

Racist art: could a Hitler-shaped teapot have saved Pepe the Frog from the alt-right?

For *The Dial* (2017)

Pepe the frog is dead. His creator, Matt Furie, killed him in May, after the image was hijacked by the alt-right and used to fuel its hate-filled agenda. Pepe was created in 2005 and became a popular meme, which did not originally have a hateful meaning. However, during the 2016 US Presidential election, the cartoon was appropriated by supporters of the alt-right to express racist and anti-Semitic messages. Soon afterwards, the Anti-Defamation League labelled Pepe as a hate symbol. Despite efforts to reclaim the image and cleanse it of its racist meaning, Furie admitted defeat and released a cartoon of Pepe dead in an open casket.

The appropriation of Pepe the frog with hateful intentions, and the subsequent shift in the image's meaning, echoes a wider problem in the story of art. What happens to an artwork when it is revealed that its creator or user has hateful beliefs or intentions? How far should we allow an artist's beliefs affect the meaning of an artwork?

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Four years ago, this problem took the art world by storm in the form of a Hitler-shaped teapot. Charles Krafft, a ceramicist working in Seattle, has been a respected artist for decades. He is famous for combining dark political imagery with banal objects such as perfume bottles and decorative ceramics. Critics applauded his works as ironic and darkly comic critiques of totalitarian ideologies and bigoted beliefs. His best-known work, the infamous teapot in the shape of a bust of Hitler made in 2003, seems to reduce the raging dictator to an absurdity—a kitschy, commonplace object. The bathos is potent.

But in 2013, the artist was exposed *as* a neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier by Seattle's weekly paper *The Stranger*. His artworks suddenly seem to mean the complete opposite of what we thought. His ideological extremism seems plainly relevant. His works are not condemnations of fascist ideals after all, but homages to those ideals. It now looks like we've been praising celebrations of Fascism, not denunciations. Museums quickly stripped down his artworks. But were these museums right to accept this transformation in the meaning of the artwork? What *should* happen to art when it's revealed that the artist is a racist? Is it forever cursed, or can it be salvaged?

You might think that when we learn that an artist's views are hateful and oppressive, it is difficult to separate this knowledge from our interpretation of their work—even if we've been interpreting the art as saying something very different. In this reading, the work should be removed from museums and deplored by critics, almost as if the artist's intended meaning was always clear. This might be because the artist's intentions determine the meaning of the work: it is *their* artwork after all. So the thought goes: it doesn't matter what you thought the Hitler teapot meant, if Krafft is a neo-Nazi then his work is clearly neo-Nazi. The art's messages are therefore dangerous, not insightful, and must not be protected in the white cubed sanctuaries of art galleries. The art should be destroyed, or at least hidden from the public. The art is cursed and cannot be salvaged.

But is this view too hasty? It bestows to the artist God-like powers, making a kind of divine intervention into what their work means. But, in reality, it looks like an artwork needs to at least *support* an interpretation. Krafft's teapot can only celebrate fascism (as he intended) if that meaning is supported by what we're given in the art itself. This is because art works in a similar way to language. For thousands of years artists have been using art to communicate emotions and ideas. For instance, Pepe the Frog is not just a depiction of a frog—it was used to *say* anti-Semitic messages such as, roughly, *Jews are inferior*. This was achieved by placing a neutral-looking frog in various contexts, such as photoshopping the frog in front of an image of a concentration camp. Similarly, the Hitler teapot is not just a teapot—it was taken to *say*, roughly, *Fascist ideology is absurd*. This was achieved by the artwork's seeming reduction of Hitler into a banal and delicate object, placed within a broadly anti-Nazi context. Given this communicatory purpose—much like I can't make my words "Hitler was a bad man" mean "Hitler was a good man" just by sheer willpower—Krafft's Hitler teapot can't glorify Nazism just because Krafft wants it to.

The question, then, is whether an artwork does support its artist's intention. If it does, then we've good reason to accept the intended meaning as legitimate. If it doesn't, then we ought not accept it as the work's meaning. And a good case can be made that the Hitler teapot fails to support Krafft's intention. His aim for the work to celebrate fascism doesn't look particularly successful—he did make Hitler's head into a *teapot*. The curator Timothy Burgard unknowingly pre-empted this sentiment in 2007: "If the artist were to state now, ten years after its creation, that this teapot was intended as an homage to its subject, it appears to have failed in visual terms." Indeed, it's hard to ignore the *reductio ad absurdum* of the dictator. His eyes, blind with rage, roll back into his head. He's about to blow his top: his quaint and delicate teapot lid. This seems far more critique than celebration. We know instinctively that a powerful way to disarm oppressive ideologies or hateful messages is to expose their absurdity—if we can laugh at a dictator, we deny them a measure of their power. Moreover, the teapot has been created in a time where fascist views are consistently and openly exposed and rejected in mainstream society. The fact that the artist intended to celebrate, not disarm, fascist ideology, appears not to match the artwork itself.

The Hitler teapot teaches us that the artist's *actual* intentions shouldn't have so much power. The artist certainly does not have a divine decree over what their art means. Rather, we can separate Krafft from the Hitler teapot and hypothesise what the artwork means, using the available evidence of the context in which it was made or displayed, and the art object itself. Using this way of interpreting the Hitler teapot, it looks like we have censure, not homage.

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With Pepe the frog, the creator's intentions diverged from what his image ended up saying. The image was hijacked and re-used, gathering a new meaning that was starkly different to the one intended by Furie. We can therefore see how an artwork might develop a meaning quite different from the one intended by its creator. Krafft put his artworks into the art world, where artworks communicate to audiences. These are public objects, to be interpreted and scrutinised by critics and the viewers in galleries. Properly contextualising the work in this public way will reduce the work's *intended* impact. Given this, we needn't let the artist's hateful beliefs completely taint the meanings of their art.

The reason this position might chime oddly is because Western art history has been forever concerned with the artistic (white, male) genius. We've been so concerned with the artist's biography that it can take precedent over the art they produce. *Artist* history is of course a worthwhile endeavour. But we should be wary of how much we let this biographical information influence or taint our interpretation of an artwork.

One option, then, would be to hijack *back* Krafft's art and steadfastly treat it as anti-Nazi symbols, keeping its place in the museum with resolve. Indeed, this anti-Nazi interpretation is compatible with our art-related evidence. Another option would be to allow Krafft's art to remain in museums—but as a painful and complex symbol of this age-old problem in the philosophy of art. Either way, we should refrain from hastily stripping it from museum walls.

So when we learn something problematic about an artist's work, it is too hasty to immediately relinquish the artwork, and abdicate all power to the artist. Rather, we should inspect the artwork as the communicative, public object it is. We should consider its context: not only *who* made it, but when it was made, where it was made, and what it looks or sounds like. We should ask: what does the art say? Not: what does the artist say?

But what does this mean for Pepe the Frog's demise? Maybe his death wasn't necessary. We've seen how an image or artwork can mean something radically different to what its creator intended, and how the context and the artwork's content and form can affect what it says. But if this is correct, then Furie's attempts at reclaiming Pepe may have been eventually successful. The alt-right's *use* of the image needn't have had the final decree on what Pepe meant. This depends, of course, on which meaning—Furie's or the alt-right's—is supported best by the content of the image and its context. Perhaps there is something about the image that made it particularly suitable for the alt-right's agenda—Pepe's slightly grotesque appearance may be well-suited for the alt-right's trollish in-jokes. But on the other hand, Pepe became such a successful meme because his facial expressions could be used to express a multitude of emotions and reactions. Indeed, this is why the meme was so easy to appropriate in the first place. And this works both ways: it might have been possible to use Pepe to express *anti*-alt-right messages. Perhaps, then, killing Pepe was not the only way to deny the image's racist power. Maybe this mercy killing was premature.