

Identity, Originality, Multiculturalism and Accountability in 21st Century Art

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The identity of an artist, especially as it relates to his/her/their originality, has always affected how we receive and perceive art. Identity, in so many cases, is considered essential to assessing originality and divining individual aesthetic style, but there are two additional things that have emerged as paramount in the 21st century – multiculturalism and accountability.

The fact is that artists have more recently attained higher levels personal notoriety, and sometimes treated like movie stars. As a direct or indirect result of that, it seems like they are being held more culturally accountable for the work they produce. Not only are they made responsible for what they include in or in some cases exclude from their art, but also for who they are as individual citizens and as people in the larger world – what I call multiculturalism.

In other words, spectators are asking, are the artists and their art, part of the problem or part of the solution? In some cases, as we saw with *The Birth of a Nation* (USA, 2016), a film was actually held not only accountable, but in a way held hostage because of how the artist was perceived as a person. The level of accountability rose far above the aesthetic decisions and historical elements in this “based on a true story” film. Two things must be made clear here before we continue our discussions on accountability,

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and they are that the assessment tools are not clearly defined or evenly distributed to art or for artists for that matter. We can understand the complications with regard to this film best from the *USA Today* story “‘Birth’ of a Controversy: Is Nate Parker’s ‘Nation’ forever tainted?”¹

Arthur C. Danto states that – “A work of art is an externalization of the artist's consciousness; as if we could see his way of seeing and not merely what he saw. Whatever else art does it has to feed into an on-going discourse on the nature of art, or we will judge it trivial.”² Embedded in this idea is the notion of judgment or my ideas of accountability. What I think is revealed here is the fact that we as spectators have now empowered ourselves, going beyond just experiencing the work of art for personal pleasure, and have moved to making larger cultural assessments about a work of art and its creator.

I teach aspiring artists how to see. That is how I describe my pedagogy – I encourage my students to actually see what they look at every day – truly *see* things for what they are but more importantly, see them in a larger cultural and global context. When it comes to looking at a work of art, I ask them to try and see it in a variety of ways: first by assessing the individual elements in the visual text itself; then to try and see it from artist’s perspective by carefully looking for revealing clues in the work of art; and finally to try and see what it wants to be – without attachments to either the creator intention or our desire as spectator (which might not be possible). I hope that my teaching helps my students to understand that what they are taking in on a daily basis, as sentient beings, consciously and unconsciously, will influence their art. I hope that they will become more conscious of their decisions and more importantly, willingly accept what it will reveal about their core values and beliefs.

I strongly believe that we are constantly assimilating disparate parts of the world

¹ USA Today “‘Birth’ of a controversy: Is Nate Parkers ‘Nation’ forever tainted?” accessed October 8, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2016/10/05/nate-parker-birth-of-a-nation-controversy/91538936/>

² Arthur Coleman Danto *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Harvard University Press: London, 1981), p. 164.

around us as we adapt to ever changing local and global contexts and in this way are becoming global citizens. In psychological terms, this assimilation sounds simple. “Through assimilation, we take in new information or experiences and incorporate them into our existing ideas.”³ What is not simple is when or how we incorporate and finally, use this information either as artists or as spectators. This assimilation is, for me, a critical point especially in tandem with the constant flow of these disparate, often conflicting ideas. To put it simply, I believe art and artists can help us sort things out, get perspective, and even question our own values. I believe artists have and must continue to deal with these opposing ideas or complexities of life as exemplified by so many of the quotes I use in my class. Take for example William S. Burroughs’ idea that – “Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.”⁴ This puts art and artist in a completely different arena than merely supplying us with the simple pleasures of entertainment. It is for this reason that I endow artists with such great responsibility and subscribe to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s idea that – “An artist is someone who can hold two opposing viewpoints and still remain fully functional.”⁵

I also talk a great deal about the artist’s need to be responsible for all of the things included in their art, and yes, even for what appears inadvertently that they *don’t* know about. Indeed there are many such things that appear in aspiring artists’ work, which is for a different conversation, but for now, suffice it to say that one of quotes I regularly rely on is from the renown psychiatrist Carl Jung who says that – “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” At the end of our journey together, what I hope students take away from our conversation, is how important their artistic decisions are, how those decisions will reveal their thinking, their values, and world-view. I take great care in explaining that once those are revealed, they will be held accountable and that my job as a teacher is to get them ready.

³ verywell “What is Assimilation? Definition with Examples” accessed October 8, 2017
<https://www.verywell.com/what-is-assimilation-2794821>

⁴ William S. Burroughs, *apud* Daniel Smith, *30 Years Ago: William Burroughs at the Walker* (October 23, 2009): <https://walkerart.org/magazine/30-years-ago-william-burroughs-at-the-walker>.

⁵ F. Scott Fitzgerald *apud* Donald Clarke, “Spring Breakers” in *The Irish Times* (April 5 2013): <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/spring-breakers-1.1348876>.
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/spring-breakers-1.1348876>

I regularly teach two classes: “Anatomy of Difference” and “The World Through Art” and in each course, our conversations are grounded in, among other things, the social, cultural, political, economic and artistic context of the time period the art was made. We then go on to discuss how that art dialogues with the present times via our individual and shared perspectives. We contemplate the personal spectatorship of art and examine how it interrogates what the art discloses of its cultural setting. We discuss form and content in several specific artistic disciplines such as photography, dance, music and film and call attention to some of their defined genres. Take photography for example which has such a wide range, it is at once a form used to relay what is called *hard news* in journalism or to create works of abstract art. No matter what the art form, a critical element remains the art’s positioning in the conversations taking place in a larger historical context whether in national and international terms. What for example is the difference to the spectator between documentary photography or war photography and every-day photojournalism; between travel and tourism photographs and anthropological photography; or between fashion photography and portrait photography?

One must also consider the role of time as well as form and content when it comes to works of art. Another useful example is the historic, cultural, artistic conversation in America, between D.W. Griffiths *The Birth of a Nation* (2015), DJ Spooky’s *Rebirth of a Nation* (2007), and Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). In the case of this multi-racial, multi-century, and multi-arts dialogue, much historical information is unfolded and what is evident is how each subsequent work on the timeline embraces and dialogues with the previous. Most important for our conversations, is how each holds the ones that preceded it accountable. This also exemplifies the topic of this essay and shows how ideas of identity, originality, multiculturalism and accountability can interact over time. It clearly shows us that in fact works of art are held accountable not only in their present but in this case decades or a century later. Because of the complexity, depth and breadth of any work of art’s reach over time, I have even taken to drawing pictures to demonstrate how art dialogues with and encompasses so many conversations past and present.

Working directly with the aspiring and emerging artists at the Tisch School of the

Arts at New York University enables me to experience the many ways in which people from all over the world navigate and engage their personal histories as well as debate a variety of elements from our shared present. In our multicultural classrooms, I call this the shared and contested present. Needless to say, there is a rich exchange of ideas and information and I must confess I learn a great deal about other points of views, families, communities and ways of being in various locations on our planet. I work primarily with filmmakers (those of the writer/producer/director variety) and the films will of course include each director's influences, sometimes life-changing events, but more often works reflect how they have assimilated all of it, at least at the time the work is made. Teaching in the department of Art and Public Policy gives me more than enough encouragement to discuss art's place in the larger world whether as an influential force for change or reflective surface showing us another reality of what is. Core to the success of film as a visual text is keeping in mind that as an art form, it must first be engaging, especially if it intends to be instructive or probing. However, what is becoming more and more clear to me is that the first hurdle a new work in this century must attend to is accountability. Students, even at nascent stages in their professional careers, are attaching more and more value to creating and spectating responsible art. We all understand, in much deeper ways than before, the idea that art is a "universal" language. What we now want of this language is clearly changing.

Indeed, in the past fifteen or so years, the interconnections and growing tensions between identity, originality (perceived by spectators as aesthetics or style), and multiculturalism manifest in the form of accountability. One must keep in mind that this accountability is multi-faceted, sometimes uneven, and ever changing as it relates not only to works of art produced and the decisions therein, but to the individuals creators themselves. One reason, as mentioned before, is that the artist is now as important as the work of art itself. This is grounded in the spectator's notion that the identity of the artist as author is key to assessing originality, aesthetics and style. We as spectators have always had an attachment to the idea of an author and this attachment is growing in interesting ways, related not only to creative skill, but also to the personal identity of the author of a work. Roland Barthes in *Theories of Authorship* questions this need for the identification of and attachment to an author. "To give a text an author" he claims "is to

impose a limit on that text”. And yet Barthes completely understands our need to do so. “When the author has been found, the text is ‘explained’”.⁶ No matter how cultivated our tastes are, at core, we all want the text explained.

In the case of films, where trends and genres range from fantasy to fact based, much can be said about 21st century trends towards more accountability, too much actually, so, for our purposes here, we will look at “fact based” films. To further clarify, I do not mean to suggest documentary films, but rather the trend I see is an increase in the numbers of the “based on true story” films. These films in particular seem to set the bar for notions of accountability with audiences. They also present a new way of being globally conscious and new ways of visiting or revisiting national histories.

Mark Hughes in a *Forbes* article called attention to the fact that seven of the nine Best Picture nominees for the 2014 Academy Awards were based on true stories: *American Hustle*, *Captain Phillips*, *Dallas Buyers Club*, *Nebraska*, *Philomena*, *12 Years a Slave* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. In 2015 audiences are offered "true stories" in four of the eight Best Picture nominees: *American Sniper*, *The Imitation Game*, *Selma*, and *The Theory Of Everything*. The 2016 Academy Awards boasted nine nominated films based on “true stories” – *The Big Short*, *The Revenant*, *Joy*, *Straight Outta Compton*, *Steve Jobs*, *Bridge of Spies*, *Trumbo*, *The Danish Girl*, and *Spotlight*. So not only are these films becoming more plentiful, they are also receiving awards and critical acclaim which Brian Truitt in his *USA Today* article on the film *Boyhood* (2014) confirms – “true stories appealed to the voting contingent for the Academy Awards this year...” According to Hughes, who also did extensive research to prove this as a growing trend in the 21st century – “in the previous 25 years of Oscar history (not including 2013’s nominees) with 143 Best Picture nominees, only 40 were based on real-life events...”⁷

⁶ Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author” ed: John Caughie *Theories of Authorship* (NY: Routledge, 1990) 212

⁷ Forbes “True Stories Dominate Oscar Nominees” Accessed October 8, 2017
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2014/02/28/true-stories-dominate-oscar-nominees/#93370634642f>

The “based on” is a complicated category of film story, one that lives somewhere between the narrative and documentary forms of visual storytelling. These however, are narrative films but when they say things like “based on a true story” or “based on true events” or “inspired by a true story” they will indeed complicate our spectatorship even more with regard to accountability and depending on the story, put fact-checkers and the culture police on the alert. Let me say it another way, these are not documentary films and should in no way be held to those standards, which begs the question – what forms should the accountability take? In other words, what measures do we use to hold art accountable and are we consistent? If we leave this time period of the 21st century for a moment and recall Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) we note the director’s identity and religion were integral to assessing his originality and authenticity but nonetheless he was publicly held accountable for the portrayal of Christ. Scorsese was not only taken to task by critics alone, or by any particular group of people, no, the director and the film were challenged by the Catholic Church.⁸

So, I ask us to think about this again – what are the standards for holding any work of art or artist accountable? What are our expectations as spectators with regard to identity, originality, multiculturalism *and* accountability? How aware are we about how we use our *own* identity to make these assessments? How do we use our own identity to relate to the identity of an artist, and more importantly, how does that affect whom or what we hold accountable? How does this debate relate to Pablo Picasso’s ideas about art and notions of truth? “We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.”⁹

When we hold a film accountable, are we saying that it needs to bear the burden of presenting accurate information, or tell the truth? And whichever we choose, do we need or expect this level of accuracy in every scene or shot? Whichever we choose, can

⁸ Los Angeles Times “Church Declares ‘Last Temptation’ Morally Offensive” accessed October 8, 2017 http://articles.latimes.com/1988-08-10/local/me-88_1_temptation-morally-offensive

⁹ Oxford Art Online “Lesson Two: The Artist at Work” accessed October 8, 2017 <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/public/page/lessons/PicassoLesson2>

we then debate the question – who is to decide what “accurate” or “truthful” is? The reality is that it is near impossible to know how the pitfalls of these notions will affect art and artist beforehand and for that reason and many more I subscribe to the idea that being a responsible filmmaker is up to each individual. One may never know where the line is, particularly in the various atmospheres of the world of art, and I believe that until the constantly changing line is crossed, we never really know where it is or more importantly – whose it is. What we can be sure of however, is that when it is crossed both art and artist will be held accountable and in that moment we can only hope the measures used will be defined and self evident.

The “based on” film is also a culturally relevant film, one that sparks a rich debate and questions will inevitably get raised about accuracy as Cara Buckley points out in her aptly titled article “When Films and Facts Collide in Questions: 'Selma' Questions Are Nothing New for Historical Films.”¹⁰ But before we try to define the rules for this in-between (between narrative and documentary) form of visual story, we must be reminded that the narrative form of filmmaking is the most popular worldwide. It is the “once upon a time” of film stories, the “guess what happened today” kind of visualized tale. Oxford Dictionary defines narrative in this way: "A spoken or written account of connected events." If a “story” is not based on a real story or real events, then the author has a great deal of freedom, fondly known as artistic license. Given the regularity of fictional stories, why then does this disclaimer appear at the end of such films – “All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.”

One phenomenon I have noticed over the years is that even if the film does not note it’s “based on” status, many of us who view characters and stories from cultures we are not familiar with, tend to absorb some of the information presented as if we have discovered something about that culture, even though the film is not defined or presented as a documentary. This might either be a good thing or an extremely concerning thing.

¹⁰ The New York Times “When Films and Facts Collide in Questions” accessed October 8, 2017 https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/22/movies/selma-questions-are-nothing-new-for-historical-films.html?_r=0

If history has taught us anything in America, particularly with the western genre and Native Americans, we should take great care in making real-life use of the so-called cultural information in films.

While art has always been considered, at its best, a universal language, our growing conscious engagement with globalism and economics has created additional awareness regarding the fact that art is made for audiences to consume. To state the obvious, this audience includes many types of people. One only needs to look at the USA box office numbers to see the importance of “worldwide” appeal of films. Plainly said, art is for everyone in cultural terms but it is also good business. With these economic benefits or repercussions, we must then take heed with regard to the creation of art for a multicultural audience. Simultaneously, many artists are engaging more directly with the cultural relevance of their work and facing head-on the growing need to be both artist and responsible citizen at the same time.

As I mentioned before, I teach in the department of Art and Public Policy, where we focus on the many intersections of the arts and politics. Some of the curricular discussions are about the intentional use of the arts to affect culture and one strategy is described in this way – “courses examine histories of political frameworks in the arts, as well as contemporary strategies for activism and advocacy.” We think of the arts in broad terms and engage students from all disciplines within the arts and outside, which allows classroom conversations to reveal a multiplicity of perspectives. These conversations encourage us all to look at the issues from many sides.

I recall the seeds of this conversation being planted in my own education. It took the form of an emerging debate between films engaged in representation of Black Americans versus self-representation. This was specifically with relation to what was then called “African American Cinema” as it was again being recalibrated and revived in the mid 1980s. This so-called genre began to take shape during the independent film movement¹¹ of the time and came after a period where Hollywood films had been

¹¹ IndieWire “The Original DIY Filmmakers: The New York Punks of ‘Shoot It! Hollywood Inc. and the Rising of Independent Film’” accessed October 8, 2017 <http://www.indiewire.com/2012/02/the->

through several phases of redemptive representations of African Americans. In some ways, all subsequent mainstream movies featuring Black Americans were seen as a response to the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. The 1980s seemed like the right time for different filmmakers to change the face of American filmmaking, filmmakers who were educated and skilled, demanding to tell their own stories. This by no means suggested that self-representation would alleviate artists of the burden of originality or accountability, quite the opposite in fact, as they faced even higher standards that had to be met with even fewer films. In reality, given the limited opportunities for marginalized artists to represent their communities and lives, the burden was greater.

Thus, with the “based on” category of films’ emerging popularity came another layer of complexity. Self-representation opened itself up to a different set of expectations of accuracy or accountability inferred simply because the director belongs to the particular group being represented and dared to tell another version of history. One has to be reminded that in the case of self-representation, even a narrative fiction film will be spectated and in many cases received, as being in full or part based on reality and seen as real events or true stories. Take for example the work of Native American filmmaker Chris Eyre and his first feature film *Smoke Signals* (1998), any spectator, understandably, might come away feeling that they have had a glimpse into the reality of Native American life. This is of course compounded by the fact that we rarely see or know much about present day life on a Reservation. One thing to think about more deeply is not only *that* the film will be held accountable, but *how* the film will be held accountable, given how little we know about the actual circumstances of life in these delineated spaces. Let me further complicate the idea of accountability by ask this in a different way – what would the assessment of this film be if it had a white director? Another essential historical point one must make, has to do with noting how many ways Eyre’s film holds the American genre known as the western accountable for its portrayal or representation of Native Americans, in implicit and explicit ways. This is the kind of work I do with students, what I call unraveling the social, cultural, or political material in the visual text.

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How then do we go forward with these seemingly unresolvable complexities? The easy answer is to just be aware of the conversation, and the more difficult answer is for all of us to be more responsible spectators. I suggest that regardless of the declared self-representation status, or based on status, that when we are really not sure how to judge the accuracy of the information being presented in these films – we simply think of them as fictional narratives. To be clear, this does not mean they are immune from being held accountable – either by the individual measures or the cultural expectations at the time. All films come from some form of real life stories anyway, even those that are imagined.

Accountability can be engaged at many levels. The ones I concern myself with most are with the artist as spectator, within the work of art, and finally with the art's conversation directly with each spectator. As consumers, with deep emotional investments in art and artists, when we engage with these kinds of films and filmmakers, who are engaged in culturally relevant work – I use the work of renowned psychiatrist Carl Jung.

Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present.¹²

It is this very “one-sidedness of the present” that is intensifying the need to hold all art accountable. Therein lies the challenge of art in the 21st century.

¹² C.G. Jung. *The Spirit of Man in Art and Literature* (Routledge: New York, 2014), p. 82.