

## The Success of Sophisticated Formalism in Modern Pop Music

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With a vernacular oversaturated with references to “evil,” many usages of the word tend to lead to more confusion than clarity. In one definition, the Oxford Dictionary defines evil as “harmful or tending to harm.”<sup>i</sup> This definition does not only apply to Disney stepmothers, however, as Mary Devereaux’s piece “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*” makes evident in its assessment of the treatment of aesthetics and morals in relation to the 1935 Nazi propaganda film. Devereaux discusses the challenge of achieving a proper analytical treatment of a film that is inherently morally problematic and yet simultaneously artistically profound, while considering the perils of praising a piece whose vision tempts us to find National Socialism appealing. However evil the subject matter of *Triumph of the Will* may still be considered today, Riefenstahl made the film in 1930s Germany for 1930s Germany, and it is undeniable that the film was not meant to (and *will* not) have the same effect on a modern audience. This being said, the idea of beauty and evil extends beyond the Nazi propaganda of yesteryear and lives on in our contemporary context, even—and perhaps surprisingly, often—in the form of contemporary American popular music.

I will explore how Devereaux’s notion of “sophisticated formalism” succeeds in giving proper aesthetic attention

to the “evil” art of today, despite its failing to do so, according to Devereaux, for Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*.

As one method of appreciating *Triumph of the Will*, Devereaux proposes what she calls “sophisticated formalism,” which seeks to understand a work of art by observing the relationship between its form and content or, as she puts it, “the connection between the message and the means used to convey it.”<sup>ii</sup> More specifically, unlike the class formalist approach, sophisticated formalism takes into account the content of a work, but nevertheless still in order to *aestheticize* it. In other words, according to sophisticated formalism, “our finding the message...repulsive (or attractive) should not therefore affect our aesthetic judgement.”<sup>iii</sup> Devereaux claims, however, that sophisticated formalism fails to respond fully to *Triumph of the Will* as the artwork it is. She finds it inappropriate to allow such a morally reprehensible vision to be attended to only so far as how well it is expressed. Furthermore, she finds danger in allowing ourselves to appreciate the work without holding a lens of morality up to it, explaining:

The concern is not only that if I enjoy such a film, I may be led to act badly (e.g., to support neo-Nazi movements), but also that certain kinds of enjoyment, regardless of their effects, may themselves be problematic. Pleasure in this work of art (like pleasure in a work of art that celebrates sadism or pedophilia) might lead one to ask not just about what one may become, but about who one is now. The point is an Aristotelian one. If virtue consists (in part)

in taking pleasure in the right things and not in the wrong things, then what is my character now such that I can take pleasure in these things?<sup>iv</sup>

Her claim is that “*Triumph of the Will* presents National Socialism as attractive and, in doing, aims to make us think of National Socialism as good.”<sup>v</sup> However, Riefenstahl did not make her film for us in the twenty-first century, she made in for 1930s Germany. Thus, in watching *Triumph of the Will* today, we as a modern audience are not considering whether to adopt the ideals of National Socialism or not. Rather, we are watching with knowledge of its historical context and what has happened in the seven decades since the film’s release. Hopefully, we are all able to agree that Adolph Hitler and his actions were evil, and thus the film does not pose a real moral threat to us as viewers. While I *do* agree with Devereaux that sophisticated formalism is unable to attend to *Triumph of the Will* effectively, my reasoning differs from Devereaux; it is not so much because suspending our morals in order to appreciate art is wrong, but because, in this instance, it is impossible. In the post-World War II world, people, at least in America, are most likely aware of the horrors that came as a result of Hitler and the Nazis; World War II is a mainstay in history lessons in the classroom and we are asked by many memorials and holidays to always remember the war and those who were involved in it. The knowledge of World War II and Hitler’s tyranny is embedded in our culture and, because we are unable to rid ourselves of the notion of Hitler’s evilness, we are unable to

watch *Triumph of the Will* without the pervasive reminder of that evilness. In other words, we cannot approach the film with true moral distance. A greater threat may lie, though, in the representations of evil created in the present, and *for* those in the present.

In the post-Hitler world, evil is still alive and well, and, post-Riefenstahl, it lives on in our modern art, as can be seen in our popular music. The evils of our modern day are largely in part social evils and often come with affixes of “ism” and “phobia”: racism, classism, ageism, homophobia, Islamophobia...the list goes on. One particularly prevalent (though not particularly new) “evil” of the present time is sexism, as can be seen time and time again in popular music that perpetuates the problematic treatment of women in general and rape culture more specifically. This deficit in morality in our media is more dangerous to us now than *Triumph of the Will* as viewed in the present day, primarily because of its subtlety and its prevalence in the canon of our lives. It may seem inappropriate to compare a film glorifying an establishment that condoned the genocide of millions to songs that can be found playing in the gym of any middle school dance, but the approach one must take in order to judge them *aesthetically* is comparable.

Take Robin Thicke’s 2013 single “Blurred Lines,” for example. To date, it is his most popular song, peaking at number one in at least 25 countries, claiming sales of 14.8 million, and having been nominated for two Grammys. In addition, the song stirred considerable controversy over the fact that it reinforces the notion that sometimes when a

woman says no she actually means yes, with lyrics proclaiming throughout the track “I know you want it / I know you want / I know you want it.”<sup>vi</sup> Most people find issue with the rape culture that exists within our modern society, but most people will also find “Blurred Lines” pretty darn catchy, and therein lies the moral dilemma. Feminist essayist Roxane Gay writes of “Blurred Lines” and similar songs: “As much as it pains me to admit, I like these songs. They make me want to dance. I want to sing along. They are delightful pop confections. But. I enjoy the songs the way I have to enjoy most music—I have to forget that I am a sentient being.”<sup>vii</sup> Gay is describing the “aesthetic distance” she assumes in order to enjoy music that contradicts her morals. In doing so, Gay, like most others that dance and sing along to “Blurred Lines,” is engaging in the sophisticated formalism that Devereaux discusses in her essay on Leni Riefenstahl. In responding so enthusiastically to the song, the content of “Blurred Lines” has been successfully aestheticized; the existence of words in the song requires the content to be considered, and the urge to dance and sing solidifies the success of the song’s form in conveying its content. When listening to music that promotes the degradation and objectification of women, we all participate in sophisticated formalism, assuming of course that we do, in fact, have a moral objection to sexism. Sophisticated formalism may not have succeeded in appreciating *Triumph of the Will*, but it has surely found a foothold in the appreciation of modern music that, as in Kanye West’s song “New Slaves,” contests: “You see it’s leaders and it’s followers / But

I’d rather be a dick than a swallower.”<sup>viii</sup> We find the ethics of this art questionable, and yet it tempts us to dance and sing along. We give praise to this art, we give these songs awards, we put them on our mix CDs, we “judge not the message but its expression”<sup>ix</sup>; in doing so, we become avid practitioners of sophisticated formalism.

As explained earlier, sophisticated formalism necessarily fails in terms of a modern application to *Triumph of the Will* because we are unable to suspend our ethical concerns about Hitler and his institutions—but it succeeds as a mode of appreciation for modern music because of some *actual* “blurred lines” in our society. On this account, “Blurred Lines” and other songs like it are not blatant propaganda in the same sense that *Triumph of the Will* is, and there have not been decades of education about their implications and evilness. It is still very possible for people to simply ignore their questionable ethics and bob their heads along to the beat. In no way are we bobbing our heads along to the figurative beat as we watch *Triumph of the Will*. If it is not easy, it is very possible that, like Gay, we suspend our morals, forget we are sentient beings, and dance along to “Blurred Lines.” Moreover, as it turns out, there might be a benefit to this system. Gay writes: “These are just songs. They are just jokes. It’s just a hug. They’re just breasts. Smile, you’re beautiful. Can’t a man pay you a compliment? In truth, this is all a symptom of a much more virulent cultural sickness—one where women exist to satisfy the whims of men, one where a woman’s worth is consistently diminished or entirely ignored.”<sup>x</sup> Songs like “Blurred Lines”

provide not only a good tune to dance to, but also evidence of the sexism that pervades our media and our society. In listening to and appreciating the song with our modern sophisticated formalism, we choose not to involve ourselves morally—at least for the song’s four minutes and thirty-two second duration—but we do listen to the words and, as such, we must (eventually) consider their implications, at the very least in so far as they contribute formally to the song, thus opening up the possibility for post-listening moral consideration.

Devereaux explains the importance of making morally corrupt media available for viewing, writing: “Deciding not to ban (or avoid) materials like *Triumph of the Will* means learning not to deny, but to live with, the historical reality of the Third Reich.”<sup>xi</sup> Similarly, “Blurred Lines” makes its listeners confront the reality of sexism in our modern society. Unlike *Triumph of the Will*, though, the issues “Blurred Lines” makes us aware of are happening all around us in the world, not in a black and white time capsule. For this reason, acknowledging the evil of *Triumph of the Will* is less important in the sense that there are no blurred lines for us with respect to the wickedness of the film and its vision; our subscription to its values are nearly implausible. Songs promoting the unfair treatment of women normalize the practice of sexism, thereby giving value to the application of sophisticated formalism, which involves consideration of a work of art’s content without dismissing it altogether for its moral repugnancy. Devereaux explains further: “The second, related reason is that confronting the film’s vision of National Socialism may allow us to

understand more fully ourselves as human beings. Imagining seeing the world as Riefenstahl represents it, however disturbing, may enable us to confront, and come a little closer to comprehending, both the real and potential tendencies that have come to define human evil.”<sup>xii</sup> Likewise, imagining seeing the world as Thicke represents it may enable us to confront and comprehend the reality of our society as an institution that condones sexism and our role in that system. Thicke’s problematic treatment of women in “Blurred Lines” gives us as listeners a concrete example of the sexism that exists in our society, and it is important for us to see it as such, even if we do dance and sing along:

If you feel compassion, if you seriously understand another's pain, you accept your own vulnerability. A person afloat on hubris believes himself not to be exposed, and is thus unable to empathize with the suffering of others, he does not suffer with others. The supreme achievement of the play is to move even the proud, to force them to see their own humanity, their state of being but one among many.<sup>xiii</sup>

In our modern time, it is next to impossible to feel real compassion for Hitler and the Nazis as we watch *Triumph of the Will* because we have been conditioned not to, but this *is* possible in the case of “Blurred Lines.” It is okay to enjoy the song and to see it as beautiful art, for in doing in the terms of sophisticated formalism allows us both to dance and to consider the moral gray area it reveals as present in the values of our society when it comes to gender.

Art like Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* would make evil seem a black and white subject, but modern music reveals the blurred lines behind the concept's definition. Both the film and modern music are art, though, despite the approach in appreciating each requiring to be different. Mary Devereaux illustrates her notion of sophisticated formalism and its ineffectiveness in justly appreciating *Triumph of the Will*, but the practice of evil art being paraded as beautiful extends beyond the film, finding frequent representation in contemporary pop music, which is where sophisticated formalism finds its appropriate application at last.

<sup>i</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "evil," accessed November 12, 2016, [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/evil](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/evil).

<sup>ii</sup> Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*" in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 355.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> Robin Thicke, Pharrell Williams, Clifford Harris Jr., and Marvin Gaye, *Blurred Lines*, Robin Thicke, T.I., and Pharrell Williams, Star Trak Recordings, 2013, CD.

<sup>vii</sup> Roxane Gay, "Blurred Lines, Indeed" in *Bad Feminist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 187-88.

Despite its ineffectiveness for *Triumph of the Will*, sophisticated formalism allows modern audiences to listen to songs promoting "evils" such as sexism and suspend their moral values while they dance along as Robin Thicke "sings soulfully about giving a good girl what she *really* wants."<sup>xiv</sup> Devereaux's proposal of sophisticated formalism may have failed in the appreciation of *Triumph of the Will*, but the theory is not altogether a waste, as it finds proper application in the songs that play on the radio today, allowing us as a listening audience to simultaneously enjoy and criticize songs characteristic of modern day beauty and evil.

Notes:

<sup>viii</sup> Kanye West, Christopher Breaux, Cydel Young, Ben Bronfman, and Malik Jones, *Yeezus*, Kanye West, Roc-A-Fella, 2013, CD.

<sup>ix</sup> Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," 355.

<sup>x</sup> Gay, "Blurred Lines, Indeed," 189.

<sup>xi</sup> Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," 358.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> Félix Ovejero, "When Aesthetics is Ethics: The Art that Lost its Manners," trans. Mike Escárzaga, *Essay and Science*, 2010, [www.essayandscience.com/article/10/when-aesthetics-is-ethics-the-art-that-lost-its-manners](http://www.essayandscience.com/article/10/when-aesthetics-is-ethics-the-art-that-lost-its-manners).

<sup>xiv</sup> Gay, "Blurred Lines, Indeed," 187.