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Propaganda and its role in Aesthetic Judgement and Artistic Knowledge: Looking at Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract

Critiquing any piece of art brings with it a plethora of epistemic anxieties - from the limitation of the individual experience to one's imbued cultural biases, so much so that any shared knowledge seems impossible, and the influence of the political inseparable. This paper explores Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, which situates and magnifies these anxieties in its dystopian portrayal of a near-future England—where cloned children are taught art in a rigorous and unidimensional means to make them accept their status in society as organ donors for the "real" citizens. It looks at how the children are brainwashed to accept a particular worldview through art, but how the imposition of a single meaning in art makes it entirely devoid of any cathartic or intellectual quality, and yet how propaganda can be used by, or through marginalized groups to create mainstream change as well. It also discusses the possible redemption of an existential artistic representation through the character of Tommy, who turns to art near the end of his life for the catharsis he had never been told was possible, and whose art can only be understood by himself – a positive affirmation of individual knowledge and experience in art creation. Thus, the work aims not only to provide a thematic analysis of the novel but also consider how its representation of art carries implications in art criticism and philosophy.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, Art and Propaganda, Artistic Knowledge, Epistemology, Philosophy of Art, *Never Let Me Go*

Introduction

The connection between art and institutional power structures is well-documented: nearly all forms of propaganda are transmitted through art – from religious iconography to state-sponsored and controlled visual media and literature – have been used for centuries as a means of effectively curbing dissent and fostering particular ideals of behavior and identity. In fact, aesthetic influence has long been considered to be a foundational, necessary aspect of a capitalistic society, as in Walter Benjamins conception of the *flânerie* as the fetishization of the commodity and Guy Debord’s analysis of the omnipresence of the spectacle in daily life. At the same time, the Intentionalist school of aesthetics, among others, highlights the importance of the individual, of the subjectivity of time, place and personal proclivities, in the creation of artistic knowledge, i.e., it highlights the creation of art more than the role it plays once it is created. This paper will analyze these two models of the use and interpretation of art through the novel *Never Let Me Go*, by Kazuo Ishiguro. It will show that Ishiguro’s book effectively represents the individual’s role in creating art, and the use of art as propaganda, through its narrative, in particular through the focus of the memories of Kathy, the protagonist, on her experiences with art in her school – Hailsham – amidst the larger political landscape of the Ishiguro’s dystopian, totalitarian England. Finally, it will use the example of Tommy’s art at the end of the novel to show a form of existential reaffirmation of identity and authenticity as a possible means of solving the contradiction in political and individual ideas of aesthetics.

Philosophical Approach: Aesthetic judgement versus artistic knowledge

The importance of individual experience in understanding and critiquing a work of art is both a question of aesthetic judgement – the largely subjective question of individual or general ideas of beauty and taste – and epistemology – the presuppositions and cognitive

patterns that influence how we understand art in the first place, and how we create it. These concepts have no agreed-upon means of functioning and are constantly debated. In terms of epistemology, while some posit a version wherein the judgment of the audience is entirely irrelevant, and that artistic interpretations can only depend on the intentions of the artist in creating them, others situate the audience as the primary interpreters of knowledge¹.

Meanwhile, structuralists focus on the importance of the artwork and its features rather than its social significance, in contrast with Marxist and feminist frames of analysis, which tend to position the sociocultural context at the center of their analyses². Overall, however, all of these modes of collecting artistic knowledge and creating aesthetic knowledge (knowledge here referring to the sum of material, thematic and ethical understanding that the audience receives) are addressing the value in attempting to create objective knowledge in a highly subjective knowledge system.

When it comes to aesthetic judgement, every aspect, from its creation to its appreciation, stems from several subjectivities: like the specific, unknowable cultural and biological factors that influenced the creator of an artwork, to another interplay of sociocultural and biological predispositions in the minds of each viewer of that artwork. How then, do we find that most artworks tend to have only a limited number of popular interpretations? The most likely answer is that the vast majority of the audience is culturally conditioned enough to use only a few broad forms of interpretation. This would explain why aesthetic judgements change over time, as modes of interpretation change³, and when people's brain states are altered⁴. The implication of this largely culture dependent means of

¹ Wimsatt, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1946, pp. 468–488. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27537676. Accessed 21 May 2020.

² Dombrowski, Eileen. *Theory of Knowledge: Course Companion*. N.p.: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.

³ Silvers, Anita. "The Story of Art Is the Test of Time." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 49, no. 3, 1991, pp. 211–224. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/431475. Accessed 22 May 2020.

⁴ Krippner, Stanley. "Ecstatic Landscapes: The Manifestation of Psychedelic Art." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, vol. 57, no. 4, July 2017, pp. 415–435, doi:10.1177/0022167816671579.

creating artistic knowledge is that if a particular means of interpretation is backed by a nearly all-encompassing sociopolitical hegemony (as in totalitarian states), all knowledge of that artwork would essentially be the same for everybody who views them. Another would be that if even in the so-called free nations there exist only a few popular interpretations of artworks, then all that most individuals can choose between is those few interpretations. Thus, the only thing that separates these nations would be no individual choice and highly limited individual choice, revealing a world of aesthetic judgement that values individual experience in creation, but succumbs to cultural and political forces in practice and appreciation.

Hailsham: Excising aesthetic judgment and creating a single form of artistic knowledge

Ishiguro situates these troubles at the very center of *Never Let Me Go*. The story is centered on the lives of three students in a dystopian, totalitarian version of England. Their school, Hailsham, is entirely closed off from the rest of society, and focuses on teaching the students arts and the humanities. This is done because the students are clones, created for their use as forced organ donors (in their late 20s) to the non-clone British population. Therefore, the government, and consequently the schoolteachers, go to great lengths to make the students accept to their fate, and inculcate them into being compliant with their lives and duties. While this is done through multiple ways, one of the most successful – since they are the ones that the novel’s protagonist, Kathy recounts in detail – are the ones surrounding art. One example of this can be seen when Miss Emily teaches the students, when they are in primary school, about the counties of England. To do so, Miss Emily sets down a ‘large calendar with photos of [each] county’⁵ on an easel, and talks about each county while showing the children its corresponding picture. Further, the photos tend to represent England as a natural, beautiful place – “little villages with streams... white monuments on hillsides... beaches crowded with seagulls, cliffs with seagulls”. Kathy even claims that in her later

⁵ Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print. pg. 64.

travels around England “it’s amazing... the extent to which [her] idea of the various counties is still set by these pictures”.⁶

Thus, this can clearly be said to be propaganda due to the specific choice of pictures to represent England – naturally in tune, quaint and joyful rather than the version the clones will encounter, namely, one that enslaves and kills them for its own gain. It’s also a clearly powerful tool of propaganda because of the lifelong impact it has on how Kathy views the world around her. It is also being disseminated through art, photos are a form of visual media, and them being put down on an easel, which the students are already familiar with using to make their own art, strengthens its contextual understanding as a piece of art.

If we explore this example through the lens of aesthetic judgement and critique, it suggests that Hailsham is enforcing an extremely objective version of appreciating art, rather than the subjective views that aesthetic theory suggests and encourages. In fact, the very association that they are forced to make of art with reality is a very overt push for the students to associate art with a single, real *thing*: art is no longer abstract or subjective, but simply representational. Note the choice of the art too; rather than a painting or novel about the counties, which skew more towards abstraction, it is a photo, which is often instinctually associated to be a representation of reality rather than an art form prone to its own subjectivities – in framing, editing, when, where and of whom the photo is taken, and in what context the frame is seen. In fact, placing it on easel is not a mistaken confusion of two separate forms, but a connection between the two, almost as if to suggest that the art the students are making, should reflect the world around them just as a photograph does. Clearly, therefore, aesthetic judgement and artistic knowledge are intricately related with each other in this example. In fact, judgement or critique of the artwork is almost entirely excluded, to observe the artwork is to absorb its knowledge. Importantly, this knowledge is

⁶ Ibid

not just the material information about the county of England, but also the subtext of England as a civilized, naturally harmonious place, and the continued epistemological implication of art as a thoroughly representational source of knowledge. For the students to adequately judge the artwork, and any of the knowledge it provides, would involve them having to actively *engage* with it, something that they don't do with any of the art they see, but the art that they don't, i.e., through the missing picture of the county of Norfolk.

Norfolk has no picture to represent it, which leads the students think of it as a “lost corner”, similar to the one in Hailsham where the lost property is located. Thus, Norfolk becomes the lost corner of England— where “all the lost property found in the country end[s] up”⁷. What is particularly interesting is that the lack of an artistic representation means that the children could use their imagination to conceive of Norfolk in any way that they wished, and yet chose to attach it to a physical aspect of their school, a sign that even when a political interpretation is not enforced directly, implicit forces propel them to make almost predictable aesthetic judgements.

Thus, in this scenario, both the totalitarian vision of total aesthetic judgement, and the relatively freer version of choice within a constrained ideological climate are presented – the totalitarian being the specific picture representing each county, and the choice representing finding one's own representation of Hailsham. Of course, this is not a question of aesthetic critique (since no art for Norfolk exists), but it offers the possibility of artistic creation; the students technically have all liberty in creating a new piece of art to represent Norfolk, it can be as incredible as they wish, and since they have never seen any other county of England as well, they don't *need* to associate Norfolk with geographic knowledge, as its existence is just as informed by art as that of the rest of the counties. And yet, they choose not to create aesthetic knowledge, but graft the missing knowledge onto the lost property section of the

⁷ Ibid, pg. 65.

school. In essence, they have replaced aesthetic knowledge – which partially contains geographic knowledge – with geographic knowledge that could be said to contain some aesthetic value in the symbolism of the lost corner. This reveals, firstly, that the students are entirely embroiled in the concept of representational art, since even when they have the opportunity to not engage in it, they do. Secondly, it shows that there is not much difference between totalitarian control of art and a choice in aesthetic judgement, if the lives of people are so politically, geographically, and aesthetically limited, that their ‘choice’ only reinforces their preexisting conceptions of art and society. After all, as the students’ experiences are so severely limited, and their access to alternative means about approaching art are virtually non-existent, their aesthetic creations will be similarly lacking in genuine creativity.

Where does this example fit into our current system of approaching art? It seems that Hailsham’s usage of art is not extremely separated from the typical approach of Western education towards artistic knowledge and critique. Most children are introduced to it in an institutionalized way through their schools, and movies, posters, etc. are consumed, and created, by students to understand the world around them. They are taught, both explicitly and implicitly, that there are certain ways to approach art, and the art itself attempts to inculcate a certain identity in the general. And the students accepting their organ donations to protect England draws clear parallels with many schoolchildren today being taught to give their lives to protect and expand the pre-established society through becoming pliant economic and political agents. Ishiguro spoke about this very phenomenon in an interview about the novel:

“The school setting... [is] a clear physical manifestation of the way all children are separated off from the adult world and are drip-fed little pieces of information about the world that awaits them, often with generous doses of deception, kindly meant or

otherwise. In other words, it serves as a very good metaphor for childhood in general”⁸

Thus, we see that when it comes to its exploration of aesthetic judgement and artistic epistemology, Hailsham represents itself as the all-powerful institution, a fictionalized agglomeration of what in the real world occurs through multiple institutions – family, mass media, schools, peer groups, and more.

Political implications of propaganda: Exploitation as a means of liberation?

While the excision of subjective critique and passive acceptance of artistic knowledge can now be clearly seen, we must consider the question – *why art?* This question is what strikes at the heart of the unique value of aesthetic judgement, as compared to rational inquiry or forced conformity.

One possible answer is the deep emotional power of it. The experiences that Kathy associated with art, like the burgeoning romance of her finding an old album with Tommy in Norfolk, and that she and Tommy believe that if they create truly great artworks they would be allowed to live for longer before being killed for their organs, shows that the students brought aesthetic experiences far closer to the deepest recesses of their minds, than they did to other forms of propaganda. Although they were taught only one way of appreciating and creating art, it did not change the kind of emotional connection they made with it as is common with the aesthetic experiences of most people today. In fact, in Hailsham, art played a significant role in their interpersonal relationships. For one, since they could only rarely get things from outside Hailsham, the school used to organize Exchanges, where students were given a certain number of tokens based on how valuable the teachers deemed their artwork to be, and they used these tokens to purchase art made by others. These purchases would often

⁸ "Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Writers Write*. N.p., Oct. 2005. Web. 22 Sept. 2018. <<https://www.writerswrite.com/books/interview-with-kazuo-ishiguro-100120051>>.

become some of their closest possessions.⁹ Of course, the art these students shared amongst each other was the same representational, derivative art – giraffes, pottery, and calendars with “pencil sketches of Hailsham life”¹⁰, which simply strengthened their limited notions about the value and meaning of art. More importantly however, Kathy writes that even sharing these artworks had a profound impact on the students:

“...the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all. If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures—that’s bound to do things to your relationships.”¹¹

In fact, the effect was so intense that at Hailsham one’s position amongst their peer group was determined by how “good you were at creating”¹², so much so that Tommy, Kathy’s closest friend, and later partner, was bullied throughout school for not being good at art. Professor Shameem Black argues that this hierarchization leads to the students thinking “instrumentally about the worth of their peers”¹³, and this leads them to accept that their own lives are instrumentally valued, this time as instruments to the state rather than artistic usefulness. Simply, the students begin to consider that a person is only as valuable as they are at being able to complete an externally mandated task, and accepting this ideology implicitly becomes their “license for exploitation” by the rest of society.¹⁴ Art is therefore useful because it affects the students’ lives deeply, leads them to consider each other instrumentally (since they adopt the institutional form of aesthetic judgement), and is not explicit enough in its machinations to lead to active acknowledgment and direct action from the students.

⁹ Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print. pg. 16

¹⁰ Ibid. pg 91.

¹¹ Ibid. pg 16.

¹² Ibid. pg 16.

¹³ Black, Shameem. "Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics." *Modern Fiction Studies* Winter 55.4 (2009): 785-807.

Print.

¹⁴ Ibid

However, in the novel, the truth is more complicated. In an integral line near the end of *Never Let Me Go*, Miss Emily, the former headmaster of Hailsham, is speaking about how the teachers would choose the students' best artworks during the Exchanges and sell them to the public, presenting them in major galleries across England. The purpose, she claims, is "We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all."¹⁵ She reveals to Kathy and Tommy that out of all the institutions rearing the clones for slaughter, Hailsham was one of the most 'humane', in that it attempted to educate the children, and sought to change the public's view about them, to treat the clones as human rather than subhuman, an experiment that ultimately failed.¹⁶ Thus, even though Hailsham was extremely exploitative in its continued support of the programmed genocide of the clones, it got farther than anyone else in its attempt at liberating the students from their deaths, and largely due to the art these students were forced to create.

What does this information change about the previous model of Hailsham as a totalitarian regime? For one, the efficacy of Hailsham's methods should be analyzed. Miss Emily claims that Hailsham failed because of a scandal involving a scientist creating clones smarter than humans, leading to fearmongering and increased resistance to extending human rights to them.¹⁷ However, I believe there was an inherent flaw in Hailsham's plan which would have prevented widespread public acceptance – one cannot impose political suppression of the individual and stringently control their artistic output, and expect their creations to represent their authentic identity. When the cultural output of these marginalized people is controlled in such a manner, it would at most lead to a basic conception of skill, rather than genuine correspondence with their emotional, spiritual, and physical existence. Furthermore, forcing the students to replicate the artistic output (with its own history and

¹⁵ Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print 255

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pgs. 256-7

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 257

philosophy) of the ones oppressing them would not encourage a creative, active involvement with artistic creation, which inherently involves a cognizance of art history¹⁸.

On the other hand, if we approach Hailsham method's more leniently, we see an interesting perspective on the nature of propaganda. As we saw in the introduction, propaganda has long been considered to be an essential aspect of the spectacle of modern, consumerist society, particularly in the West. In this sense, perhaps Hailsham was acknowledging the omnipotence of propaganda, or the spectacle, as philosopher Guy Debord referred to it, as the "present model of socially dominant life",¹⁹ and uses this very system of propaganda to work for its own benefit. This would be analogous to how non-profit organizations today use the image of the poor in less developed countries that created the continued objectification of these peoples, tends to implicitly support racist stereotyping (and sometimes fetishizing) of 'third world' poverty, it *still* provides material gains for these suffering peoples, at least in the short term. In this sense, therefore, the exploitation of Hailsham's students to create artworks could be said to be more justified, since it had the genuine possibility of liberation contained within it. Hence, this perspective would suggest that art is indeed intrinsically tied to propaganda, at least within the systems we inhabit today, and that the individual subjectivity of aesthetic judgements will never be truly individual, due to these systems. Further, when it comes to the knowledge one can gain from an artwork – its' material, political, and ethical understandings – the propaganda filters through each aspect of that knowledge; at the same time, it can be used not just by the mainstream, dominant culture, but by marginalized groups to *propagandize for its own freedom* from the oppressor's sociopolitical control.

Tommy - Is authentic, individual artistic creation possible?

¹⁸ Adajian, Thomas. "The Definition of Art." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 14 Aug. 2018. Web. 29 June 2020.

¹⁹ Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 1977. *Marxists.org*. Web. 29 June 2020.

So far, we have seen, at worst, art being used for total mental control over the individual, and at best, a tool of propaganda that can be used by marginalized groups to highlight their sufferings. However, in the latter half of the novel, Ishiguro presents a compelling argument for once again centering the individual, at least in artistic creation, through Tommy. Tommy was unable to learn the artistic methods of Hailsham as a child²⁰, which meant that when he later began to make his own art, he did out of a personal attempt at catharsis, and far freer of the aesthetic limitations that had been imposed on Kathy and the other students. This is because, for him, there was no real peer pressure to create it. Further, while he originally began making the art due to his belief that Miss Emily could prevent him from having to donate his organs if his art was good enough, he continued to do so even after he found out that it was a lie. This indicates that Tommy's art was being created through personal, creative energies rather than external, forced controls. Thus, when she first saw his drawings, Kathy is surprised by their unique quality:

“...I was taken aback at how densely detailed each one was. In fact, it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you'd get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird.²¹”

We see that Tommy was making a particular attempt at creating an artwork that was modelled on his own unique origin – an artificial construction, yet a natural, real thing. The true value was that in this distinctiveness, Tommy presented a powerful, radical response to the politicized versions of art he had been taught so far. Rather than reproducing the same forms

²⁰ Ishiguro, Kazuo. *Never Let Me Go*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print. pg. 22.

²¹ *Ibid*, pg. 184-5.

of expression that society had imposed upon him, Tommy chose to present his own version of art, one that represented his individual identity, and was yet political simply in its being different. Yet, it was not overtly propagandized; it wasn't trying to change other people's minds about his identity, it was by him, and primarily for him. And yes, of course, Tommy was being influenced by a material and personal situation that were products of his society, but the true value was in *his affirmation of his own identity* – one that acknowledged he was the product of a society but was also not its servant. Thus, Tommy quite clearly represents an aesthetics of existentialism: extremely dependent on personal, sensory experiences and highlighting his artistic freedom. Tommy's art, in the words of Sartre, is about "making [him] feel essential in relation to the world"²². The fact that the art largely ignores the historical culture of art he was forced to learn is the mark not only of existentialism but also of a political cry: "an image of engaged freedom in particular situations that are truly accessible only to its contemporaries"²³. Thus, it ignores the historical situation and relates to only the particular identity and behavior of clones like Tommy. And while it is true that Tommy does eventually die, succumbing to the organ harvesting, his art cannot be said to only be a palliative, but should at least be recognized as a means of reaching for freedom and authenticity in artistic creation and life in general, despite massive social and political constraints.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that Ishiguro presents an extremely intricate portrayal of the epistemic problems of creating artistic knowledge, and how political institutions exert a powerful hegemony over aesthetic judgement and creation. Further, this control can be exerted even more strongly due to the intrinsically emotional responses that art creates in an individual and can affect one's identity and behaviors far more successfully than other forms of political repression. Yet, these

²² Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What Is Literature?* Trans. Bernard Frechtman. London: Methuen, 1967. Print. pg. 47.

²³ Deranty, Jean-Philippe. "Existentialist Aesthetics." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, 04 Mar. 2019. Web. 29 June 2020.

means of propaganda *can* be used for good, when they are used to highlight to the rest of the public the suffering of a particular people. Ishiguro even seems to be suggesting that genuine change cannot be possible through art if its political aspect is not recognized as inherent. At the same time, he presents Tommy as an existential figure of individual freedom; a means of preserving one's authenticity and individuality in a world determined to destroy it. And this authenticity does not become invalid simply due to the implicit, environmental features of one's life that leads to the creation of an artwork, but can still be true individual expression while acknowledging the role of societal conditions, i.e., the individual can still be presented since the individual knows that they are a product of their society, and *yet* not beholden to it. The aesthetic implications of *Never Let Me Go*, are, therefore, complex: art stands in a unique position as a field of knowledge, both in its epistemic uncertainties and its emotional and ethical impact on an individual. Thus, genuine aesthetic creation and judgement would involve an acknowledgment of this unique nature, but still prioritize the authentic individual, even in a repressive, alienating society. Further, the book opens up many avenues of exploration: within the book, an important idea could be highlighted wherein the relations between the clones and minorities, whose people is suppressed, yet whose culture is highlighted and fetishized within the elite and the general mainstream. Additionally, there is a great deal of metanalysis possible; after all, Ishiguro explores these themes through an artwork himself, which poses questions about how we can consider Ishiguro's philosophical insight to be reliable when he is providing us with the epistemologically convoluted concept of artistic knowledge, and does our aesthetic judgement affect how we perceive his insights? Finally, the possible inherent connection between art and propaganda poses several important implications for the ethics in using art as a political tool, for governments, mass movements, non-profits and more.

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