function like hate speech.

A well-documented effect of hate speech is that it leads to *withdrawal*, that targets will work to avoid being subjected to hate speech. People will choose to leave the scenario, will avoid certain social events or even avoid going to work, will forfeit opportunities like career training or education, and may even refuse to participate in public debates (Cudd 2019; Gelber and McNamara 2016; Leets 2002; Olsen et al. 2019). It is an injustice that some have their political freedom and opportunities so restricted, and/or have to incur a severe psychological cost to enjoy what others have.

Some have argued that objectionable commemorations do what hate speech does (Lai 2020; Shahvisi 2021). The basic idea is that just like hate speech, objectionable commemorations can rank certain people as inferior, can undermine civic inclusion, can cause psychological harm, and so on. The claim I make here is that objectionable commemorations can also lead to *withdrawal*.

Consider, for example, the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall in Taipei. Designed by the architect Yang Cho-cheng and inspired by traditional Chinese imperial tombs, the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing, and the Tiantan (Temple of Heaven) in Beijing to signify Chiang's self-proclaimed legitimate authority over China and canonical position in its history. There is reason why victims and their families normally avoid this popular tourist attraction (unless it is to protest). Witnessing one's oppressor basking in glory is an awful experience. It suggests how little the society has taken the victims' perspective and suffering into consideration when establishing and choosing to maintain the commemoration. To visit the main hall, to obey the instructions "be respectfully silent" (or risk the wrath of the ceremonial guards) also appears to be participating in the commemorative practice. As public art, the Chiang Kai-shek memorial hall fails to be accessible to all, and this is due to its injustice.

The problem of withdrawal easily generalises. The psychological costs one must endure to appreciate art portraying one's oppressor—in our case, objectionable commemorations—may simply make the appreciation of the of art not worth the trouble. The inequality of access to the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations, however, cannot be solved by providing better means of access. This is because the inaccessibility is linked to the immorality, yet the immorality is hard to decouple from the artwork. Curators (in our case states) who display commemorations that discriminates against certain groups fail in their task of displaying accessible public art. They have chosen to create and maintain a scenario where good aesthetic value can be appreciated by fewer people. Here, unless we can find some feasible way to block the immorality and keep the art, to make sure that public art is equally accessible to all or at least can be appreciated by more people, the best way to confront objectionable commemorations that stand in public spaces may simply be to remove and replace them with morally innocuous artwork.

It is, of course, possible that those who care about morality are just not competent judges of the aesthetic value of immoral artwork (Kianpour 2023; but again, see Yao 2023 for a rejoinder). But note that the argument made in this section is by no means incompatible with this possibility. For the argument here to work, we only need to acknowledge that first, those who are put off by the immorality, e.g. the victims, have very good moral reasons to remain incompetent in this sense, and second, this gives the curators (governments in this case) very good moral *and* aesthetic reasons to instead display something more accessible as public art so that beauty can be more widely appreciated.

3.3 Saving the Art from Its Immorality

I have argued that the immorality of objectionable commemorations can hinder the appreciation of their aesthetic value. I plan to take the argument one step further. I shall argue that sometimes the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations may demand us to do something about them and release the aesthetic value from the distraction of their moral disvalue.

Earlier, in Sect. 3.1, I entertained two interpretations of the muffling of aesthetic value: The aesthetic value *per se* being compromised by the moral disvalue, and the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations being *externally* overwhelmingly distracting such that the audiences cannot focus and appreciate the independent and intact aesthetic value. If the external story turns out to be correct (and I think it may well be at least regarding certain instances), a surprising implication may arise. Thus, I wish to make the following conditional claim: If the moral disvalue is merely an external distraction of the aesthetic value, then we may have further reasons to do something about objectionable commemorations. This is because the aesthetic value may demand us to free it from external distractions.

Consider the following non-moral intuition pump:

> imagine a visually beautiful painting made of putrid materials emitting an intolerably nauseating stench. Such a painting would be almost completely

> inaccessible to anyone with sound olfaction, but this would not mean that the painting was therefore less visually beautiful (Eaton 2012: 286).

In this case, the aesthetic value of the painting is inappreciable to most, unless the viewer is willing to don an oxygen mask (286), or better, if the curator can put the painting behind tightly sealed glass. (Indeed, this is something we have independent reasons to do, as many climate activists spray-paint protective glass to generate public awareness to their cause. Such acts expose the double-standards of the outraged: they care about certain well-protected artwork, yet are completely unmoved by how the climate crisis threatens the beauty of nature and other artefacts.) In this case, even if the aesthetic value is inappreciable, it is not because it is compromised; just that there is an obstacle blocking the appreciation. The intact aesthetic value calls to us, demanding release from the distraction.

Now, if the external blocker story turns out to be correct, objectionable commemorations emit, metaphorically speaking, *moral stench*. Should the aesthetic value be significant enough, the objectionable commemoration may warrant rescue from its own moral disvalue. Here are existing practices that can help us concoct workable moral deodorants.

Daisy Dixon (2022) proposes that we can "metaphysically destroy" an artwork without physically destroying it. For example, consider the statue of Edward Colston, the British slave trader, that once stood at the Bristol Harbour, the exact place where he brought in the slaves. In 2020, protestors pulled down the statue, dragged it to the harbour and dumped it into the docks.

> The Colston statue, still covered in graffiti, now lies on its side in a museum. Re-curating the Colston statue by de-platforming it, temporarily submerging it, and then permanently laying it down, has disarmed the statue's commemorative and subordinative speech acts (Dixon 2022: 9).

The artwork was metaphysically destroyed in the sense that its meaning—the commemorative function—was obstructed. Insofar as the meaning of the artwork constitutes its identity, the artwork is no more. However, while the artwork is no more, the physical basis of the artwork survives. Relevant to our case here, as Sandra Shapshay (2021) puts it, such practices "would take the monumentality out of the monument" (157). But since the physical basis survives, it is still in principle possible to appreciate its aesthetic value. One can study its physical details and other properties to properly imagine what it would be like to view it in all its glory or how it may effectively elicit emotions, should one choose to do so.

Now, it may be possible to engage in metaphysical destruction without any of the vandalism. For example, the Charging Bull at the corner of Broad Street and Wall Street in Manhattan represents, according to its creator Arturo Di Modica, the prosperity and strength of America. The installation of the Fearless Girl in front of the Charging Bull in 2017 led to Di Modica's protest that the meaning has been distorted (Mettler 2017), which eventually led to the relocation of the Fearless Girl in late 2018. (I believe that Di Modica was correct in believing that the meaning has been altered. However, I also believe that the new setting—the representation of American capitalism threatening women—aptly reflects the severe gender

inequalities sustained by the prosperity and strength of America.) All the physical properties remain, but the meaning and thus the identity of the artwork was altered, at least during the time the Fearless Girl stood.

I contend that we can draw from such practices and come up with a potential solution to rescue the aesthetic value from the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations. We can relocate and recontextualise objectionable commemorations. Relocate, because we may be unsure whether recontextualisation fully blocks the objectionable force (Lai 2020, 2024), and thus need to make the encountering of objectionable commemorations completely optional; and recontextualise, with or without the vandalism, so to best preserve the physical properties to help the interested connect with the aesthetic value, but free from the distraction of the moral disvalue.

Indeed, such practices have already been somewhat performed in real life: We can put objectionable commemorations in "statue graveyards" and allow them to decay (Scarbrough 2020). For example, many statues of the dictator Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan were relocated to and recontextualised at the Cihu Memorial Sculpture Park. While some of Chiang's statues remain in all their glory in their original location, "Cihu is where unloved statues of Chiang Kai-shek are sent to die" (Hartnett et al. 2020: 249). "Less of a serene space of honoring the past than a bizarre sprouting of orphaned junk […] Cihu feels like a graveyard of dashed hopes" (250). If these commemorations genuinely instantiate aesthetic value previously externally blocked by the moral disvalue, this is one place where the aesthetic value can be appreciated.

4 A Note on Consistency

I have argued for two claims. First, the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can amplify their moral disvalue. Second, their moral disvalue can hinder our appreciation of their aesthetic value. Here, I would like to explain how I am not proposing something contradictory, or implying that the moral and aesthetic value bounces back and forth: The more the aesthetic value, the more the moral disvalue; the more the moral disvalue, the less the aesthetic value, and so on. A few clarifications:

First, the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations doesn't depend on the aesthetic value. Ugly commemorations can be objectionable. Consider the Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue previously in Nashville. While it is ugly, (and doesn't even remotely resemble Forrest, according to the Battle of Nashville Trust,) it is still clearly a glorification of the first "Grand Wizard" of the Ku Klux Klan. It is still an unambiguous instance of derogatory pedestalling. Regarding beautiful objectionable commemorations, the aesthetic value adds an additional emotional layer to the derogatory pedestalling through prescribing inapt emotions. It is not unlike someone with a strong command of the skills of rhetoric, e.g. Joseph Goebbels, speaking racist hate speech that could have been spoken by any ordinary speaker. Racist hate speech is more objectionable—at least in the sense of being more harmful—when spoken by someone who can effectively gain the uptake of the intended audience, but is nevertheless objectionable when spoken by the average hater. Thus, even if we

are unable or unwilling to be emotionally brought on board by objectionable commemorations, they are still of moral disvalue.

Second, we need to take into consideration the diversity of the audiences. Many are already aware of the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations, and would thus resist being emotionally brought on board. This set of audiences would be unable to appreciate the muffled aesthetic value. Some, for example, children and tourists, however, may be unaware of the moral disvalue, and are vulnerable to emotional manipulation. This is especially problematic because we, as irrational beings, value evaluative consistency. Once we accept someone or something as honourable, it takes much conscious effort to accept countervailing evidence (Newby-Clark et al. 2002; Rossi 2020; See also Archer and Matheson 2019). The aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations is particularly problematic when it comes to those who are unaware of the moral disvalue in the first place, as they can effectively bring them emotionally on board.

Third, we should further examine the process of being brought on board by aesthetic values, especially that of the youth of the marginalised groups. Often at a young age, people are manipulated into participating in the glorification of one's oppressors. For example, in Taiwan, the National Flag Song includes the following line: "Descendants of Yan and Huang, to be the heroes of East Asia," where the "descendants of Yan and Huang" refers to those who ethnically or culturally fall under the label of Han Chinese. It is common for public ceremonies to invite the indigenous youth to sing the Song. The Indigenous peoples of Taiwan, however, are not Han Chinese, but are the victims of forceful Sinicisation. Here, the indigenous youth are manipulated to glorify their own oppressors and their own oppression. It is objectionable to manipulate people to glorify oppressors, and even more so when it comes to glorifying their own oppressors. We can easily imagine the sense of humiliation when discovering how one was led to participate in such glorifications. As the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can effectively lead people to unwittingly sympathise with oppressors, sometimes *one's own oppressors*, it further amplifies the humiliation.

Fourth, immoralism, according to Eaton (2012), acknowledges the specific aesthetic achievement of art bringing us emotionally on board with persons (and possibly ideologies) we clearly ought not to identify with. Especially when we are constantly aware of the immorality in question, it takes a lot of aesthetic prowess to overcome all the aesthetic dealbreakers to accomplish such a feat. If any commemoration achieves this level of excellence, there is then an urgent need to confront them, as they are extremely good at what they do, which is very, very bad.

5 Conclusion

The aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations can amplify the moral disvalue. This can happen because the aesthetic merit of objectionable commemorations can more easily bring people emotionally on board, to experience inapt emotions towards wrongdoers, and thereby degrade the victims of the wrongdoers. Alternatively, it may simply be because the beauty of objectionable commemorations helps

to establish unwarranted positive associations to wrongdoing. In either case, given their service to injustice, the stronger the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations, the stronger the moral reason to confront them.

On the other hand, the moral disvalue of objectionable commemorations can also come back to muffle their aesthetic value. The moral disvalue can hinder the emotional uptake, and undermine the ability of objectionable commemorations to effectively prescribe emotions core to their commemorative function. Moreover, the moral disvalue can also drive away potential audiences, and prevent objectionable commemorations from serving as good pieces of public art—art that must be accessible to all. In either case, the stronger the moral disvalue, the weaker the aesthetic reason to protect or preserve objectionable commemorations as they are, where they are.

What's more, if we hold that the moral disvalue, at least in some cases, instead of corrupting the aesthetic value *per se*, only *externally* blocks access to the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations, we will have even stronger aesthetic reasons to confront them. Here, instead of confronting them by removing and replacing them (call this *R&R1*), the aesthetic value calls to us and demands us to rescue them from the moral stench. To properly respect the aesthetic value, we need to relocate and/or recontextualise them (call this *R&R2*). Once morally deodorised through the revision of metaphysical destruction that deprives them of their commemorative function, we can properly *accept* them and appreciate their beauty without the distraction of their moral disvalue.

In short, instead of giving us reasons against confronting them, the aesthetic value of objectionable commemorations may give us even stronger reasons, both moral and aesthetic, to do so.

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