Is it OK to like the work of ‘bad’ people?

Separating art from the artist is a complex moral dilemma, writes Genevieve Rota.

A

nne Hall, Ignition, House of Cards, Forever, Shakespeare in Love.

While the individuals who are associated with those famous, popular and often critically-acclaimed works – Woody Allen, R. Kelly, Kevin Spacey, Chris Brown, Harvey Weinstein – have slipped further and further from public view, their work will always remain.

And herein lies a moral dilemma. Is it OK to still like work left behind by people who have wreaked havoc on others? Can you separate the art from the artist and, more importantly in the context of the #MeToo movement, should you?

“In principle, but not in every case, yes, it is possible to separate the art from the artist,” says executive director of the Ethics Centre, Dr Simon Longstaff. “Almost all art takes on a life that is independent of its creator.”

But there’s an important distinction to be made when assessing the work of a “bad” person, he says, because there are times when the work embodies the person’s deficiencies.

“We have to distinguish between the art that is relatively benign in itself but happens to be from a person of flawed character,” Longstaff says, “and the art where those flaws are an integral part of its creation.”

Once you’ve made the distinction, choosing whether or not to consume the work is a personal decision. On the one hand, the product – such as Woody Allen’s multiple Oscar-winning Annie Hall, Weinstein’s critically adored Pulp Fiction (which was directed by Quentin Tarantino, who also has various question marks around his name), R. Kelly’s chart-topping Ignition – is good and enjoyable. On the other hand, consuming it often equates to throwing your support – financial or otherwise – behind someone you’d rather not back.

In the last few weeks, Grammy award-winner R. Kelly has been thrust into public consciousness following a docu-series that detailed various alleged instances of sexual misconduct against women and underage girls.

On the days Surviving R. Kelly aired in the United States, digital streams of Kelly’s music soared – up 116 per cent on the days before. This increase made headlines around the world. Rather than deterring people from his work, the harrowing series seemed only to make him more popular.

It was a confusing result – and one that indicated Kelly was now profiting, whether he wanted to or not, from his alleged misdemeanours. One industry publication mooted the theory it could be a sign of a generational shift, with Generation Z – those born after 1995 – more willing to separate the art from the artist than Millennials?

Longstaff thinks the opposite is true, and believes the rise in Kelly’s streams could just be the result of curiosity.

“What we don’t know is if the downloads are a product of a positive endorsement of him, or was it because he had greater name recognition through notoriety?” he says.

“We were people just interested to know what the fuss was about? Or are they doing it without even thinking?”

Dr Catriona Elder, associate professor in sociology at Sydney University, says the reaction to the Kelly documentary is a sign of the times, sure – but it’s not a generational change.

“It’s not generation, it’s attitude. It’s much messier than that,” she says.

“Some chunk of [those streaming] is a group of people or an attitude which is, ‘Who are you to tell me that this person is someone I can’t enjoy?’ It’s sort of a backlash. ‘If you hate him, if you tell me I can’t like him, then I will.’ I think a lot of that is attached to misogyny.
“In the 21st century, we’ve reached a position where it’s quite acceptable to say: ‘I don’t agree with you, I think this is true.’ And you don’t have to provide evidence ... I think that’s a really big shift – you don’t have to find evidence any more to underpin your opinions.”

Deciding whether it’s OK to like the work of bad people comes down to asking yourself a few questions, Longstaff says. Are you enjoying it and, knowing it will enrich the individual who made it, are you alright with that? “You’ve got to own up to that choice, if that’s the choice you’re going to make,” Longstaff says.

“But you’ve also got to be asking yourself whether the work is solely the product of that individual. Does it embody in a deliberate sense the wicked nature of the person within the work itself? Were they a different person when they made it? Does it have intrinsic merit?”

Owning up to the choice means also letting go of guilt you feel around the moral dilemma because, as Elder points out, that’s just a cop-out.

“Feeling guilty is easy, as opposed to changing your behaviour,” Elder says. “[It’s] the easy way out. Sitting at home in your jim-jams and saying, ‘Oh, whooops, I’m feeling naughty about this,’ as opposed to going, ‘No, I’ll make a decision to actively not do it’. Guilt is a pretty lazy way of managing something like that.”

Though it must be said: if you’re feeling guilty, doesn’t that tell you all you need to know?