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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERFORMING CULTURE

PERFORMANCE & CULTURAL MEANING

EDITOR'S NOTE

Words
Kirill Oleshkevich

Photography
Alexander Utyupin

It is with great excitement that I present the inaugural issue of ***Performing Culture***. This journal was created as a space where theatre, performance, and the creative industries meet research, reflection, and real practice.

In recent years, the boundaries between art and society have become more fluid than ever. Theatre and performance not only reflect cultural changes - they actively shape them. Our mission is to give voice to both emerging scholars and practicing artists whose work helps us better understand the evolving nature of performance today.

We welcome texts that explore new forms, challenge traditions, and rethink the future of performing arts - whether from an academic perspective or from within the creative process. By publishing in both English and Russian, we aim to build a bridge between artistic communities and cultural discourses across different regions of the world.

This first issue marks the beginning of a journey. We hope that Performing Culture becomes a meeting point - a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and discovery.
Thank you for joining us at the start of this exciting path. Let's create this future together.

Solitude as Stage: Marta Becket's Amargosa Opera House and the Autonomy of Art in Death Valley

***Kirill Oleshkevich**, EdD / MBA*
Assistant Professor, DLIFLC
California, USA

Abstract: This article examines the work of American choreographer and painter Marta Becket, founder of the unique Amargosa Opera House in Death Valley, California. It explores the phenomenon of autonomous art created outside institutional and spectator-based frameworks. Becket's theatre is interpreted as a model of inner mythology, in which the performance space serves as a tool of self-identification, a ritual for overcoming solitude, and a form of psychical self-therapy. The analysis draws on Gaston Bachelard's concept of the poetics of space, theories of ritual performativity (Victor Turner, Richard Schechner), and the tradition of American individualism. The article argues that the Amargosa Opera House represents not only an artistic but also an existential phenomenon - a theatre in which art becomes a means of personal survival under conditions of radical isolation.

Keywords: Marta Becket; Amargosa Opera House; theatre without audience; autonomy of art; poetics of space; Death Valley; outsider art.

Introduction

The career of American dancer, painter, and choreographer Marta Becket (1924 - 2017) represents a rare case in which art becomes not merely a profession or a vehicle for self-expression, but a mode of existence. In an era when theatre is firmly embedded in the entertainment industry, and the spectator is widely perceived as the primary agent of theatrical exchange, Becket created a theatre in which the spectator is nearly absent. Her Amargosa Opera House, situated in a remote region of the Mojave Desert in California, is not merely a cultural curiosity; it is a lifelong ontological experiment that pushes the outer limits of artistic autonomy.

Becket's life story appears simultaneously mythic and meticulously documented. In 1967, during a tour of the American Southwest, she accidentally discovered a deserted community hall in the tiny settlement of Death Valley Junction. In that sun-scorched, wind-worn place, she felt that "the stage found her." From that moment, she devoted the rest of her life to restoring and transforming the space into what she named the Amargosa Opera House, after the historic name of the surrounding valley. She lived there alone, writing scripts for her performances, dancing, and painting the walls with images of imagined spectators. For nearly forty years, she continued to step onto the stage even when no one occupied the seats.

This phenomenon cannot be reduced to eccentricity. It confronts fundamental questions in aesthetics and the philosophy of art: Can artistic creation exist outside of social context? Is a theatre without an audience still a theatre? Where is the threshold between performance and an internal act of self-awareness? In Becket's case, a paradox emerges: deprived of a spectator, theatre does not disappear; instead, it acquires a heightened concentration of meaning. The stage becomes a site of pure presence, a space in which the artist performs before herself before her own being, in phenomenological terms.

The Amargosa Opera House constitutes a self-sufficient universe fashioned by a single artist, where painting, choreography, and architecture merge into a unified form. The theatre becomes an embodied extension of Becket's identity. She is simultaneously its performer, director, painter, custodian, and witness. This convergence of radical creative autonomy and ritual repetition transforms her practice into a distinct form of psychic self-therapy. Each performance functions not as a public presentation, but as an inward-oriented meditation addressed to memory, fear, solitude, and the divine.

Becket's artistic path may thus be understood as a mode of performative existence, in which the creative act becomes a mechanism of self-preservation and self-definition. Her life and theatre together constitute a singular artwork, enacting the idea of art as a form of survival.

Methodologically, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates performance theory, phenomenological inquiry, and psycho-aesthetic analysis. Its theoretical framework draws upon Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, Victor Turner's and Richard Schechner's concepts of ritual and performativity, as well as scholarship on outsider art and the existential aesthetics of solitude.

The purpose of this article is to examine the Amargosa Opera House not as an exotic tourist attraction but as a phenomenon of autonomous art, in which the personal and the artistic, the real and the imagined, the corporeal and the spatial become inseparable. Becket's theatre emerges as a kind of "living painting," where the stage becomes a mirror of consciousness and solitude assumes a theatrical form.

From Broadway to the Desert: Biographical Context

Marta Becket was born on August 9, 1924, in New York City, to Flora, a visual artist, and Harold Becket, an engineer. During her childhood, she developed interests in drawing and music, but ballet proved decisive for her artistic trajectory. As a teenager, she trained in classical dance, and at seventeen began performing onstage first in amateur productions and later as part of professional ensembles.

After completing her training with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School, Becket made her Broadway debut, where she worked for nearly a decade. Her name appeared in the playbills of such musicals as *Show Boat* (1951), *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1951), *Wonderful Town* (1953), and *Kismet* (1954). She performed in the ensemble, danced featured and solo parts, and toured nationally. Colleagues' memoirs and archival documentation emphasize her strong technical command and a distinctive stage presence. Critics described her as "supple yet restrained," noting her internal focus and capacity to construct choreographic meaning without reliance on overt theatrical display. One such assessment appeared in *Dance Observer* in a review of *Wonderful Town* (1953), later quoted in Becket's own autobiography.

Yet within the commercial machinery of Broadway, Becket felt like a "pawn among the scenery." In her memoir, she recalls: *"I stood on the stage but never felt I belonged to it. This was not the dance I had dreamed - it was someone else's dream. I needed a stage that could truly hear me".* [Becket 2007: 42] This statement is crucial for understanding her subsequent artistic decisions. Already in the 1950s, she began creating her own dance miniatures and pantomimes, performing in small New York galleries and clubs. She designed her costumes, composed or selected her own music, and painted her promotional materials. Early programs such as *Dance of the Clowns* and *The Mirror* contained embryonic versions of the theatrical language, she would later develop fully at the Amargosa Opera House: a fusion of grotesque, symbolic imagery, and autobiographical tone.

In 1962, she married set designer Thomas Willett. Together, they left New York to tour the country, presenting her solo shows in small civic venues and schools. This period, which Becket called *"the time of the traveling theatre,"* was both liberating and exhausting: *"We carried our stage in the trunk of the car. Every town was a new opportunity to perform, but the audience never quite became mine."* [Becket 2007, 73] Many of these performances took place in libraries, community centers, and churches - wherever a modest crowd could be gathered. Over time, however, this nomadic model weighed heavily on her: *"I dreamed of a place where movement would not disappear but would remain in the air after I was gone."* [Becket 2007, 75]

The decisive turn came in the spring of 1967. While traveling from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, the couple's car suffered a flat tire near Death Valley Junction. As Willett repaired the vehicle, Becket explored the area and discovered a dilapidated building marked simply "Hall." Inside, she found a small stage, a curtain, and rows of dusty seats. She later described the moment as a mystical revelation: *"I peered through the crack in the door and saw a stage that seemed to have been waiting for me. It felt as if I had stepped into a dream I had once painted for myself."* [Becket 2007, 82]

The next day, she learned that the building belonged to the local county administration and secured a rental agreement for forty-five dollars a month. Thus began the story of the Amargosa Opera House - the theatre in which she would spend the remainder of her life. At first, her husband supported the restoration effort; soon, however, he realized that Becket had become completely absorbed in the project. Their relationship deteriorated rapidly, and within a few months, he left her, writing that he hoped she would "return to the real world." Becket wrote in her diary in response: *"The real world is here. Everything else is a stage that no longer needs me."* [Becket 2007, 83]

This initiated a period of profound solitude and remarkable self-organization, during which Becket's life became a continuous performance - literally and metaphysically. She lived in a small room attached to the theatre, spending her days repairing walls and the stage, and her evenings rehearsing. In February 1968, she gave her first performance at the Amargosa Opera House, attended by only three travelers who had stumbled across the abandoned settlement. That *"desert premiere"* marked the beginning of one of the most singular artistic biographies of the twentieth century. Unlike countless performers who leave the stage in pursuit of recognition or security,

Marta Becket chose a path in which the stage became her home and solitude itself became her audience.

Architecture of Imagination: The Space of the Amargosa Opera House

From the outset, Marta Becket perceived the Amargosa Opera House not as a building but as a living organism. *"I did not find the stage,"* she wrote, *"the stage found me."* [Becket 2007, 82] For her, the architecture of the hall functioned not as an external shell but as a material extension of an inner world, something to be shaped in the same way that a painter shapes an image on canvas.

The building, constructed in 1923 by the Pacific Coast Borax Company to serve the needs of a mining settlement, embodied a modest variant of industrial Spanish Colonial Revival architecture: a simple rectangular plan, thick adobe walls, arched openings, and a compact auditorium of roughly fifty seats. When Becket first entered, the interior was severely deteriorated, its ceiling collapsing, its floors rotting, its walls blackened by soot. Yet this ruination and silence signified to her that the place awaited transformation. Over several years, she single-handedly restored the interior and then began to paint the walls, surrounding herself with an audience of imagined figures. Executed in acrylic and tempera, these murals gradually evolved into one of the most distinctive visual cycles in twentieth-century American outsider art.

As the project developed, figures of eighteenth-century gentlemen and ladies, knights, monks, clowns, and classical philosophers appeared along the walls of the Opera House. They occupy balcony boxes, gallery seats, and the front rows, creating the illusion of a full house. The overall composition follows a baroque theatrical aesthetic: decorative arches, fluted columns, ornamental friezes, cascading drapery. Becket explained that she painted her audience at night *"so they could arrive in time for the premiere"*: *"I painted them one by one so that I would never again be alone. Every night they watch me dance."* [Becket 2007, 115]

This illumination of absence exposes not merely a psychological strategy but an ontological principle. By conjuring a fictive public, she materializes vacancy, turning emptiness into figural presence. In terms of spatial semiotics, this operation represents a substitution of the communicative field.

Following Yuri Lotman, Becket's stage may be understood as a "secondary modeling system" in which artistic signs reconstruct lost social relations. [Lotman 1997] In conventional

theatre, communication presupposes an interaction between actor and audience. In Becket's theatre, these positions converge: the actor produces her audience as an image—literally inscribing it into space. Amargosa Opera House becomes not a theatre of interaction but a theatre of memory, where the painted spectator records the very act of imagined dialogue.

The analytic lens of Gaston Bachelard's Poetics of Space is equally crucial. Bachelard conceptualized the house as a "container of the soul," a topos of intimate being where material forms are projections of interior experience. *"The house shelters daydreaming,"* he wrote, *"the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."* [Bachelard 1994, 36] In this Bachelardian sense, Becket's theatre functions as a house at its most extreme: a site where dwelling and imagination coincide. She does not simply live *in* the theatre - she lives *through* the theatre. Stage, walls, and murals are not décor but organs of her creative body.

The ceiling, painted with celestial vaults populated by mythic creatures; the walls, expanding through painted loges that imply exchanged positions of performer and spectator, these produce what Bachelard called an "intimate topology," detectable not in geometry but in the experience of corners, stairways, apertures, and silence. Every object is charged with traces of corporeal presence: an aging velvet curtain, the candle at the wings, the creak of the boards beneath her feet.

Viewed through Lotman's framework of cultural semiotics, the Amargosa Opera House may be interpreted as an auto-communicative text, addressed from the author to herself. In Culture and Explosion, Lotman defines auto-communication as a mode of meaning transmission in "closed cultural spaces," where sender and receiver coincide and the message functions as a process of self-description and self-transformation. [Lotman 1997, 17]

This structure is fully operative in Becket's practice. Her theatre is a self-sufficient semiotic organism wherein speech, movement, and imagery form a closed cycle. There is no communication with an external audience: the addressee is generated by the artist herself through painted spectators. The audience is therefore displaced from the role of interlocutor to that of signifier, transforming communication into an act of internal reflection.

Such self-referentiality also casts the theatre as a spatial self-portrait. The stage becomes a body, the walls a skin, the murals reflections, and light the breath animating the entire organism. The distinctions between inside and outside, performer and environment, dissolve. Theatre ceases to be a venue of representation and becomes a mode of existence: a semiotic body in which subject

and object converge. Within such a system, the act of creation and the act of being become inseparable. The Amargosa Opera House thus functions not as a channel of communication but as a mechanism of art's self-awareness, turned toward its own meaning and its own breath.

Ritual and Autotherapy: Performance as a Mode of Inner Survival

Once Marta Becket settled permanently at the Amargosa Opera House, her life and art merged into an uninterrupted performance. Between 1968 and 2012, she created more than fifty productions - concurrently serving as actor, director, costume and set designer, and accompanist. Among her most notable works were *Dance of the Spirits* (1969), *The Mirror* (1972), *Masquerade of Souls* (1985), *Fables and Fantasies* (1992), *The Sitting Down Show* (1996), and *A Valentine to the World* (2000). Each performance constituted a synthetic theatrical form combining pantomime, symbolic movement, visual scenography, and a painterly environment.

All of Becket's performances began the same way: she would draw the curtain, place a candle at the edge of the stage, and bow in silence. This repeated structure endowed her actions with a ritual quality, aligning them with religious ceremonies in which repetition is not mechanical but generative of meaning. Whereas in conventional theater the performance is directed toward an audience, here the action addresses space itself. It pacifies and sacralizes the hall, much like a priestly rite consecrates the temple.

Victor Turner's theory of liminality is useful for understanding this structure. He defines the liminal as a transitional state in which habitual social roles dissolve and the subject enters a threshold domain of sacred transformation. [Turner 1969] For Becket, the stage became such a liminal zone: the moment she stepped into its light, she ceased to be merely a performer and became a medium between the visible and the invisible. Turner described ritual as a "model for life and a model of life" - a doubled system in which person and action fuse. For Becket, life and theater did fuse. She did not *play* roles; she *inhabited* them.

Dance of the Spirits (1969), one of her earliest Amargosa works, was a near-wordless chamber piece wherein embodiments of earth, water, fire, and air interacted through minimal props and symbolic gesture. The performance explored the theme of fading vitality and the dance required to restore balance. As Becket would later write, "Dance is a conversation with what is not there." [Becket 2007, 115]

Her best-known production, *Masquerade of Souls* (1985), functioned as her artistic manifesto. It featured only three characters: Life, Death, and the Artist, all portrayed by Becket. Life entered in a billowing white costume, Death in a dark mask, and the Artist as a woman bearing a candle and palette. Life and Death danced the Artist to exhaustion until only the empty stage remained. The final whispered line - *"They have gone, but the dance remains"* became her credo. The work stands as an allegory of creative identity articulated through ritual action.

Richard Schechner's theory of performance as restored behavior also illuminates Becket's practice. Schechner characterizes restored behavior as repeatable action that retains the structure of ritual while acquiring altered significance with each iteration. [Schechner 1985] Her weekly performances were not repetitions but temporal renewals of first meaning - reactivations of sacred time in which performer and work briefly reunite with the origin of art itself. The Amargosa Opera House thus became a laboratory of restored behavior on the most personal and intimate scale: ritual repetition became a survival strategy; performance became a way of being.

After the departure of her husband and years of isolation, Becket faced bouts of depression, but the stage, as she stated, served as her "medicine against silence": *"When I dance, I am whole. When I stop, the silence begins to devour me."* [Becket 2007, 134] Gradually, the boundaries between performance and daily life dissolved. She rehearsed in the morning, painted or repaired the theater during the day, performed each evening, and wrote or designed costumes at night. Every movement was absorbed into the performative cycle. In this sense, her work approaches the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. [Wagner 1993] Yet, unlike Wagner's monumental collectivity, Becket realized a microcosmic total artwork, produced entirely by one creator: drama - self-written scripts and silent pantomime; music - piano accompaniment and the rhythm of movement; dance - physicality as text; visual art - murals and handcrafted décor; architecture - the theater as dwelling and body; and light - the breath that animates the whole organism.

Becket's *The Mirror* (1972), which examined self-observation and doubling, is emblematic. Dancing before a candlelit mirror, she conversed with her reflection until it seemed to take on independent life, at which point she shattered the mirror, transforming the fragments into metaphorical stars. Here, the search for unity through fragmentation and vice versa became a poetic dramaturgy of self.

As her physical abilities waned, especially after a hip injury in the 2000s, she developed *The Sitting Down Show* - "a dance of spirit without legs," in her words. Audiences saw an aging

woman seated in a chair, dancing inwardly through the expressivity of her hands, face, and gaze. The meaning remained intact: not to cease the act of creation.

In the documentary *Amargosa* (2000), Becket, already wheelchair-bound, speaks to the audience, comprised mostly of those painted on the walls: "I still perform because the theater needs me. And I need it. We keep each other alive." This reciprocal dependence transforms the theatre into a shared organism. She healed the building through her presence; it healed her through repetition and purpose.

Her final performance took place on February 12, 2012 - forty-four years after her desert premiere. Addressing her painted spectators, she concluded simply: "*Thank you for being here all this time, even if you are only painted*." This statement closed not merely a performance but an entire life in which art and existence were indivisible. The Amargosa Opera House emerged as a sanctuary of performative solitude, where each night she affirmed that art is not a form of communication, but a form of life.

The Desert as a Stage of Revelation: From the Gospel Archetype to the Myth of Creative Solitude in American Culture

The story of Marta Becket is organically inscribed into one of the central traditions of American cultural imagination: the myth of the solitary creator who seeks truth not within society but in isolation, at the threshold between civilization and wilderness. From Henry David Thoreau to Emily Dickinson, from Georgia O'Keeffe to the Beat writers, this lineage has shaped solitude as a spiritual resource, a state in which the artist encounters the "real." In this tradition, the Amargosa Opera House is not an anomaly but a continuation: a variation of the American myth of self-sufficient creativity in which the stage becomes the equivalent of a cell and the act of art a form of prayer. As Thoreau famously wrote in *Walden*, "*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life*" [Thoreau 2004, 84]. Becket repeats this gesture, but her "woods" are a dead desert, and her medium of contemplation is dance.

Yet Becket's relocation to Death Valley Junction was not an escape but a ritual of self-initiation. If for Thoreau isolation signified protest against industrial society, for Becket it meant a return to the sacred essence of art, an art free from external gaze. Psychologically and aesthetically, this gesture corresponds to what American scholars describe as a mode of *sacred individualism*, which endows solitude with the status of a mission. Becket thus becomes a female

embodiment of the same archetype represented by Thoreau, Melville, or Joseph Campbell's hero-figure: one who abandons the world in pursuit of revelation.

At the same time, Becket's narrative draws upon a deeper biblical archetype: the desert as a space of trial and revelation. Just as Christ spent forty days in the desert to clarify his calling, Becket arrived in her desert not by accident, but as she suggested, by inner necessity. Leaving behind the "urban spectacle" of art, as Christ left the crowds, she entered a landscape without witnesses to confront fear, doubt, and loneliness and to gain sovereignty over her own soul.

Her "forty years in the desert," therefore, were not exile but an inner ministry. The Amargosa Opera House became both monastery and Gethsemane, where each performance assumed the form of liturgy. Just as Christ refused worldly power and spectacle in favor of fidelity to his path, Becket rejected the lure of recognition and the "entertainment industry" in the name of inward truth. In this sense, the Amargosa Opera House is a clear variation of the Christological myth of temptation and resistance: an artist alone at the edge of the world stands against entropy and spiritual inertia, continuing to dance even when the auditorium is empty.

The desert, therefore, ceases to be a backdrop. It becomes a participant in the ritual. Instead of spectators - wind; instead of applause - the howling of coyotes; instead of chorus - a silence filled with meaning. Thus, Becket's life becomes an act of *imitatio Christi* not in a doctrinal but in an existential register: through art, she affirms the presence of spirit in a landscape of silence.

In American art, the desert has long operated not merely as geography but as a metaphor of purification, silence, and insight. Modernist artists identified it with spiritual ordeal. T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* evoked a place "Here is no water but only rock; / Rock and no water and the sandy road…" [Eliot 2001, 152]. Georgia O'Keeffe, who settled in New Mexico, remarked that "in the desert I see the shape of things one misses in the city" [Corn 2017]. Marta Becket has rightfully earned her place within this symbolic landscape. Her Amargosa Opera House stands at the edge of Death Valley, one of the most desolate terrains in the United States, yet it hosts one of the most vital artistic practices. The paradox is evident: her theater is an oasis of aesthetic presence within a geography of absence.

In her diaries, she wrote: "*The desert speaks in a whisper. You can hear it only when you have lost everything."* [Becket 2007, 138] This line binds two key myths: the desert as trial and art as salvation. If Thoreau, Melville, or Kerouac constructed a male model of solitude rebellion against society, Becket embodies a female mode of solitude based on creation rather than negation.

She does not sever communication with the world; she constructs a new, imagined form of it. Her painted spectators represent an empathetic restoration of community after the physical social bond has dissolved.

Emily Dickinson wrote: "*I dwell in Possibility a fairer House than Prose*" [Dickinson 1960]. This line reveals the essence of Dickinson's poetics: "house" as an inner architecture of infinity, a mode of being built not from stone but from language and imagination. The metaphor aligns remarkably with the Amargosa Opera House: the walls may be painted, but the reality inside them is alive. Becket's theater is likewise a "house of possibility," positioned between the material and the imagined, the desert and the stage, life and art. If Dickinson replaces communication with literature, Becket replaces language with movement dance as her only grammar of presence. Both create worlds where possibility outweighs reality: Dickinson in the poetic mode, Becket in the performative. Like Dickinson's "house-poem," the Amargosa Opera House is a house-of-possibility: a place where imagination generates a truth more real than the visible.

A comparison with Georgia O'Keeffe is particularly illuminating. O'Keeffe left New York for the desert "to hear the silence of color." Becket did likewise, but she heard the silence of movement. If O'Keeffe painted the desert into art, Becket painted art into the desert, making the theater its living body. In both cases, we witness a phenomenon of *creative solitude* in which a woman-artist asserts her autonomy beyond masculine canons and market logic. The Amargosa Opera House becomes not simply a venue but a manifesto of female artistic autonomy: Becket controls the space, repertoire, rhythm, light, and body.

Conceptually, the Amargosa Opera House also recalls Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* - a "*solitary place*" where the artist constructs a self-contained universe governed by its own logic [Roussel 1970]. Psychoanalytically, the desert symbolizes absence and loss, but also purification. Becket fills this void with signs: every gesture, every candle, every step becomes a means to overcome nothingness. As a result, her theater has come to be understood as a sacred site of a contemporary myth. The façade of the Opera House still bears the inscription The Show Must Go On -not as an advertisement but as an epigraph to the American faith in regeneration out of nothingness. Thus, the phenomenon of Marta Becket is not a private story of an eccentric performer but a variation of a national myth in which solitude becomes the source of truth. The desert becomes a stage where art encounters itself again, through a woman dancing in silence and solitude, for painted spectators and for eternity.

Public Reception and Media Mythologization

During the first years of the Amargosa Opera House, Marta Becket performed in near-total isolation. She hand-painted her early posters and hung them along Highway 127, which connects Death Valley to the small town of Pahrump. Audience members were few: a handful of geologists, accidental tourists, and the occasional traveler. Yet within this enclosed space, a legend slowly took shape, one that, by the 1970s, transformed an unknown ballerina into a cultural icon.

The turning point occurred in 1969, when photographer Herb Robbins, traveling through Death Valley, accidentally attended one of her performances. He photographed Becket bowing before her "painted audience" and submitted the images to *National Geographic*. The article (*Life,* 1971, № 14), titled "The Ballerina of the Desert," caused a sensation: readers encountered the image of a woman who "dances for eternity." Shortly thereafter, *Life* magazine published a photo essay that featured the caption: "Amid the silence of Death Valley, she has built her own stage and kept dancing." Following these publications, a stream of journalists, photographers, and writers made the journey to her isolated venue. Reports appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *People*, *Time Out Los Angeles*, and others. The press dubbed Becket *"the woman who painted herself an audience."*

The height of public recognition came with the release of Amargosa, a feature-length documentary film by Todd Robinson, which received an Emmy Award for Best Cultural Documentary. Structured as a modern myth, the film interweaves archival footage, interviews, and reenacted performance fragments, turning Becket's biography into an allegory of the "infinite act." Becket recounts how she converses each night with her frescoes; she utters a line that has since become emblematic: *"My painted audience never leaves me - they understand everything without a single word."* This image of a woman communicating with an audience she herself created became a powerful media metaphor for the artist seeking authenticity in the age of mass culture.

In one of the film's most striking sequences, Becket sits alone in the empty theater, gazing at a mural that depicts her performing onstage. As the camera pulls back, it becomes clear that she is situated *inside* her own image. The documentary thus evolves into a philosophical parable on artistic self-reflection. After the film's release, visitor numbers to the Amargosa Opera House increased dramatically. Tours were established, a nonprofit foundation formed, a museum-hotel

opened, and the Opera House was listed on the *National Register of Historic Places (*Ref. № 80000802).

Over time, Becket's personal story has acquired the contours of a national parable of fidelity to art. The press compared her to Emily Dickinson, Frida Kahlo, and Georgia O'Keeffe, women who chose isolation as their path to self-knowledge. In late-twentieth-century American culture, weary of glamour and postmodern cynicism, Becket emerged as a symbol of authenticity. Magazines referred to her as *"the last romantic"* and *"the desert's patron saint of the arts."*

Today, the Amargosa Opera House functions as a museum, cultural venue, and 24-room historic hotel managed by the nonprofit Amargosa Opera House, Inc. Its frescoes are carefully restored; guided tours, film retrospectives, and talks on Becket's life are offered. For scholars of theatre and performance, Amargosa remains a living laboratory of autonomous art. Her work is cited in studies of the anthropology of performance and gender theory, where Becket is recognized as a foundational example of a "hermit-artist who created a performative space of female self-affirmation." Her media history illustrates how an intensely personal artistic act can transform into a cultural myth and how an isolated space can become a site of collective identification.

Conclusion

The story of Marta Becket and her Amargosa Opera House is not merely an eccentric achievement of a solitary artist. It is a philosophical experiment enacted across the span of an entire human life. What happens when art exists outside society - without audience, without recognition? Does it gain purity, or does it dissolve into silence? Becket's legacy demonstrates that art does not require spectators to exist. It requires faith, an act of continual renewal in which life and creativity become interchangeable. The theater she built is a theater without communication, at least in the conventional sense. Where the classical model presupposes a triad of actor, audience, and feedback, the Amargosa Opera House replaces this with a self-referential form of performance. In this sense, Becket's theater functions as a mirror mechanism of consciousness: the artist becomes both performer and witness. Each performance is not a message to the world, but an act of inner speech, a letter addressed to eternity in which the addressee is the artist herself. Such art does not live in linear time but in the timeless dimension of repetition, where every rehearsal generates a new origin of meaning.

The media transformed Becket's story into a contemporary legend - the "ballerina of the desert," the "woman who painted her audience." Yet beneath this romantic veneer lies a deeper truth: the Amargosa Theater is not an escape, but a homecoming; not a rejection of the world but the construction of a new one. The desert, commonly viewed as a symbol of death, becomes, in Becket's work, a life stage, where nothing interrupts the resonance of a pure gesture. This paradox lies at the heart of her myth: in a place where culture seemingly cannot survive, she created a microcosm of art that is both fully autonomous and profoundly human. Her life contests the belief that creativity depends on external recognition: a single inner light is enough to illuminate the stage.

Philosophically, the Amargosa Opera House can be interpreted as a metaphor for contemporary art after the dissolution of its audience. In an era where attention has become a commodity and spectatorship a metric of success, Becket proposes an alternative: art as an existential necessity. She embodies the principle of total aesthetic autonomy, where ethics and aesthetics converge. Her "theater without spectators" becomes a resistance to the inflationary economy of cultural consumption, a return to art's primordial gesture: to create, even if no one sees.

Over time, the Amargosa Opera House evolved into more than a performance venue. It became an archive of Becket's inner life, a visual diary. Every painted figure, every brushstroke is not a decorative flourish but a fossilized fragment of biography. As Gaston Bachelard wrote, "*The house is a shelter for dreams. Even when we leave it, it continues to live within us."* [Bachelard 1994, 42]. His words seem to foretell the fate of the theater after Becket's death: her murals not only preserve the memory of her performances, but they also continue to look back. Now, living visitors enter the world she once created solely for herself, unaware that it would one day open its doors.

Marta Becket lived to the age of 92, nearly half a century of which she spent on the same stage. She passed away in 2017, but the Amargosa Opera House continues to exist - breathing, cracking, smelling of paint and dust. Each evening, when the sun disappears behind the mountains and the desert wind rushes through the arches, one might imagine the silhouette of a woman returning to the stage - dancing in the void for her painted spectators. Her life stands as a completed metaphor of art as fidelity to oneself. The Amargosa Opera House remains not merely a museum but a testament to the fact that art can survive where everything else dies.

Postscript

I found myself at the Amargosa Opera House entirely by chance on an October evening in 2025, as the sun was sinking behind the desert mountains and everything around me dissolved into endless ochre. I was driving through Death Valley in search of a place to spend the night. The road was empty, the wind pushed sand across the asphalt, and suddenly, like a mirage, this white building appeared with the inscription Amargosa Opera House. I stopped, went inside, and time stopped with me.

Inside, the air smelled of dust, aged paint, and something human and warm. From the walls, hundreds of painted eyes, created by hands that no longer exist, watched me. Yet the spirit of their maker still seemed to observe every visitor. Standing in the center of that hall, I did not feel like I was in a museum or a memorial, but in a living presence as though Marta herself had just stepped backstage and would soon return to bow before her silent spectators.

The silence did not feel like emptiness - it resonated. It held the breath of the stage, the creak of old floorboards, the whisper of frescoes, in which gestures, thoughts, fears, and hopes remained suspended. I realized that the story of Marta Becket is not one of madness or fame. It is a story of inner freedom of the ability to remain true to oneself even when the entire world stops listening. Her theater has no audience, yet it offers eternal proof that art exists as long as someone continues to dance.

When I left the building, the door shut behind me, wooden, fragile, like memory itself. Outside, the desert was falling into darkness. For a moment, I thought I saw a faint silhouette in a window: a woman in a white dress. Perhaps it was only the last reflection of the sun. Or perhaps it was a reminder that sometimes real theaters exist even where there is no one left to applaud.

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Nonverbal theatre: the specificity of expressive means and communication with audience

Bazheev Evgeny
Graduate Student, Institute of Culture and Arts,
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article examines the phenomenon of nonverbal theatre as an autonomous and significant direction within contemporary performing arts. It analyzes the artistic nature of nonverbal theatre, which is based on the deliberate rejection of spoken language as its dominant expressive tool. Attention is given to the specific expressive means that replace the textual dimension: movement, gesture, facial expression, dance, pantomime, visual imagery, sound, and rhythm. The article explores communication processes in nonverbal theatre, which unfold through immediate, pre-logical perception, enabling the overcoming of linguistic and cultural barriers. The study seeks to systematize key aspects of the language of nonverbal theatre and to identify its unique potential for creating universal artistic statements.

Keywords: nonverbal theatre, pantomime, physical theatre, visual theatre, plastic expressiveness, communication, body language, contemporary scenography, metaphorical imagery.

Contemporary theatre is characterized by an ongoing search for new forms and an expansion of expressive boundaries. Within this landscape, nonverbal theatre existing on the periphery of the traditional, word-oriented stage occupies a distinctive position. Its origins reach back to antiquity, to ritual practices, folk performance, and the commedia dell'arte tradition, where gesture and movement often carried greater semantic weight than spoken language [Turner 1969; Schechner 2013]. Yet as a consciously articulated artistic method that deliberately excludes verbal text, nonverbal theatre took shape in the twentieth century under the influence of modernist and postmodern aesthetics [Artaud 2000; Grotowski 2003].

The term nonverbal theatre is umbrella-like and encompasses a wide range of practices: classical pantomime (Marcel Marceau), contemporary mime-drama (Boris Amarantov, Viacheslav Polunin), physical theatre (Pina Bausch), visual theatre, object theatre, and several strands of street performance. What unites these heterogeneous forms is the intentional rejection of spoken text or the reduction of its role to an absolute minimum - onomatopoeia, abstract vocalizations, or fragmentary sonic gestures. This does not imply that such theatre is devoid of meaning. On the contrary, meaning is transposed into a visual-kinesthetic dimension. The primary vehicle of signification becomes not the verbal text but the actor's body and the spatial environment in which it operates [Lecoq 2015; Demez 2012].

The historical trajectory of nonverbal theatre is rooted in the most ancient strata of cultural practice. Early manifestations of theatricality: rituals, ceremonial actions, and shamanic performances were, by their nature, nonverbal or minimally verbal. Their efficacy depended on the precision of gesture, the rhythm of dance, and the expressive intensity of masks and body markings designed to mediate with the transcendent realm [Turner 1969].

Despite the richness of its verbal culture, the theatre of classical antiquity employed choral movement, sculptural poses, stylized masks, and elevated footwear, all of which established a powerful nonverbal dimension. Eastern theatrical traditions such as Japanese Noh and Kabuki, and the Indian Kathakali, demonstrate an exceptionally refined codification of gestural language (mudras), in which each movement is symbolically charged and semantically precise [Barba 2019; Barrault 1963].

In the twentieth century, criticism of the verbal theatre became programmatic. Avant-garde directors and theorists, particularly Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and later Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, challenged the dominance of the literary text and advocated for a theatre anchored in physicality, affective intensity, and the sensory presence of the performer [Artaud 2000; Meyerhold 1968; Grotowski 2003; Brook 1995].

As the theoretical foundations of nonverbal theatre crystallized throughout the twentieth century, several key practitioners began to articulate concrete methods that reoriented performance away from verbal dominance. These innovators sought to construct a new scenic language grounded in corporeality, rhythm, and sensory impact. Their approaches not only challenged the primacy of the dramatic text but also laid the groundwork for an expanded understanding of theatrical expressivity.

Vsevolod Meyerhold, through his system of biomechanics, proposed understanding the actor's craft as the construction of a "structure of the role" built from precise, economical, and highly expressive physical actions. Verbal text receded into the background, giving way to a performer's body organized according to the laws of rhythm, balance, and biomechanical logic [Meyerhold 1968].

Antonin Artaud, in his manifesto on the Theatre of Cruelty, proclaimed the necessity of rejecting the "dictatorship of the text" and restoring to theatre its magical, ritualistic function. He called for the creation of a "metaphysical language" composed of gestures, sounds, cries, light, and plastic forms, a language capable of shocking the audience into confronting essential truths and destabilizing habitual patterns of perception [Artaud 2000].

Étienne Decroux and Jean-Louis Barrault developed the technique of high pantomime, liberating it from anecdotal content and everyday imitation. Their focus shifted from illustrative depiction to the essence of movement itself, its capacity for metaphorical condensation, abstraction, and poetic generalization [Barrault 1963; Lecoq 2015].

If the basic unit of verbal theatre is the spoken line, the fundamental unit of nonverbal theatre is the plastic image. This is a coherent and self-contained fragment of action that carries within it condensed dramaturgical meaning. For example, the image of "a person attempting to climb an invisible slippery wall" may simultaneously signify social ascent, the struggle against internal barriers, or an existential impasse. The plastic image is inherently polysemic and demands interpretative decoding from the spectator [Demez 2012; Barba 2019].

It is important to distinguish between nonverbal theatre and a wordless episode within a dramatic production. In the latter case, nonverbal expression constitutes only one part of the overall structure and remains subordinate to the text. In nonverbal theatre, by contrast, the rejection of spoken language is a conceptual foundation that determines every component of performance from the initial artistic conception to its final embodiment on stage [Schechner 2013; Grotowski 2003].

As nonverbal theatre evolved through the efforts of these innovators, it gradually developed a distinct semiotic system capable of functioning independently from spoken language. This system is not monolithic but composed of several interrelated expressive layers that together form a coherent dramaturgical whole. To understand how nonverbal theatre constructs meaning, it is essential to examine the principal components of its scenic language.

The language of nonverbal theatre is synthetic by nature. It emerges from several interdependent systems that collectively determine the structure of performance.

1. Movement and Gesture as the Basis of Narrative.

The actor's body serves as the primary instrument of storytelling. Movement conveys not only action but also emotion, character, and abstract concepts. Techniques of pantomime, contemporary dance, acrobatics, and butoh create a multilayered physical vocabulary. Gesture is frequently heightened, metaphorical, and symbolically charged [Demez 2012; Lecoq 2015; Barba 2019; Hijikata 1977].

2. Facial Expression and Psychophysical Technique.

The close-up of cinema finds its theatrical analogue in heightened concentration on the actor's face and body. Facial expression becomes a powerful instrument for conveying inner states. In classical pantomime, however, where the white face stylizes expression, psychological individuality cedes place to universalized semiotic clarity [Barrault 1963; Lecoq 2015].

3. Visual Imagery and Scenography.

The visual component: costume, makeup, props, and lighting serve not a decorative but a meaning-forming function in nonverbal theatre. Objects often acquire symbolic significance. Scenography tends toward metaphor, creating emotional or mental landscapes rather than literal settings. Lighting becomes an analogue of intonation, shaping perception and emotional dynamics [Brook 1995; Meyerhold 1968; Kantor 1990].

4. Sound and Rhythm.

The absence of spoken language does not entail the absence of sound. Music, noise, and rhythmic patterns produced by the actor's body or objects form an auditory score that structures the performance [Schechner 2013; Artaud 2000].

Because the expressive systems of nonverbal theatre operate independently of spoken language, they reshape not only the structure of performance but also the spectator's mode of perception. The audience must sense, intuit, and embody the dramaturgy before interpreting it intellectually. This shift opens access to deeper, pre-verbal layers of cognition and emotion. The perceptual mechanism of a nonverbal performance differs fundamentally from that of a text-based production. Deprived of verbal narration, the spectator activates intuitive, associative, and empathic channels of perception [Lecoq 2015; Demez 2012].

Overcoming Barriers. Nonverbal theatre transcends linguistic and cultural boundaries, drawing on universal emotional responses shared across societies [Barba 2019; Schechner 2013].

Co-Creation. The spectator becomes an active co-creator of meaning, constructing interpretations based on personal experience and associative imagination [Brook 1995].

Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Nonverbal theatre frequently appeals to archetypes and the imagery of the collective unconscious [Jung 1969]. Through metaphor and symbol, it reaches pre-verbal layers of the psyche [Artaud 2000].

Mirror Neurons and Cognitive Science. The power of nonverbal theatre can be partly explained by mirror neurons, which fire both when acting and when observing oneself. These fosters embodied empathy and pre-verbal understanding [Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004; Gallese, 2001].

Beyond Art. Social and Psychological Functions. Nonverbal theatre becomes a tool for social and psychological engagement.

Inclusive Theatre. It supports inclusive participation, including performers with hearing or speech impairments and those with cognitive differences [Schechner 2013].

Theatre Therapy. Nonverbal techniques support trauma work, PTSD treatment, and the expression of emotions that bypass verbal defenses [Grotowski 2003; van der Kolk 2014].

Intercultural Communication. As a universal language, nonverbal theatre bridges cultural differences and fosters mutual understanding [Brook 1995; Barba 2019].

Building on these mechanisms, contemporary practitioners continue to expand the expressive and communicative potential of nonverbal theatre. One of the most compelling figures in the post-Soviet landscape is the Lithuanian director Giedrius Mackevicius.

Mackevicius's productions represent a philosophy grounded in the universal language of emotion [Fischer-Lichte 2019]. His work appeals to archetypes and fundamental human states: love, fear, loneliness, joy, and longing, evoking pre-verbal emotional strata shared across cultures [Jung 1969; Chatterjea 2022].

In his theatre, music is a full-fledged character, shaping rhythm and emotional landscapes. Actors are virtuosos of bodily expressiveness; their movements function as metaphor, symbol, and embodied thought [Murray and Keefe 2016].

In The Emperor's New Clothes, themes of hypocrisy and social masking unfold through grotesque, marionette-like plasticity [Lehmann 2016]. Scenography and lighting extend

characters' emotional states, creating universal spaces and sculpting symbolic focal points through light [Brook 1995; Carlson 2022].

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Mackevicius's work is the active role of the spectator, who constructs individualized meanings from the performance.

Thus, nonverbal theatre constitutes a developed artistic system with its own rich language. Its specificity lies in shifting dramaturgical gravity from the verbal to the visual-plastic and sonic-rhythmic dimensions. It speaks through the body's semiotics through movement, rhythm, affect, and subconscious perception. The renunciation of spoken text reveals the ritual origins of theatre and restores holistic perception to the spectator, combining logic with sensory immediacy [Fischer-Lichte 2019; Schechner 2013].

Today, the universality of nonverbal language, its direct emotional resonance, and its ability to activate imaginative participation make it one of the most dynamic and promising directions in contemporary performing arts. The rise of embodied cognition, intercultural performance, and inclusive practices further underscores its relevance.

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From Invisible Barrier to Interactive Interface: The Fourth Wall in Theatre and Cinema

Piskovatskaya Polina
Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia

Abstract: The article focuses on the transformation of the technique of breaking the fourth wall in contemporary theatre and cinema. Traditionally associated with Bertolt Brecht's use of direct address to create critical distance, this device has taken on new functions in modern practice. Drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of post-dramatic theatre, the study analyzes how breaking the fourth wall has shifted from a tool of distancing to a means of interactive engagement. Three current forms are explored: direct address in film, immersive theatre that dissolves the boundary between stage and audience, and interactive cinema that allows viewers to influence the narrative. The analysis demonstrates that today this device is used not to distance the spectator but to establish a closer, more personalized connection. The article concludes that the fourth wall has evolved from a separating barrier into an interface of interaction.

Keywords: fourth wall, contemporary theatre, interactive cinema, immersive theatre, Bertolt Brecht, post-dramatic theatre, audience perception, interactivity.

The fourth wall is a foundational concept in performance, describing the invisible boundary that traditionally separates performers from their audience. In a proscenium stage setting, for example, actors behave as if an imaginary wall at the front of the stage keeps them in a self-contained world, unseen by spectators. This convention emerged to bolster the suspension of disbelief - audiences become voyeurs of an onstage reality, while actors remain fully immersed in the dramatic fiction. Over time, however, the fourth wall has undergone a profound transformation. What began as a rigid barrier ensuring theatrical illusion has, in contemporary practice, often been reconfigured into a porous interface that actively engages spectators. This article examines the theoretical foundations of the fourth wall, traces its historical evolution, and analyzes its contemporary functions in theatre and cinema. In doing so, it charts how the fourth wall's role has

shifted from preserving an artistic illusion to enabling participatory and interactive forms of art. The argument builds on performance studies, media theory, and aesthetics to show that the fourth wall's metamorphosis from an implicit barrier to an explicit interface reflects broader changes in the relationship between artists and audiences in modern culture.

The idea of maintaining an imaginary wall between audience and actors was first articulated in the eighteenth century as theatre sought greater realism. French philosopher and dramatist Denis Diderot is often credited with formulating this concept. In a 1758 essay on dramatic art, Diderot advised performers to "imagine a huge wall across the front of the stage, separating you from the audience, and behave exactly as if the curtain had never risen" [Diderot 1957]. By ignoring the audience's presence, actors could more faithfully simulate real life, thereby intensifying the authenticity of the performance. The audience, for its part, would accept a voyeuristic role, observing the action from the other side of an unseen divide (a dynamic later described as the audience becoming "a kind of voyeur" to the onstage events.

In the 19th century, the fourth wall convention became a hallmark of Realist and Naturalist theatre. Playwrights and directors strove to craft the stage as an enclosed slice of reality, often using a three-walled room set (a box set) with the audience positioned where the missing fourth wall would be. The actors behaved as if oblivious to spectators, undertaking everyday life on stage with no direct acknowledgement of those watching. This approach reflected a broader 19th-century aesthetic of illusionism, aiming to make the theatre experience as lifelike as possible [Wallis and Shepherd 1998, 214]. Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski, a key figure in Naturalist performance, insisted on the integrity of the fourth wall in acting practice. Stanislavski trained actors to achieve a state of "public solitude," in which they could perform "as if alone in public," utterly focused on the fictional world of the play and unperturbed by the presence of onlookers [Stanislavski 1947, 47]. By narrowing the actor's attention to the world on stage and not the auditorium, Stanislavski argued, the actor gains a "*particular power over the audience,*" paradoxically drawing spectators in by steadfastly ignoring them. The fourth wall, then, was seen as essential to creating a compelling, realistic performance that audiences could believe in. Critics and theorists of the period described this invisible wall as "transparent" from the viewers' side but effectively opaque from the actors' side, ensuring a one-way flow of observation [Bell 2008, 203]. Through this convention, the audience's role was to observe in silence, emotionally invested but physically separate, while the actors could carry on as if in a private space. The result, as one critic

later put it, was "*that invisible scrim that forever separates the audience from the stage"* [Canby 1987]. In summary, the early theoretical foundation of the fourth wall rested on ideals of dramatic illusion and immersion: it was a protective barrier that sealed the artwork away from reality, aiming to intensify spectators' engagement by positioning them as unseen witnesses rather than active participants.

Although the fourth wall became codified in 19th-century theatre, it was by no means an immutable rule in the longer view of drama history. In fact, much of classical and pre-modern theatre had freely "broken" any notional barrier between actors and audience. In Ancient Greek theatre and Shakespeare's Renaissance stage, for instance, direct address to the audience was common through choruses, asides, or soliloquies, and spectators were acknowledged as present. These practices faded with the rise of the proscenium stage and theatrical realism, but they provided a precedent for later artists to challenge the convention of the fourth wall. By the early 20th century, as theatrical modernism took hold, many practitioners began breaking the fourth wall to create new artistic effects and to redefine the audience's role.

One of the most influential figures in this shift was Bertolt Brecht**,** the German playwright and director who developed the theory of Epic Theatre in the 1920s–30s. Brecht believed that conventional realist theatre, with its intact fourth wall and engrossed audiences, produced an uncritical emotional identification that dulled the spectator's capacity for thought. To counter this, he famously employed the *Verfremdungseffekt* or "alienation effect," deliberately interrupting the illusion of reality to jolt the audience into a reflective state. In Brecht's productions, actors would sometimes step out of character, address the crowd directly, or otherwise remind viewers that they were watching a fabricated story. As Brecht described, "*the artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him… The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place*" [Brecht 1964, 91]. By shattering the invisible wall, Brecht transformed the audience from passive onlookers into conscious critics of the drama's themes and messages. The audience, no longer allowed to be "unseen," was made self-aware and even complicit in the theatrical event's meaning. Brecht's techniques, from having actors address viewers with narrative captions to exposing the stage machinery, broke the barrier to estrange and engage**.** The spectator's detachment, he argued, would provoke intellectual engagement and social critique [Brecht 1964, 85–88].

Around the same mid-century period, other avant-garde and modernist movements likewise eroded or played with the fourth wall. Luigi Pirandello in Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921) famously blurred the line between performance and reality by involving the audience's presumed presence as part of the play's internal story. Thornton Wilder's Our Town (1938) opened with a Stage Manager character directly addressing the audience and continually reminding them of the theatrical artifice. These meta-theatrical strategies made the boundary itself a subject of artistic exploration. Antonin Artaud, in his manifesto The Theater and Its Double (1938), went even further in calling for a theatre that would eliminate the barrier separating stage and auditorium. Artaud advocated immersive, ritualistic performances that bombard the senses of the spectator, dissolving distance and breaking through the "wall" of complacency, in effect, assaulting the audience to provoke a deeper emotional response [Artaud 1958]. Although Artaud did not use the term "fourth wall" explicitly, his vision demanded a space where performers and audience shared the same air, without any protective separation of a proscenium or conventional etiquette. The radical happenings and experimental theatre of the 1960s continued this trajectory. Pioneers of performance art and environmental theatre, from Allan Kaprow's Happenings to Richard Schechner's Performance Group, staged events in which the audience found itself incorporated into the performance environment. Schechner's Environmental Theater particularly insisted on flexible space and a mingling of actor and spectator. He formulated "*Six Axioms of Environmental Theatre,*" one of which declared that "*all the space is used for performance; all the space is used for audience,*" abolishing any fixed frontality or wall between them [Schechner 1973, 15]. This principle meant that performers could emerge anywhere and spectators might be scattered or mobile within the performance area, a literal breakdown of the architectural fourth wall. By dismantling the barrier, these experimental approaches invited audiences to be physically and intellectually co-present with the performers in the same unified space.

In the realm of cinema and television, a parallel evolution occurred. Early narrative film inherited the theatrical convention that actors should not look into the camera lens - essentially treating the camera as the fourth wall, with viewers peering through it. For much of the classical Hollywood era, direct address to the film audience was rare, used only occasionally in comedies or avant-garde works. However, as film theory and style developed, filmmakers began to intentionally break the fourth wall on screen for specific effects. One early case was the 1918 silent film Men Who Have Made Love to Me, in which the star Mary MacLane interrupts the action to

speak to the audience. Later, comedic performers like Oliver Hardy and Groucho Marx turned sly glances or quips to the camera into a signature device, essentially winking at the audience to draw them into the joke. By the 1960s and ’70s, breaking the fourth wall had become a conscious stylistic choice in cinema: directors such as Woody Allen famously have characters speak directly to the viewer (as in Annie Hall, 1977, where the protagonist addresses the audience to explain his feelings). Such moments disrupt the narrative illusion to create intimacy or humor. Film scholars note that *“direct address in fiction cinema”* ultimately became an identifiable technique that challenges the viewer’s passive role [Brown 2012]. By the late 20th century, a wide range of films and TV shows played with fourth wall breaks, from the self-referential comedy of Mel Brooks to the meta-documentary style of The Office. What was once considered a transgression of narrative form is now “*widely celebrated for skillful use*” in engaging the audience [Zelazko 2025]. In summary, over the course of the 20th century, artists in both theatre and screen media increasingly broke the fourth wall, sometimes to provoke critical distance (as with Brecht), sometimes to generate new forms of humor or reflexivity, and often to simply remind the audience of their role as active witnesses to an artwork. By violating the invisible barrier, creators opened a new realm of creative possibilities and set the stage for even more interactive configurations of the audience–performance relationship.

In contemporary theatre, cinema, and related media, the concept of the fourth wall has further evolved in tandem with trends toward interactivity, immersion, and audience participation**.** Rather than functioning only as a one-way window for passive spectatorship, the notional “wall” can become a two-way membrane, an interface through which audiences and performers communicate and influence each other. Several currents in modern performance illustrate this transformation of the fourth wall from a strict barrier into a porous boundary enabling participation.

One key development is the rise of participatory theatre and performance art, which explicitly invite audience members to become part of the performance. Pioneered by figures like Augusto Boal in the 1970s, participatory theatre rejects the spectator/actor divide as politically and artistically limiting. Boal’s influential Theatre of the Oppressed introduced the idea of the “*spectator,”* a participant who is both spectator and actor, actively intervening in the theatrical action [Boal 1979]. In Boal’s Forum Theatre events, for example, viewers were encouraged to stop the performance and step onstage to improvise solutions to social problems dramatized in the play.

By literally breaking the physical fourth wall – inviting the audience onto the stage Boal transformed the wall into an open doorway**.** "In the Theatre of the Oppressed, the audience becomes active, such that as 'spectators,' they explore, show, analyze, and transform the reality in which they are living," Boal explains [Boal 1979, 126]. The formerly passive audience is "humanized" and empowered to "act in all its fullness" rather than observe in silence. Here, the fourth wall's disappearance is not just a stylistic quirk but a democratic recalibration of theatre as an interface for dialogue and co-creation. Boal's techniques have since influenced community-based theatre, educational drama, and political performance art worldwide, all of which utilize audience interaction as a core element. The implicit wall separating art from life is dismantled so that art can directly engage with real social participants.

Even in less overtly political contexts, contemporary theatre frequently experiments with immersive and interactive forms that reconfigure the audience's role. Immersive theatre**,** as popularized by companies like Punch-drunk in the 2000s, abandons the proscenium stage and traditional seating entirely. Audiences at an immersive production (such as Sleep No More*,* an immersive adaptation of Macbeth) may wander through a multi-room performance environment, encountering actors and scenes in any order. In such a setting, the concept of a fourth wall is virtually obsolete: the spectators are inside the world of the performance, often literally inches away from the actors, sometimes even addressed or touched by them. As theatre scholar Josephine Machon observes, immersive performances create "immediacy and intimacy" by dissolving the spatial and psychological distance between audience and action [Machon 2013, 21]. The audience member's presence and choices can influence the unfolding of the piece; for instance, an actor might whisper a secret to one chosen viewer, or an audience group might be tasked with solving a puzzle that affects the narrative. The result is a theatre experience where the audience is not behind a wall at all, but rather embedded within the performance**.** In other words, the fourth wall has been refashioned into an interactive platform: it is as if the audience has climbed through that invisible wall and joined the actors on the other side. The immersive theatre trend underscores how far the participatory impulse has come; as one commentary notes, "in an immersive theatre, everything is an integral part of the author's idea… the audience is placed inside the fourth wall" [White 2013, 44]. This placement turns the audience into co-creators of meaning, blurring the line between spectator and performer.

Cinema and new media have also reconceived the fourth wall in interactive terms. While mainstream film and TV still mostly keep the fourth wall intact, emerging forms like interactive cinema, virtual reality (VR) storytelling, and video games invite the "user" to become an active agent within the narrative. In video games, for example, the screen is sometimes described as a fourth wall that the game can play with, addressing the player directly or acknowledging the real-world interface. The concept of breaking the fourth wall has thus expanded to mean any occasion when a fictional work recognizes its audience or invites the audience's direct input. A striking example in cinema is the film The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985), in which a movie character literally steps off the movie screen into the theater audience's reality. This fantastical scenario is a metaphor for the collapse of the wall between fiction and the viewer. In interactive film or VR experiences, the collapse is more literal: the viewer might decide the course of the story (as in Black Mirror: Bandersnatch, 2018, an interactive film where audiences choose actions for the protagonist via the interface), or the viewer might virtually inhabit the story world through a headset. In these cases, the fourth wall becomes a digital interface - a medium through which the audience not only watches but also acts. Media theorists Bolter and Grusin have noted that digital media often seek to erase the perceptual boundary between the user and the content, a process they call "*immediacy*." When applied to narrative forms, this immediacy is essentially the eradication of the fourth wall: the audience's role changes from external observer to participant operating from within the narrative framework.

In the sphere of performance art and installation art**,** the notion of the fourth wall as interface is equally salient. Contemporary artists frequently create works that only come to life through audience interaction, thereby externalizing the art to the space between artist and audience**.** Claire Bishop, surveying the history of participatory art, argues that since the 1960s, artists have increasingly treated the audience's interactive involvement as the artwork's primary material [Bishop 2012]. The result is an art of "participatory experiences" where the exchange between performer (or artwork) and participant is central. In these scenarios, any figurative fourth wall has not just been broken but completely removed: the audience is, in effect, a collaborator. For instance, in an interactive performance installation, a viewer might enter a booth and have a conversation with a performer or make choices that generate unique artistic content. The audience interface (be it a conversation, a touchscreen, or a physical co-creation process) is the artwork. The fourth wall in such contexts functions as a permeable membrane, or indeed an interface for

feedback loops - the audience's responses directly shape the unfolding performance, which in turn responds back to the audience. Performance theorists have noted that this dynamic creates a new aesthetic of responsiveness and co-authorship, aligning with broader trends in participatory culture [White 2013, 89–90]. The spectator's traditional passivity is thoroughly challenged: as Gareth White puts it, the audience member in participatory theatre "stands on equal terms with the performers, each influencing the outcome" [White 2013, 112]. The "wall" has truly become a conversation.

It is important to recognize that even as these innovative forms flourish, the classical fourth wall convention is not uniformly obsolete. Traditional theatrical productions and many films continue to employ the invisible barrier to great effect, reminding us that immersion and interaction are artistic tools to be used judiciously depending on intent. Nonetheless, the contemporary landscape of performance and media is remarkable for the diversity of ways it manipulates the fourth wall. Artists now treat the audience's awareness and involvement as a variable that can be modulated, from total absorption behind an intact fourth wall, to playful oscillation when a character occasionally breaks the wall, to complete elimination of the wall in immersive or interactive works. In essence, the fourth wall has been reimagined less as a structural absolute and more as a spectrum or interface. Modern audiences are also highly attuned to this concept: they understand the convention enough that breaking it becomes a meaningful event, and in participatory settings, viewers come prepared to step through the fourth wall when invited. The boundary between art and life, spectator and performer, has thus become one of the creative frontiers of 21st-century performance.

The journey of the fourth wall from an invisible architectural fiction to an interactive artistic interface reflects a wider evolution in cultural attitudes toward spectatorship. Originally conceived by Diderot and embraced by 19th-century realists to protect the integrity of the fictional world, the fourth wall established a relationship of distance and hierarchy: the stage or screen was the realm of art, and the audience's role was to appreciate that art from the outside, in respectful silence. Over the past century, however, the sanctity of that invisible wall has been repeatedly questioned and punctured. Early 20th-century modernists broke the fourth wall to critique reality or engage the audience's critical mind; late 20th-century artists took this further, dismantling the wall to either shock audiences out of complacency or seduce them into new forms of engagement. Today, in an era of interactive media and participatory art, the once-rigid barrier has in many

contexts melted into an open doorway or been repurposed as a stage on which audience and performer meet. The fourth wall, in short, is no longer only something to be maintained or broken - it can be extended, shared, or redefined**.** Audiences might find themselves co-narrating a story, influencing outcomes, or even performing alongside professionals, all of which speak to an expanded notion of what the audience-art interface can be.

Crucially, this transformation does not mean that the traditional fourth wall is irrelevant. Instead, it highlights that the presence or absence of the fourth wall is a conscious artistic choice, a tool that creators wield to shape the audience's experience. In a serious drama film, maintaining the fourth wall can deepen emotional immersion; in a satirical play, breaking it can generate ironic distance or humor; in an immersive installation, removing it entirely can produce a sense of empowerment or personal investment for the participant. The fourth wall thus has become a dynamic concept. Its function can range from barrier to bridge: it can either insulate the performance to heighten illusion or serve as the contact surface that invites audience input. As performance scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann observed in describing post-dramatic theatre**,** contemporary works often blur the boundary between performer and spectator, treating the live performance as an event of shared presence rather than a one-directional presentation [Lehmann 2006]. This aligns with broader aesthetic trends that value experience, agency, and communal meaning-making in art.

In conclusion, the evolution of the fourth wall epitomizes the shifting paradigms of theatre and media from the modern era to the present. What was once a metaphorical wall ensuring audience separation has, in many progressive practices, become an interactive threshold - the place where audience and artwork meet and influence one another. From the viewpoint of performance and media theory, this shift underscores a move from spectatorship to participation**,** from observing art as an object to engaging with art as a dialogic process. The fourth wall's theoretical foundations in illusion and realism have not only been preserved in certain contexts but also inverted in others, yielding rich new modes of artistic expression. Ultimately, whether upheld or demolished, the fourth wall continues to frame the most fundamental questions of performance: What is the role of the audience? And what is the relationship between art and reality? In grappling with these questions, artists will keep building, breaking, and reimagining the fourth wall, that ever-flexible membrane between worlds as both a barrier and an interface in the evolving drama of human creativity.

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Producing Ethics: Balancing Commercial Success, Creative Freedom, and Social Responsibility

Zaynullina Dina

Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,

Moscow City

Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article examines the ethical implications of contemporary media production, concentrating on the intricate balance between commercial viability, artistic freedom, and social responsibility. In an era defined by hyper-competition, digital transformation, and heightened audience awareness, the role of the producer has evolved into a mediator navigating a "triangle of contradictions." Drawing on case studies from film and television, including Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*,* Les Misérables*,* and Squid Game, the study analyzes dominant production models: market-driven, auteur-centric, socially missioned, and integrative. The paper advocates for an integrated approach in which producers act not merely as financiers or facilitators, but as cultural stewards capable of aligning economic logic with ethical practice and artistic integrity. Emphasizing tools such as transparent budgeting, script consulting, and inclusive representation, the article advocates for producing as a core competence of ethical governance in 21st-century media systems.

Keywords: creative autonomy, cultural industries, social responsibility, media economics, cinema, production, show

In today's hyper-competitive, capital-intensive media industry, the role of the producer has expanded far beyond mere project management. With the shift to streaming platforms and digital distribution, producers find themselves at the nexus of conflicting imperatives: a "triangle of contradictions", whose vertices are commercial success**,** creative autonomy, and social responsibility. Each of these imperatives exerts pressure on the producer, and an overemphasis on any single one can lead to ethical and practical vulnerabilities in media production.

Rather than choosing one corner of this triangle at the expense of the others, modern producers face the challenge of integrating all three. This calls for a reimagined ethical framework of producing, one that can harmonize profit motives with artistic integrity and with accountability to society. To explore this, I first examine the three imperatives in tension and then evaluate four models of producer behavior: three traditional models and a fourth integrative model that seeks balance. Case studies from film and television will illustrate how a balanced approach to producing can achieve both ethical and commercial success in the contemporary media ecosystem.

The first and most uncompromising pressure on producers is the economic imperative. Film and music production are notoriously high-risk ventures. As entertainment economist Harold L. Vogel observes, the media business operates under extreme uncertainty; seemingly "sure-bet" big-budget films with bankable stars can flop, while low-budget titles with no stars sometimes skyrocket to success. In other words, no one can reliably predict which project will be a hit or a failure in advance. This inherent riskiness forces producers and investors to devise strategies to minimize uncertainty**.** One industry response has been to favor familiar formulas: sequels, franchises, reboots, and adaptations of well-known titles under the assumption that a built-in audience makes success more predictable. As media scholar David Hesmondhalgh notes, such "formatting" of cultural production is essentially a defensive reaction by capital to the unpredictability of audience demand [Hesmondhalgh 2019, 32]. By sticking to proven formulas and genres, studios hope to reduce variance and avoid the worst losses.

The preference for formula and standardization has deep theoretical roots. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their classic critique of the culture industry, argued that under capitalism, the production of art becomes routinized and stripped of its unique "aura." Culture is treated like any other mass-produced commodity, standardized products engineered to satisfy predictable consumer wants rather than to enlighten or challenge. As they put it, the culture industry's aim is not true edification but the perpetuation of consumption: churning out variations of the same pleasurable forms to keep audiences buying. For today's producer, this analysis underscores that the commercial imperative is systemic and not merely personal "greed." Structural market pressures are pushing every project toward safe bets and away from originality.

In practice, the economic imperative manifests in what Anita Elberse calls the "blockbuster" strategy. In her analysis of entertainment economics, Elberse demonstrates that concentrating resources on a few potential blockbusters: big-budget productions with broad

appeal, is often more financially rational for major studios than spreading investment across many smaller projects. A single hit can be so profitable that it offsets numerous flops, lifting the company's bottom line. By contrast, trying to hedge bets with many modest films might increase the risk that none of them achieves breakout success. This logic leads studios to pour money into franchise films, tentpole releases, and star-driven vehicles, the kind of high-concept projects that marketing departments love. As one Hollywood executive summarized, the goal is overall profitability: a blockbuster that connects with audiences globally can subsidize other failures.

From an ethical standpoint, however, this "high concept" approach raises concerns. Media scholar Justin Wyatt famously defined high-concept films as those built around a simple, marketable premise, the "hook" - often reducible to a single image or tagline. Such films prioritize broad appeal and merchandising opportunities (the "look" and the "book"*)* over nuance. Studios employing this model may even alter a film's content based on market research: for example, test screenings and focus groups are used to ensure endings or plot points maximize audience satisfaction, sometimes resulting in tragic endings being replaced by crowd-pleasing "happy endings". Industry journalist Edward Jay Epstein documented instances of studios doing exactly this - modifying a film after negative feedback from preview audiences [Epstein 2010, 156]. The ethical risk is that stories get sanitized or cliché in pursuit of mass approval, and genuine creative vision is subordinated to what tests well. In the long term, over-reliance on formulas can alienate discerning audiences and lead to cultural stagnation. The critical drubbing of certain formulaic blockbusters (e.g., 2017's Justice League, a film widely seen as compromised by committee-driven reshoots) exemplifies how a purely market-driven approach can generate reputational damage for both producer and studio.

Balanced against commerce is the second imperative: the defense of creative freedom and artistic integrity. The cultural value of media products ultimately derives from the talent and vision of their creators: writers, directors, musicians, and other artists. Richard E. Caves, in his economic analysis of creative industries, articulated the principle of "art for art's sake." Creative workers gain intrinsic satisfaction from the process of making art and care deeply about the integrity of their work [Caves 2000]. They often continue laboring on projects even with little prospect of commercial reward, driven by passion and artistic "utility" rather than profit. Consequently, they tend to react poorly to external interference that they perceive as diluting or distorting their vision. Caves notes that for many artists, interventions from "humdrum" commercial partners are at best

a necessary evil; at worst, such interventions are experienced as a violation of artistic integrity [Caves 2000].

Nowhere is the primacy of artistic vision more strongly asserted than in the Auteur Theory of cinema. First popularized in the 1960s by critic Andrew Sarris, auteur theory posits that the director is the author of a film, imprinting it with personal style and thematic consistency [Sarris 1962]. In this view, the mark of great cinema is the unfettered expression of the director's creative personality. Any force that compromises that expression, be it studio mandates, producer edits, or market-driven changes, is cast as antithetical to art. Under the classical auteur paradigm, a producer who demands script changes or softer endings for commercial reasons becomes a kind of artistic antagonist. Indeed, Hollywood history is rife with tales of visionary directors battling profit-minded producers or studio executives over final cut and creative decisions.

Despite these tensions, many contemporary scholars and industry veterans argue that the producer need not be the enemy of creativity; instead, the producer can serve as a vital ally and protector of the creative process. Rather than the old caricature of the producer as a philistine "money man" chopping up auteurs' films, the ideal is a creative partnership between producer and artist. Some researchers describe the producer's role as providing a "protective buffer" between fragile creative work and the harsh demands of finance and logistics. In other words, a good producer absorbs external pressures: budget constraints, investor anxieties, and marketing considerations, and translates or mitigates them so that the creative team can work with as little compromise as possible. This conception aligns with what one might call a "creative producer" or "producer-as-midwife" model. For example, Sherry B. Ortner's ethnography of independent filmmakers observes that indie producers often take on the "dirty work" of dealmaking, fundraising, and managing practical matters specifically to free the director to focus on artistry [Ortner 2013, 60–63]. Such a producer acts as a facilitator or enabler, valuing the director's vision and shielding it from unnecessary tampering.

Film historian Jonas Ryan famously likened a great producer-director collaboration to a creative union [Ryan 2017, 14]. In this union, the producer's business acumen complements the director's imagination. The producer doesn't impose creative decisions but rather provides guidance, resources, and problem-solving that allow the auteur's ideas to flourish within real-world constraints. We see echoes of this approach in accounts of producer-director teams like Bérénice Bejo and Michel Hazanavicius, or Emma Thomas and Christopher Nolan, where the producer is

deeply involved in script development and production choices yet remains aligned with the director's core vision. In practice, this means a producer might argue to financiers on behalf of an unconventional storytelling choice, or schedule extra shooting days to get a scene right, even if it strains the budget, to preserve the film's artistic quality. The ethics of creativity**,** from the producer's perspective, thus centers on respecting the authorial process, ensuring that commercial considerations do not entirely eclipse the creator's intent.

The third, and most rapidly evolving, pressure on producers is the imperative of social responsibility**.** In the age of media ubiquity, producers are increasingly recognized not just as content managers but as cultural gatekeepers - figures who decide which stories are told and how they are told. In classic media sociology, a gatekeeper controls the flow of information to the public, and this role carries inherent ethical obligations. Pamela Shoemaker and Tim Vos, in their Gatekeeping Theory, emphasize that decisions about content are never neutral; gatekeepers effectively construct reality by filtering and framing the world for audiences [Shoemaker & Vos 2009, 21]. A producer green-lighting a project or making editorial choices is engaging in this act of mediated reality-construction.

With this power comes responsibility for a film or show's social impact. Producers today must consider how their content might influence attitudes, reinforce or challenge stereotypes, and affect various communities. A central concern is the ethics of representation means how people, especially marginalized groups, are portrayed on screen. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that media representations actively produce meanings that shape how society understands groups and issues. Stereotypes in media can crystallize into "common sense" beliefs about those who are stereotyped [Hall 1997, 24]. For example, if Hollywood repeatedly depicts a particular ethnicity or gender in a derogatory or one-dimensional way, it not only reflects bias but also potentially reinforces that bias among audiences. Producers, as the ones approving scripts and casting, bear responsibility for avoiding harmful misrepresentations. They are increasingly expected to practice due diligence in this area: consulting with communities, hiring sensitivity readers or cultural consultants, and striving for authenticity.

The social imperative has given rise to what some call "impact producing." This approach frames the producer's role in quasi-activist terms. The goal of a project under this model is not primarily profit but social change - raising awareness, shifting public discourse, or catalyzing action on an issue. In the documentary world, especially, the notion of an impact producer has

gained traction [Aufderheide 2012, 45]. Such a producer works to ensure a film not only reaches audiences but reaches the right audiences in the right way to achieve a desired impact (e.g., partnering with NGOs, arranging issue-based screenings, guiding post-release advocacy campaigns). Some narrative filmmakers likewise adopt a mission-driven stance, using storytelling to intervene in social debates or correct injustices in representation.

On one hand, a socially conscious producer can bring important stories to light and model ethical practices (for instance, inclusive hiring or eco-friendly sets). On the other hand, there are risks: a film overtly tailored for social impact can veer into didacticism or propaganda, sacrificing narrative complexity for a "message." Additionally, even well-intentioned impact films can inadvertently exploit their subjects. Documentary producers, for example, face ethical dilemmas around gaining the trust of vulnerable participants and depicting them with dignity. Kate Nash has noted the paradox that in striving to give voice to the voiceless, filmmakers may end up using those voices instrumentally for an agenda [Nash 2018, 112]. A producer must therefore navigate between advocacy and artistry, between serving a cause and respecting the autonomy of those whose stories are told.

In sum, the social imperative calls for producers to be ethically reflective about both content and production processes. Questions of representation, diversity, inclusion, and audience impact are now integral to the producer's job. Filmmaker Ava DuVernay's creed of "If your dream only includes you, it's too small" exemplifies how creators and producers are rethinking success: it's not just about box office, but also about cultural contribution and expanding whose stories get told.

Models of Producing: Three Traditions and a Fourth Way

The interaction of the above imperatives yields a spectrum of producing models. We can distinguish three idealized models, each corresponding to one dominant imperative, and then consider an emerging integrative model that seeks balance.

1. ***Market-Driven Model: "Commercial Dictate."***

In the market-driven model**,** financial success is the paramount goal. The producer operates as the guardian of investor interests**,** often functioning as a proxy for the studio or financiers. Here, the producer's decision-making is guided almost exclusively by commercial metrics: return on investment (ROI), audience testing, and market research. The producer holds final cut authority**,**

or at least significant veto power over creative decisions, to ensure the product remains maximally marketable. Any element deemed risky or insufficiently "mainstream" is likely to be modified or excised.

A hallmark of this model is the pursuit of High Concept projects. These are films built around a simple, catchy premise that can be succinctly pitched and easily marketed across multiple platforms. Marketing considerations permeate the production process. For example, story pitches might be evaluated by how well they lend themselves to a 30-second trailer or a fast-food toy tie-in. Justin Wyatt described High Concept as emphasizing "the look, the hook, and the book", i.e., striking visuals, a clear selling point, and potential merchandising tie-ins. The producer in this model actively cultivates these aspects.

Another feature is the outsized role of test audiences and focus groups in shaping content. Rather than using focus groups as a mere feedback tool, market-driven producers may treat audience responses as binding directives. Film historian Edward J. Epstein recounts cases where studios, after lukewarm test screenings, demanded that filmmakers alter endings (say, from a downbeat finale to a happy one) to satisfy what preview audiences appeared to want. In one notorious instance, a tragic ending of a thriller was completely reshot into a more upbeat conclusion because focus groups disliked the original outcome. The ethos here is profoundly utilitarian: the end (audience approval and profit) justifies the means (intervening in the creative process as needed).

The commercial dictate model's pitfalls include the instrumentalization of talent and the production of vapid or stereotypical content. Writers and directors may feel like hired hands rather than artists, leading to poor morale and potentially a brain drain of top creatives away from such environments. Furthermore, playing too safely by recycling formulas can result in cultural products that lack authenticity and reinforce stereotypes (since familiar tropes often lean on shorthand and cliché). While this model can yield short-term hits, in the long run it may erode a studio's brand value - audiences eventually tire of formulaic fare, and a reputation for prioritizing profit over quality can be hard to shake. A case in point is Justice League (2017): conceived as a blockbuster, it suffered from mid-production shifts aimed at a broader appeal and ended up pleasing neither critics nor the core fanbase, causing public backlash and calls for the "Snyder Cut" to restore the original vision. The lesson is that overriding creative logic with commercial algorithms can backfire, hurting both profits and credibility.

2. Auteur-Centric Model: "Creative Underground."

At the opposite end is the auteur-centric model**,** typical of independent cinema and prestige creative endeavors. In this model, artistic vision reigns supreme. The producer's role is deliberately subordinated to that of the author (usually the director, but it could be a showrunner or writer in television). We might imagine the hierarchy flipped**:** the director is the general, the producer a trusted lieutenant ensuring the general's orders are executed.

Sherry Ortner's study of American independent film provides an illustrative description. She found that indie producers often see themselves as facilitators who take on the "grunt work": budgeting, scheduling, dealing with agents and distributors, specifically so the director doesn't have to. One producer profile described their job as making sure "the director has everything they need to make their movie." This ethos is akin to a service mentality in producing success, which is defined not by the box office or awards per se, but by whether the finished film authentically realizes the director's intent. Financing structures in this model also differ. Instead of ROI and market share, the currency might be what Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic capital" - the prestige, critical acclaim, festival awards, and artistic reputation a project can garner [Bourdieu 1996, 142]. An independent producer may justify taking on a financially risky film because it has a chance at Sundance or Cannes, which could confer honor and future opportunities even if the film sees little profit. Prestige film producers often explicitly aim for festival accolades and critical recognition. For example, many films are made primarily for the festival circuit and the awards season ("Oscar-bait"), where the payoff is fame and esteem rather than immediate commercial gain.

In this model, creative risks are embraced rather than smoothed out. Unconventional storytelling, controversial themes, or niche topics are not viewed as problems but as the very point of making the film. A producer operating here will fight to preserve an auteur's bold choices - be it a bleak ending, a 3-hour running time, or stylistic eccentricities, because those are seen as integral to the film's artistic merit. The final cut privilege usually resides with the director. The producer must exercise influence through trust and dialogue rather than edict.

While artist-driven production is essential for innovation and cultural diversity, it carries its own challenges. Financial instability is one: many auteur-driven projects struggle to recoup costs, making it hard for producers to sustain operations. The pursuit of symbolic capital can sometimes cross into artistic elitism or insularity, creating films that play well to festival juries but alienate general audiences, thereby marginalizing the work's broader impact. There is also the

issue of precarious labor and self-exploitation: independent productions often ask cast and crew to work long hours for low pay out of passion for the project. Michael Z. Newman notes that the ethos of doing it for art in indie film can mask a troubling norm where young creatives and crew accept unstable, underpaid conditions as the price of being part of "meaningful" work [Newman 2011, 48]. Additionally, an unchecked auteur can veer into ego-driven territory, without constructive outside input, a project might suffer from a lack of discipline or perspective. In short, pure auteur-centric producing can lead to brilliant originality, but it can also result in films that are financially unsustainable or culturally isolated.

3. Social-Impact Model: "Mission-Driven Producer."

The third model elevates social responsibility above all. In the mission-driven model**,** the producer approaches projects primarily as a vehicle for social change or public service**.** We often see this in documentary filmmaking and certain socially conscious narrative films. The producer in this mode might consider themselves as much an activist or educator as a businessperson. In practical terms, this means that financial profit is not the main criterion of success. Many mission-driven projects are non-profit or low-profit endeavors, relying on grants, philanthropy, or crowdfunding for funding rather than commercial investment. For instance, a documentary highlighting a human rights issue might be funded by NGOs or public arts grants and made available for free or through public broadcasters. The producer's accountability is tilted more toward the issue or community portrayed than to investors or mainstream audiences.

Social-impact producers often engage in what Patricia Aufderheide describes as "impact planning" [Aufderheide 2012, 45]. Before the film is even made, they consider the desired outcomes: Who needs to see this film? What do we want them to do or feel afterward? This can lead to innovative distribution strategies such as targeted community screenings, educational curriculum tie-ins, or campaigns that accompany the film's release. A classic example is the documentary "The Invisible War" (2012) about sexual assault in the military. Its producers worked with legislators and the Department of Defense to ensure the film would be seen by policymakers, directly contributing to changes in military policy. The emerging role of the Impact Producer formalizes this process: these individual designs and execute the social outreach campaign around the film.

While laudable in intention, the mission-driven model can falter if the line between art and advocacy blurs too much. A film overtly engineered to serve a cause might lapse into propaganda or preachiness, alienating viewers who feel they are being lectured rather than told a story. There is a delicate balance between raising awareness and oversimplifying complex issues for the sake of clarity or emotional impact. Additionally, producers with a crusading mindset must be careful not to manipulate or exploit the very people whose stories they are spotlighting. For example, documenting trauma can itself be traumatic for participants if not handled with care. Scholars have warned of the ethical peril in *"*using*"* personal narratives of suffering instrumentally to galvanize comfortable audiences [Nash 2018, 112]. A mission-driven producer must constantly practice reflexivity. Is the filmmaking process empowering subjects or just extracting their stories? Are we being transparent with participants about our goals? Also, financially, this model usually requires subsidy; it is not self-sustaining through market revenue, which can limit scale and frequency of projects unless public/charitable funding is continuously available.

4. Integrative Model: Balancing Act

Recognizing the shortcomings of the three one-sided models, many leading producers now advocate for an integrative model that seeks to balance commercial viability, creative integrity, and social responsibility. In this paradigm, a producer acts as an integrator or mediator among the differing interests: a diplomat fluent in the language of art, money, and ethics.

Chris Bilton describes this role in terms of "boundary management": the producer stands at the intersection of various domains (creative, financial, social) and manages the boundaries between them. They must translate the demands of each domain into terms the others can understand. For instance, to satisfy financiers, the producer might frame a risky creative idea in business terms: "This unconventional narrative has the potential to tap an underserved market segment."; conversely, to satisfy creatives, the producer might secure budget allocations for certain high-value artistic elements (special effects, additional shooting days, etc.) by convincing investors of their payoff. Bilton notes that successful creative management involves being a bridge rather than a barrier: connecting creative ideas with commercial strategy in a way that enhances both [Bilton 2007, 88].

The integrative producer does not see the three imperatives as zero-sum. Instead of a triangle pulling apart, the imperatives can be aligned in synergy. The underlying belief is that good

ethics and good art can also be good business in the long run. A project that is well-crafted and original will likely stand out in the marketplace and yield better returns than a mediocre formula film, even if it's slightly riskier. A project that is socially aware and inclusive can tap into new audiences and build goodwill, again strengthening its commercial prospects. There is empirical support for this: recent studies show that films with diverse casts and authentic storytelling attract wider audiences and perform better financially on average. According to UCLA's 2021 Hollywood Diversity Report, films with casts that were 41-50% minority had the highest median box office grosses in 2020, whereas films with less than 11% minority casts performed worst. In other words, inclusion and representation are now proven market assets, not liabilities. The integrative producer seizes on such convergences. Of course, integration is easier said than done. It requires skillful negotiation, transparency, and strategic thinking. Let us consider how an integrative approach manifests across the stages of production, from development to distribution.

Development Stage - Laying the Foundation: This is where the producer can set the tone for balancing interests. One tool is script consulting that aims to strengthen the story without sacrificing its originality. Rather than using "script doctors" to dumb down a script for mass appeal, an integrative producer hires consultants to enhance both dramaturgy and clarity. As script guru Linda Seger notes, a good script consultant works at the intersection of art and psychology - helping the writer realize their thematic intentions in a way that also connects emotionally with audiences. The result should be a screenplay that retains the author's voice but is also accessible and structurally sound.

Another development tool reimagined is the use of focus groups**.** Instead of asking test audiences: "What should we change to make you like this movie?" An integrative approach might use screenings to diagnose communication gaps. Are there plot points people found confusing? Is the pacing losing attention at certain points? The idea is to preserve the creator's intended story but fine-tune how effectively that story is conveyed. By shifting focus group usage from dictating creative choices to identifying misunderstandings, a producer can make a film more audience-friendly without undermining its core vision. For example, if viewers uniformly miss a subtle character motivation, the fix might be adding a clarifying line - a minor tweak that improves audience comprehension while honoring the script's intent.

Inclusive casting is another development-phase commitment that serves multiple ends. An integrative producer moves beyond tokenism toward authentic representation that suits the story

and reflects reality. Studies have shown that audiences increasingly reward authenticity; for instance, meaningful inclusion can increase audience trust and broaden a film's appeal. In practice, this may involve casting actors from the cultures depicted, even if they are not big stars, or ensuring representation in stories where it has been historically lacking. The ethical payoff is avoiding stereotypes and providing opportunities to underrepresented talent, and the commercial payoff can be tapping into enthusiastic new fan bases and positive word-of-mouth for being progressive.

Production Stage - Ethical Execution: When the project moves into physical production, the integrative model emphasizes transparency and fairness in management. This begins with transparent budgeting. An integrative producer will often create a budget that clearly delineates "commercial" vs. "creative" expenditures. For example, separating the cost of essential artistic elements (practical effects, music rights, elaborate set design required by the story) from more flexible business expenses (marketing contingencies, above-the-line premiums). By doing so, the producer can have an honest conversation with the director about where compromises can or cannot be made. The filmmaker becomes a partner in resource allocation rather than an adversary fighting unseen budget cuts. Eve Honthaner's production handbook suggests that maintaining an open budget where the creative team understands the financial limits fosters a sense of shared responsibility [Honthaner 2010, 112]. A director who sees transparently that adding a scene will force trade-offs elsewhere might be more willing to adjust, as opposed to feeling that "the suits" are arbitrarily saying no.

Additionally, integrative producers champion ethical labor practices on set. This includes humane work hours, safety protocols, and a positive work culture. In recent years, for example, many producers have begun hiring intimacy coordinators for scenes involving nudity or sexual content to ensure actors feel safe and respected. This practice emerged after persistent reports of discomfort and even abuse in filming such scenes. Implementing it is both ethically right and pragmatically wise - it reduces the risk of harmful incidents and bad publicity, and actors who feel protected are likely to give better performances [Banks 2015, 145]. More broadly, a non-toxic production environment, where crew are not screamed at, where diversity and inclusion are upheld behind the camera, tends to attract top talent and yield a happier set, which usually translates into a better final product. The producer sets the tone in this regard, modeling respectful behavior and swiftly addressing any on-set misconduct. In the long run, ethical production practices also bolster the studio's or production company's reputation, which has brand value.

Distribution Stage - Responsible Outreach: Once the film is made, an integrative strategy continues into marketing and distribution. Here, the producer tries to align the release with both market opportunity and social accountability. One approach is a differentiated distribution strategy that draws from Chris Anderson's "long tail" theory [Anderson 2006]. Instead of relying solely on a massive wide release to recoup costs (which can be make-or-break), a producer might employ targeted rollouts across different platforms and communities to let a film find its audience over time. Niche content, say a documentary about a local environmental issue or a quirky arthouse film, can be sustainable by reaching its passionate core audience via festivals, VOD, and specialized theatrical runs, rather than failing by being thrust into hundreds of multiplexes where it doesn't fit. By embracing multi-platform and long-tail opportunities, producers fulfill the commercial aim of maximizing a film's lifespan and revenue streams, while also respecting that certain films serve smaller communities deeply rather than the mass superficially.

Another key aspect is reputation management**.** In the era of social media, producers often become public spokespersons for their projects, especially if controversy arises. An integrative ethic involves being ready to engage in good-faith public discourse. If an ethical criticism is levied (e.g., "this film's representation of mental illness is problematic"), the producer should not dismiss or spin but rather acknowledge concerns and articulate the intentions or the steps taken to address such issues. Honesty and openness can turn a potential PR crisis into a demonstration of integrity. Sometimes, this may involve making amends, such as adding a content warning, or, in extreme cases, re-editing a piece of content after listening to stakeholder feedback. The producer's willingness to take responsibility can foster trust with audiences and creators alike.

To illustrate how balancing the triangle of imperatives can lead to successful outcomes, I can examine three recent cases.

Case 1: Synergy in a Blockbuster - Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

One of the most celebrated animated films in recent years, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, showcases the integrative model in action. Producers Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, along with their team, managed to deliver commercial success, creative innovation, and social inclusivity in one package.

From a creative standpoint, the film was a considerable risk. The producers embraced an experimental visual style that deliberately broke the mold of standard Hollywood animation.

Spider-Verse employs a vibrant, comic-book-inspired aesthetic, complete with onomatopoeic text bubbles and mixed animation techniques, choices that were bold departures from the hyper-realistic or traditional styles prevalent in big-budget animation. It was the sort of gamble that a purely market-driven approach might have vetoed for being "too different." Yet the producers' faith in the vision paid off: critics and audiences lauded the film as visually groundbreaking, and it earned a 97% Rotten Tomatoes score along with widespread audience acclaim.

From a social perspective, "Into the Spider-Verse" placed inclusivity at the heart of its story. The film's protagonist is Miles Morales - an Afro-Latino teenager from Brooklyn, who becomes Spider-Man. This was a notable shift from the traditionally white Peter Parker narrative, and it resonated strongly with viewers who saw themselves represented in a major superhero film for the first time. The producers did not treat Miles' identity as a gimmick; it was organically central to the story's themes of belonging and heroism. The supporting cast was similarly diverse, reinforcing the message that anyone can wear the mask. Importantly, this diversity was authentic, not tokenistic. It came straight from modern Marvel comics lore and was handled with nuance, partly thanks to a diverse creative team. The result was a film that expanded the Spider-Man fanbase to new demographics and was widely praised for its positive representation.

Commercially, the film excelled. It grossed over $350 million worldwide at the box office despite being a non-sequel animated movie in a crowded superhero market. It went on to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, a triumph that not only recognized its artistry but also enhanced its long-term profitability. The film's unique style and heartfelt storytelling gave it a strong USP (Unique Selling Proposition) in the market - it wasn't just another superhero movie, but something fresh. As producer Chris Miller recounted, early in development, they told the studio: "We'll do this Spider-Man film only if we can make it about Miles Morales and make it look crazy." And the studio said: "Yes!" That leap of faith, balancing the studio's need for a viable franchise extension with creators' push for innovation, exemplifies integrative producing. The "crazy" look attracted audiences because it stood out, and Miles Morales' presence attracted audiences because it was new and meaningful. Spider-Verse proved that creative freedom and social diversity can themselves become market virtues, resulting in a product that wins on all fronts. As one commentator noted, the film's unique mix of style and substance created a "unique selling point" that competitors could not easily replicate.

Case 2: Social Mission Meets Art - Les Misérables (2019)

Directed by Ladj Ly, the French film *Les Misérables* (not a musical adaptation, but a contemporary drama about police and youth in a Paris suburb) illustrates the "social missionary" model with a touch of auteur cinema. Here, producers prioritized the social impact of the film and the authenticity of its perspective, even knowing that its commercial prospects were limited to a niche.

From the beginning, Ly's producers (Toufik Ayadi and Christophe Barral of SRAB Films) understood that the film's gritty realism and political subject matter: exploring poverty, policing, and racial tensions in the banlieues, would not attract a mass mainstream audience or big studio backing. Instead of diluting the film to be more "market-friendly," they doubled down on its social relevance. The strategy was to target film festivals and the critical circuit to amplify its message. Indeed, Les Misérables premiered at the Cannes Film Festival 2019, where it won the Jury Prize. The prestige of Cannes and the ensuing critical buzz helped the film gain wide attention in France, far beyond what most low-budget debut films achieve. It subsequently won the César ("French Oscar") for Best Film and was France's submission for the Academy Awards, ultimately earning an Oscar nomination for Best International Feature.

The social impact was palpable. The film hit a nerve in France; its unflinching portrayal of marginalized suburban communities and police misconduct sparked public debate. Notably, French President Emmanuel Macron screened the film and was reportedly "shocked" by it. He acknowledged the accuracy of the problems shown and, in response, ordered an investigation into conditions in the banlieues. This is an almost direct example of a film provoking policy-level attention - the producers could hardly have wished for a more concrete impact. Ladj Ly's work was even compared to Kassovitz's La Haine (1995) as a wake-up call for France, 25 years later, indicating how little had changed. In interviews, Ly and his producers expressed that starting a national conversation was more important than box office euros (though the film did quite well in France, selling over 2 million tickets).

From an ethical production perspective, the project was rooted in community. Ly cast local non-professional youth alongside professional actors to ensure authenticity. The producers took care to involve the neighborhood in the filmmaking process. The production also reportedly tried to reinvest in the community: some of the film's profits were used to establish a film school in Montfermeil, the suburb where it was shot. This demonstrates a full-circle approach to social

responsibility, not only telling a story about the community's struggles but also tangibly giving back by empowering youth with skills and opportunities in film.

Financially, Les Misérables was never going to be a blockbuster, and the producers accepted that. It grossed modestly overseas and on streaming, but its symbolic capital was enormous. The film garnered prestige, influence, and future opportunities for its makers. In terms of the triangle of contradictions, this case shows a situation where the social and creative imperatives were foregrounded with the tacit hope that success in those realms (prestige, impact) would eventually translate into indirect commercial benefits (funding for the next project, international sales boosted by awards). Ethically, it stands as a reminder that producers can serve a cultural mission and succeed on those terms. Ayadi and Barral likely knew a hard-hitting film about police brutality would not be an easy sell. Indeed, they struggled for financing until Cannes validated the project, but they proceeded because they believed in the importance of the story. The payoff: a film that not only won major awards but also became part of real-world political discourse, fulfilling the highest aspirations of socially conscious art.

Case 3: The Paradox of Success - Squid Game (2021)

The global sensation *Squid Game* offers a thought-provoking case about the complexities of media economics and producer intervention. This South Korean series was created by Hwang Dong-hyuk and ultimately produced and distributed by Netflix. It became the most-watched Netflix series launch of all time, with 1.65 billion hours viewed in its first four weeks. The series is a dark, satirical thriller that delivers a scathing critique of capitalist society: ironic, given that its massive commercial success ended up enriching one of the world's largest corporations.

What is notable from a production standpoint is that "Squid Game" was rejected by local studios for nearly a decade before Netflix picked it up. Hwang wrote the script around 2009 and shopped it around, but many potential producers or networks in Korea found it too violent, too unrealistic, or simply too risky. It was only when Netflix is pursuing a strategy of investing in international content came into the picture that the series got greenlit around 2019. Netflix effectively served as the producer/studio, providing a relatively generous budget and, by Hwang's account, unusual creative freedom. The company's bet was on the global niche appeal: they suspected that a uniquely Korean show could still resonate worldwide in the era of streaming. So, Netflix's vice-president for content has noted that great stories can come from anywhere and "if

we give creators the freedom, the audience will find it." This seems to have been the guiding philosophy. Netflix producers did not significantly temper the show's brutality or social commentary to "dumb it down" for a wider audience. They allowed Hwang to keep the story's sharp edges and local flavor.

The gamble worked beyond all expectations. "Squid Game" became a word-of-mouth phenomenon across continents, proving that audiences will embrace well-made content even if it's culturally specific or unconventional**.** From a creative perspective, one could argue the producer's best decision here was non-interference. By not forcing changes that a more timid network might have (for example, toning down violence or adding a happier ending), the producers preserved the show's integrity, and that integrity is part of what made it stand out in a crowded content market. The show's shocking turns and uncompromising critique of economic desperation were its unique selling points, generating intense discussion and social media buzz.

Squid Game's narrative is a blatant indictment of capitalist systems that exploit the poor - yet the show's wild popularity generated nearly $900 million in value for Netflix, given its relatively low production cost of about $21 million. By October 2021, internal Netflix documents (reported by Bloomberg and LA Times) valued Squid Game as almost a billion-dollar property for the company. This presents a rich paradox: an anti-capitalist story became a capitalist jackpot. The creator, Hwang, has wryly acknowledged this irony in interviews, pointing out that reality is sometimes as cruel as the game he depicted. Furthermore, due to industry practices, Hwang received no residuals or ownership stake, having effectively signed away rights for an upfront payment, highlighting the very exploitative dynamics the show criticizes. Netflix's role, meanwhile, exemplifies how a giant corporation can commodify even dissent: the social message of "Squid Game" became part of a profitable content portfolio.

From a producing ethics viewpoint, what can we glean? First, Squid Game validates the idea that taking creative risks can yield enormous rewards. Netflix producers took a chance on a story others found too extreme, aligning with the creator's artistic vision and social commentary, and it led to immense commercial gain. The success was not despite the show's radical elements, but because of them. This underscores the integrative principle: what's artistically authentic and socially resonant can also be financially astute.

Second, it sheds light on globalization in content. The fact that a Korean-language series could enthrall viewers from South Korea to the United States to Brazil without creative

compromises suggests producers should broaden their sense of audience. In the streaming era, a niche can become universal. This lesson encourages producers not to underestimate viewers - compelling storytelling with local truth can cross language and culture barriers more effectively than formulaic "international" products engineered to be blandly universal.

Lastly, the Squid Game case invites reflection on the ethical dimension of success. Producers might ask: When my socially critical film or show becomes a commercial hit, what responsibility do I have? Netflix faced scrutiny for not sharing more of the windfall with the creative team - a criticism tied to ongoing debates about fair compensation in the streaming economy. A truly integrative ethical stance might be that if you profit immensely from a work that advocates for the downtrodden, you should ensure the rewards are distributed in line with that ethos. These are new frontier questions for producers who suddenly find their edgy content a mainstream smash.

My examination of the producer's role through the lenses of commerce, creativity, and conscience reveals that the old notion of an inevitable clash between "art and commerce" or between "profit and principle" is giving way to a more nuanced understanding. The tensions are real, but they are not insurmountable antagonisms. In fact, in the most successful contemporary projects, these elements often enhance each other. Commercial savvy can support creative work (through ample funding and marketing that brings art to audiences); creative excellence can drive commercial success (through quality and originality that attract audiences); socially responsible filmmaking can open new markets and deepen engagement (as audiences seek out authentic and diverse stories).

Throughout the industry, there is growing recognition that a balanced producing strategy is not only ethically desirable but also strategically wise in a 21st-century context of educated audiences and global media platforms. A one-dimensional strategy, whether "just make money" or "just make art," is less viable in a hyper-competitive and hyper-aware environment. The market-driven monoculture leads to staleness and audience fatigue. The auteur-driven isolation leads to financial precariousness and limited reach. And a mission-driven purism without entertainment value can result in preaching to the choir while losing broader impact. The proposed integrative model of producing is not a fixed formula but a set of guiding principles**.**

*Transparency***:** Communicate openly with creatives about constraints and with investors about artistic goals. This builds trust and shared purpose, turning potential conflicts into joint

problem-solving (as seen when budgets are transparent or when test feedback is shared constructively).

Respect: Value the input of all stakeholders. Treat the director's vision and the screenwriter's themes as assets to be protected, not obstacles to be managed. Treat audiences with respect by neither underestimating their intelligence nor ignoring their needs for clarity and connection. Treat represented communities with respect through research and inclusion. An atmosphere of respect often leads to better films and better reception.

Responsibility: Embrace the producer's role as an ethical agent. This means acknowledging the power one holds in shaping culture and striving to do so conscientiously, whether it's ensuring safe working conditions, promoting diversity in casting and crew, or being mindful of how a film might affect public discourse. It also means taking responsibility when things go wrong.

In sum, the producer's job has never been more complex, but also never more crucial. When producers rise to the challenge of the triangle of contradictions, they cease to be mere middlemen and become true culture-makers: professionals who bring stories to life in a way that honors artistry, rewards investors, and respects the audience and society at large. The future of media will be shaped by those producers who can navigate this balance with wisdom, creativity, and ethical clarity.

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The Aesthetics of Marginality in Contemporary Urban Cultures

Orlova Yana

Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,

Moscow City University

Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article explores the aesthetic of marginality as a distinct and evolving cultural code rooted in post-industrial urban environments, particularly in Russia. Drawing on examples from street art, subcultural music, post-Soviet architecture, and grassroots visual practices, it argues that marginal spaces, such as abandoned factories, brutalist housing, and graffiti-covered zones, serve as critical sites of artistic innovation and cultural memory. By emphasizing authenticity, situational creation, and the reuse of decayed urban textures, marginal aesthetics challenge mainstream paradigms of beauty, authorship, and legitimacy. The study examines the resurgence of Soviet-era motifs in global youth culture, the international fascination with Eastern European "*doomer*" aesthetics, and the transformation of local artistic practices into transnational visual trends. Comparative perspectives from Western cities such as Detroit and Berlin illustrate how marginalized art movements globally are redefining the boundaries between center and periphery, art and activism, nostalgia and futurity. Through this lens, the aesthetic of marginality is not a rejection of culture but a reconfiguration of its foundations.

Keywords: marginal aesthetics, post-industrial urban space, Soviet brutalism, street art, Russian youth culture, authenticity, visual anthropology.

Modern cityscapes contain more than polished business districts and landscaped parks; their true aesthetic pulse often lies in the fringes, where abandoned factories, graffiti-strewn squats, and post-industrial zones are found. These marginal spaces, once dismissed as blight, have become creative incubators, giving rise to an aesthetics of marginality. This aesthetic is not merely a protest or a shock value; it reflects a DIY ethos and a new visual language that prizes authenticity, local memory, and the creative reuse of space. For example, one photographer of Soviet cities notes that he "started to see beauty in strict plan and strong forms," insisting that this architecture "needs time to become recognizable, so now the time has come." In this article, I show how artists

and communities in Russia and around the world generate powerful new art and meanings from the margins.

By the late 20th century, large-scale deindustrialization left many cities with a "rust belt" of empty factories and endless slabs of prefabricated housing. In the United States, for instance, photographers have urged moving "beyond the clichés" of so-called "ruin porn" - the sensational images of decaying factories toward a more nuanced view. Indeed, images of Detroit's decline, once-booming car factories silent and overgrown, became icons of urban decay. But even those images hint at a hidden attraction: derelict landscapes can captivate the imagination. Similarly, in Eastern Europe and Russia, abandoned Soviet factories and apartment blocks have turned into informal art spaces or nostalgic backdrops. In many ex-Soviet cities, documentarians and urban explorers report feeling like "archaeologists… in the ruins of a great ancient civilization" when they wander through empty halls and deserted yards. The material of the industrial age, brutalist concrete, rusted metal, and shattered glass, has thus shifted from unwanted debris to a new medium for creativity. As Wired magazine observes, Soviet-era architecture (Brutalist housing blocks, grand government buildings with heroic statues) - though once widely mocked, now has active defenders who document its "triumphalist" style as shared heritage. Photographers like Arseniy Kotov and others cross Central Asia and the former USSR to capture these forms before they vanish.

The photograph above shows a typical post-war "*panelki*" housing complex in Eastern Europe. Once derided as drab or oppressive, such concrete apartment blocks now draw Instagram-born nostalgia. Commentators note that these panel buildings "evoke both nostalgia and legacies of suffering"; they carry memories of the communist past even as new generations view them as iconic heritage. In other words, large concrete slabs that were once purely utilitarian now serve as symbols of an era. This shift is even reflected in Western media trends: the so-called "New East" aesthetic has popularized images of Eastern European concrete cityscapes as exotic Brutalist vistas. For example, the Calvert Journal and similar outlets have curated hundreds of photographs of Soviet monuments and housing projects, effectively turning anonymous cityscapes into social-media clickbait for "concrete" enthusiasts. As one commentator wryly notes, prefabricated housing ("panel buildings"), once banished from official taste have been "turned into subjects of Instagram posts by hipsters hungry for Brutalist design".

Art emerging from these zones does not behave like the polished productions of the mainstream. Imperfection is often celebrated as authenticity. Consider the founding editor of the British punk zine Sniffin' Glue: he intentionally published handwritten lyrics, crude photocopies, and visible typos, stressing the immediacy of the content. The editor later noted that the fanzine's success came because it "told readers exactly what they thought" and was "more discerning… than other fanzines," precisely due to its raw, unpolished format. This DIY attitude lives on in marginal street art and music: graffiti on a crumbling wall is embraced not despite its rough spray-paint lines, but because they mark it as genuine and non-commercial. In contrast to a slick gallery piece, a mural daubed with spray-paint drips and visible scaffolding reflects a process, giving the community a sense that the work truly belongs to them.

Another hallmark is site-specific dialogue. Marginal art is deeply rooted in its physical and social context. A graffiti mural on a rusted factory door talks back to the factory's history; an impromptu installation in an empty yard uses the detritus of that yard as material. In Berlin, this ethos was literal. After 1989, hordes of artists and squatters moved into empty buildings in East Berlin. Collectives like the Liebigstrasse 34 squat in Friedrichshain covered every surface with murals, stickers, and political banners: effectively making the building itself their canvas. When these squatted houses were later legalized as cooperative housing, they kept their anarchic look: steel stairways plastered with political slogans, handmade theater posters, and a constantly evolving collage of stickers and street art. Even today, that "squat culture" remains an integral part of Berlin's identity. The point is clear: art and life interweave on the margins, without regard for the neat separations of formal art institutions.

Moreover, marginal art tends to be hybrid and boundary-blurring. It does not confine itself to one genre. In a decommissioned factory, one might find a skate ramp built under a large mural, a sound system playing underground techno over a backdrop of peeling propaganda posters, and local poets performing in the corner. Such cross-pollination: mixing music, graffiti, performance, and craft is common outside the gallery. This chaotic, open-ended approach can spark genuinely new forms. 20th-century art movements like collage and Dada began as marginal experiments, subverting classical norms by gluing "incompatible" images together, a technique now mainstream in design. Crucially, marginal creators often lack a commercial intent: their work is temporary or ephemeral, valued for community resonance rather than resale price. In many underground scenes, a piece of art has worth only if fellow participants recognize its meaning; money is irrelevant.

The aesthetics of marginality extend far beyond visual art. They permeate music and broader pop culture. In the Soviet Union, rock and punk music circulated underground on bootleg tapes, loudly voicing youth discontent. Bands like "*Kino*" (Leningrad) and "*Grazhdanskaya Oborona*" (Sverdlovsk) were never officially mainstream; their lo-fi cassette recordings, recorded on cheap equipment, became a deliberate stylistic statement. Their raw, "gritty" sound reflected the gritty reality of life on the margins. Those defiant songs with distorted guitars and shouted lyrics were counterpoints to the state's polished cultural products. Today, a similar ethos carries on in the Eastern European underground. For example, the Belarusian band *Molchat Doma* ("Houses are Silent") epitomizes the modern marginal aesthetic in music. Their post-punk/new-wave style - cold synths, clipped beats, deadpan vocals, drenches songs in gray, industrial melancholy. In 2020, their track "*Судно*" ("The Vessel") exploded on social media. It spawned thousands of fan videos on TikTok that romanticize the bleak vistas of former-Soviet cities. As Pitchfork reports, youths watching these videos say it makes them yearn for "Soviet vibes," praising its hauntological atmosphere. One TikToker even exclaimed that the montage (playing "Судно" over footage of austere apartment blocks and factories) was "the best advertisement to go to Russia I've ever seen." Fans note that Molchat Doma's music embraces a "harsh greyness of the Soviet aesthetic" as an antidote to capitalist pop, because "at least the gloom feels honest". In the lyrics (borrowed from post-Soviet poet Boris Ryzhy), we hear "*Жить тяжело и неуютно, зато уютно умирать*" ("Living is hard and uncomfortable/But it is comfortable to die"), a stark couplet resonating with alienated youth. Here, a marginal music scene from Minsk suddenly influences subcultures worldwide.

This phenomenon isn't limited to Eastern Europe. Marginal music scenes everywhere prize authenticity over commercial gloss. In the US and UK, punk and indie bands on the fringes also record in garages and distribute music through cassettes or Bandcamp, valuing local scenes over chart success. In each city: Tokyo, Rio, London, an underground culture blossoms in defiance of mainstream tastes. Lyrically and visually, the imagery often overlaps: guttural urban landscapes, DIY outfits, and themes of isolation are global. Thus, the aesthetics of marginality in music form an international undercurrent, even if specific historic memories (like Soviet nostalgia) are local.

While I have focused on Russia and its neighbors, similar dynamics play out worldwide. In former industrial cities, artists and communities reuse abandoned spaces in creative ways. For example, in North America, the narrative of cities "rising from the rubble of abandoned factories"

is a potent one. Detroit's renewal efforts include converting old car plants into tech incubators or art schools. Street artists in Pittsburgh or Montreal paint huge murals on defunct mills. In Latin America, community muralism in unused factories comments on local history and struggles. In Europe, iconic projects like London's Tate Modern (a former power station) or Berlin's Kunsthaus Tacheles (a squatted department store) show how industrial ruins can host cutting-edge art. However, the tone of marginal aesthetics can differ by region. In the West, images of decay sometimes become travel erotica - the so-called "ruin porn" fetishizing dereliction. Eastern creators often add a layer of earnest memory or political edge: a mural on a blast furnace in Ukraine might reference historical tragedy. Nevertheless, a common thread is clear: across cultures, a rejection of sanitized beauty in favor of a rough, lived-in look connects these movements. Eastern Europe's "Eastern bloc nostalgia" is just one variant of a global taste for the rough-hewn, whether in soundtrack, fashion, or photography.

The aesthetics of marginality is not a fad but a legitimate cultural phenomenon of our age. It offers a parallel visual and sonic vocabulary to the mainstream, grounded in authenticity, history, and spontaneity. In Russia and beyond, once-ignored corners of cities have become the stage for new art movements and identities. What society once labeled "marginal" is steadily woven into the broader cultural code. As one observer puts it, images once considered "ruin porn" are today coveted Instagram motifs - a sign that the periphery is reshaping the center. By turning neglected spaces into creative laboratories, marginal artists demonstrate that culture often thrives despite official norms and commercial constraints. In short, art can and often does spring up where we least expect it: under a bridge, in a boiler room, or amidst the rubble of a factory.

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The Phenomenon of the Soundtrack in Alexei Balabanov's Cinema: Rock Music as a Tool for Mythologizing Russian Space

Iogolevich Olga

Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,

Moscow City University

Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article examines the role of rock music soundtracks in the cinema of Alexei Balabanov as a central element of his artistic system and a key mechanism for mythologizing Russian space. Drawing on structural-semantic and contextual analysis, the study explores how domestic rock music functions not merely as background accompaniment but as an active agent in constructing geographic, social, and existential meanings within Balabanov's films. The analysis focuses on *Brother*, *Brother 2*, *War*, *Cargo 200*, and *The Stoker,* demonstrating how musical compositions create "emotional poles" of the country, articulate the internal monologue of protagonists, and participate in the deconstruction of cinematic reality through irony and dissonance. Attention is paid to the concept of musical cartography, whereby urban and regional spaces acquire distinct identities through sound, from the intellectual alienation of Saint Petersburg to the existential despair of conflict zones. The article also incorporates audience survey data to contextualize the reception of rock soundtracks and their perceived function as a "voice of the era." The study concludes that rock music in Balabanov's cinema operates as a mythopoetic tool that not only reflects the crisis of Russian society at the turn of the twenty-first century but also actively shapes a durable cultural mythology of post-Soviet space.

Keywords: Alexei Balabanov; Russian cinema; soundtrack; rock music; mythologization of space; musical cartography; post-Soviet culture; film music; cultural identity.

Rock music of the 1980s - 1990s was a significant cultural phenomenon in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, serving as the generational voice of youth. Initially regarded with suspicion, Soviet rock gradually broke into the public sphere - an illustrative case was the 1988 "Marathon" rock festival, whose abrupt cancellation prompted mass protests by fans and ultimately its

reinstatement. This historical arc of rock's gradual legitimization parallels Balabanov's cinematic approach: both sought an unsentimental, authentic portrayal of reality. The lyrics of Russian rock bands were notable for their lack of official ideology and their raw, unidealized reflection of social conditions. Balabanov's films similarly aim for maximal proximity to the everyday life of people at the fin de siècle, capturing its key contradictions. Thus, the shared worldview between Balabanov and many rock musicians, a commitment to an authentic reflection of a crisis-ridden era, created a natural affinity. Rock music in his films, therefore, aligns with the director's mythopoetic logic by expressing the unvarnished essence of contemporary Russian reality. As one commentator observes, Balabanov's films are designed to impact the viewer's consciousness, with music playing a significant role: the director preferred Russian rock because it "best reflects our reality," shading film scenes and helping characters express their thoughts and desires [Balabanov 2007]. In this sense, rock in Balabanov's cinema is both a cultural code of its epoch and an artistic tool that roots the narrative in its historical context.

Balabanov's soundtracks serve as an "audio map" of Russia, marking different locations and "emotional poles" of the country. For instance, Saint Petersburg (Leningrad) appears as an intellectual yet soulless city. *Брат (*The Brother, 1997*)*, shot largely in Petersburg, is permeated by the mysterious, profound music of Nautilus Pompilius. In the film's climactic scene, the Nautilus song "Black Birds" underscores the theme of an individual's identity being devoured by hostile forces. Its haunting lyrics plead "*take my eyes away so they will no longer see you*," met by the chilling reply "*we have been in your eyes and taken all we needed*," evoking a nightmare of existential absorption. This example demonstrates how Balabanov uses rock to externalize inner crisis.

By contrast, *Война (*The War, 2002) - set in the Caucasus during the Second Chechen War - employs music by *Сплин* (Spleen Band) and *Би-2* (Bi-2) to create an atmosphere of anxiety and hopelessness. Songs such as *Феллини* (Fellini), "SOS," "Plastic Life," *Волки* (Wolves), and "Hawk" contribute leitmotifs of tension and despair. For example, Bi-2's "Plastic Life" becomes a recurring theme, its lyrics expressing a feeling of dead-end existence *("kill me… the light goes out suddenly… everything in the world is plastic, and all around is plastic life").* While *Brother* builds a tense, brooding mood befitting post-crisis Petersburg, *War* conveys a tragic, inescapable doom dictated by both the narrative and the war-torn location. The gloom of Petersburg in *Brother* reflects a society recovering from the Soviet collapse and the first Chechen war, yet far from the

frontline, creating a false calm that eventually erupts into criminal chaos. In *War*, the Chechen setting brings to the fore the helplessness of civilians amid violence; documentary war footage further heightens the film's grim realism. Throughout Balabanov's films, rock soundtracks thus bring regions to life, exposing human nature and revealing all the hidden fractures of the fin de siècle. In this way, musical themes personalize locations and emotionally describe the environment, adding depth and resonance to the image. For example, after the success of *Brother*, Balabanov's follow-up *Brother 2* features an even more eclectic Russian rock score. It includes tracks by *Сплин, Би-2, Крематорий, Смысловые галлюцинации, Океан Эльзы, Аукцион, Танцы Минус, Машина Времени, Агата Кристи, Земфира, Чичерина, and Наутилус Помпилиус* (the final song "*Последнее письмо*" (Last Letter), closes the film). Similarly, The War uses *Сплин, Би-2, Океан Эльзы*, and even the film's own composer Vyacheslav Butusov. Through such varied and often contrasting musical choices, Balabanov creates a mythologized space: the city and regions acquire new meanings via their "soundtrack identity," so that one not only sees but also hears the historical and social context of the story.

Balabanov often treats popular music not just as background but as an almost independent character. In The Brother and The Brother 2, rock musicians even appear on screen as themselves, reinforcing the authenticity and immersion into the cultural milieu. In The Brother, Danila Bagrov encounters the band Nautilus Pompilius during the shooting of their music video *Крылья* (Wings), buys a Nautilus record, and repeatedly listens to it - all while the band's leader, Vyacheslav Butusov, appears in a cameo role. This blurs the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic music: the songs and the musicians exist within the film's reality, and the music becomes part of Danila's identity. The soundtrack here functions as a kind of inner monologue for the hero, aligning the viewer with Danila's worldview.

In The Brother 2, Balabanov moves beyond Nautilus to broaden his palette of rock. Bi-2's song *Полковник* (Colonel) becomes a central motif that conveys the protagonist's resolve and sense of honor in a world of lies and cynicism. Other tracks from *Аукцион* (Auction) - *Дорога* (The Road) to *Смысловые галлюцинации* (Semantic hallucinations) - *Вечно молодой* (Forever young) and *Чичерина* (Chicherina) - *Ту-лу-ла* (TuLuLa), and many more add layers of meaning. The lyrics and tone of these songs resonate with the hero's inner state and the atmosphere of the city. As one character observes in The Brother 2, *"The city is an evil force… Strong men come here and become weak; the city steals their strength…"* [Balabanov 2007]. The rock soundtrack

underlines this theme: each song's content complements the dialogue about the corrupting power of urban life. In this way, Balabanov forges a new myth of the (anti) hero not as an idealized figure but as someone intimately connected to the city's spirit through music. The mixing of musical commentary with the narrative effectively turns the soundtrack into a voice that narrates the character's unspoken thoughts.

Moreover, in The Brother 2*,* the diversity of bands from well-known names to more underground ones reflect the multifaceted post-Soviet cultural scene and the multi-layered psyche of Balabanov's heroes. The content of the rock songs often directly mirrors what the characters face: for example, Bi-2's "Polkovnik" underscores the protagonist's stern moral stance in an era of compromise. Thus, music is not incidental but central to character construction, creating a "mythical space" within the film. As Balabanov noted in interviews, each musical choice was deliberate and meaningful; in The Brother and The Brother 2, it serves as an active agent shaping the mythic dimension of the hero and his world.

A key aspect of Balabanov's audio-visual method is the use of musical dissonance and irony. In *Груз 200* (Cargo 200), a Soviet military euphemism referring to the transportation of the bodies of soldiers killed in action, perhaps Balabanov's most controversial film, this technique reaches its peak. In the brutal climax of the film, a scene of graphic violence, the diegetic soundtrack suddenly cuts to the upbeat Soviet-era pop song *В краю магнолий* (In the Land of Magnolias) by the vocal-instrumental ensemble Ariel. The lyrics of this cheerful song (written during the Afghan War) nostalgically recall youths dancing and talking about love and freedom, a world of innocence: *"Back then we used to run there, lads, eyes shining like agates… We could talk freely about life and love…"* This nostalgic chorus is heard over a scene of cold-blooded murder. The irony is jarring: the hopeful, romantic music of one Soviet era is placed against the horror of another. Balabanov thereby creates a dissonance that shocks the viewer and underscores the absurdity of the present by contrast. As one film scholar notes, this is "Balabanov's 'black humor' - irony as psychological weaponry" that exposes social sores and plays on the viewer's nerves [Florya 2016]. The narrative of *Cargo 200* unfolds against the backdrop of the Afghan war years, and by selecting a song that itself debuted on television in 1982 (during the Afghan conflict), Balabanov fuses two opposite images of one country: one full of naive hope, the other mired in violence. The song's lyrics, superficially about youth and love, stand in direct opposition to the film's nightmare plot, emphasizing the inescapable doom of the characters.

In *Cargo 200*, space itself becomes a trap. The characters drive into a void of society, locked in a car (a Volga sedan) filled with madness, with no escape. The "In the Land of Magnolias" song only heightens this feeling of entrapment and inevitability. Its cheerful melody contrasting the violent images, thereby deepening the sense that the characters cannot outrun fate. In general, Balabanov's strategy is to pick the most crisis-ridden moments in Russian history as the canvas for his films, using soundtracks to peel back the façade of society and reveal the darker undercurrents of human nature.

In later works such as *Кочегар (*The Stoker*)*, rock music increasingly functions as a metaphor for the protagonist's inner state, often replacing dialogue to reveal the character's psychological world. For instance, *Кочегар*, set in the mid-1990s, features primarily guitar compositions by virtuoso *Дедюля* (Dedulya), but crucially integrates *Агата Кристи* (Agata Kristi's) song *Истерика* (Hysteria) at the narrative's point of no return. Balabanov himself commented that in the film's key tram scene (after the hero commits a murder), the Agata Kristi track "works strongly" to underscore the silent tension. On screen, we see a quiet, almost gentle tableau, while a tense, anguished song plays - the chorus of *Истерика* ("*I love you for the fact that I love you / I will kill you as soon as I change my horse*") reverberates, mirroring the turmoil of the hero's psyche. This demonstrates how, in Balabanov's later films, the soundtrack becomes the hero's inner monologue. The music supplements the visual narrative and often replaces spoken dialogue, giving the viewer direct access to the emotional conflicts of the characters. In dramatic and tragic moments, this technique is especially effective at deepening the audience's empathy with the protagonist's crisis.

Кочегар was shot largely in St. Petersburg and its surroundings, even using Balabanov's own apartment for some scenes, continuing his practice of blending location with music. By interweaving melodies that resonate with a place, Balabanov immerses the viewer in the mystical quality of space: the city's cold, post-Soviet reality is infused with the characters' inner landscapes through rock and popular songs.

An empirical survey of 45 respondents (ages 18-65, predominantly 21-30) was conducted to gauge audience engagement with Balabanov's music. The results indicate that *Брат* and *Брат 2* were seen by 80% of participants, whereas *Груз 200* was seen by 48.9%, and *Война* and *Кочегар* by only 11.1% each. (About 13.3% of respondents had not watched any of these films.) These figures reflect the enduring popularity of the early Balabanov films, particularly among younger

viewers (most born between 1995 and 2004, coinciding with the production dates of the films). More tellingly, when asked to describe the function of rock music in Balabanov's films, 57.8% of respondents answered that it serves as the "voice of its time" or a symbol of the era. This empirical finding corroborates our analysis: viewers overwhelmingly perceive the rock soundtrack as emblematic of the cultural and historical context, underscoring its role not just as background music but as an audible emblem of the period.

My structural-semantic analysis of Balabanov's cinema, supported by audience survey data, demonstrates that rock soundtracks play a fundamental role in constructing the artistic reality of his films. Domestic rock music becomes more than a historical backdrop; it is an active mythopoetic tool in the mythologization of Russian space. In Balabanov's hands, the soundtrack evolves from a supplementary expressive device into a central mechanism of meaning-making. The songs and scores do not merely accompany the action; they encode the film's geography, social dynamics, and existential mood. Through these musical codes, Balabanov captures the crises of Russian society at the turn of the century, creating enduring mythopoetic images that continue to shape reflections on Russian identity and space. In this way, his films forged a new paradigm in Russian cinema, one in which rock music itself becomes a protagonist - the living voice of a generation that lived through the tumultuous end of the Soviet era and the chaotic birth of post-Soviet reality.

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Postmodern Deformation of Fairy-Tale Archetypes and Heroes in Husky's Songs

Galieva Nika

Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,

Moscow City University

Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article analyzes the postmodern deformation of fairy-tale motifs and archetypes in the songs of Russian rapper Husky. It explores how folklore elements and traditional heroic images from fairy tales are transformed within a contemporary context, leading to new types of heroes who are often disoriented and hopeless. Four of Husky's songs are examined in detail: *Сказки* (Fairy Tales), *Колобок* (Kolobok), *Быть Орком* (Being an Orc), and *Партизан* (The Partisan). Each of these songs vividly demonstrates elements of postmodern deconstruction of folklore. Key aspects of the changes in Husky's protagonists are discussed: from the absence of magical assistance and experiences of anti-initiation to an ambivalent chaos in which moral categories of "good" and "evil" lose their clarity. The goal is to show how Husky, by employing elements of traditional folklore structure, subverts classical canons of heroism to create characters that reflect post-Soviet realities. The study also addresses the psychological isolation and despair inherent in these modern heroes, which becomes a crucial element in understanding the postmodern approach to folklore motifs. This work thereby highlights how contemporary song lyrics can serve not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as an important tool for understanding shifts in moral perception in today's reality.

Keywords: postmodernism; folklore; fairy tales; archetypes; Russian rap; Husky

In recent decades, folkloric motifs and archetypal characters have made a vigorous return in contemporary culture, reimagined through the prism of postmodernism and urban reality. This phenomenon is evident not only in film and literature but also in music, where traditional elements undergo radical reinterpretation. A striking example is found in the songs of the Russian rapper Husky. Rather than following classical storytelling canons, Husky repurposes fairy-tale motifs and figures to create new kinds of heroes and, through them, to comment on Russian realities. This

article aims to investigate how Husky utilizes fairy-tale motifs in his songs to create new heroes and undermine traditional representations. By weaving folkloric elements into his lyrics, he constructs new narratives in which victory is no longer the primary goal for the protagonist.

Folklore archetypes and mythological elements are not only fundamental to cultural identity but also serve as a powerful toolkit for reinvention in contemporary music. In recent years, there has been a clear trend toward invoking folklore and mythology across various musical genres. This is part of a broader postmodernist process that involves rethinking traditional archetypes, breaking down canonical forms, and generating new meanings from familiar cultural images.

Myths and folklore provide a rich source of imagery and motifs actively employed by modern musicians. This practice is often tied to a postmodern inclination for recontextualization and irony, which imbue these works with ambiguity and indeterminacy. In music, folklore is used not only as an element of national or ethnic identity but also as a means of social critique and the expression of psychological depth. Storylines, characters, and archetypes are reinterpreted against the backdrop of modern life, where they lose their "pure" symbolism and become more contradictory. This reflects a crisis of traditional moral reference points: characters now often straddle the line between "good" and "evil," rendering them more subjective and multi-dimensional.

Postmodernism, as a cultural movement, actively engages with folklore archetypes by offering new interpretations of well-known images. In music, this results in folklore being not only a source of aesthetic pleasure but also a method of analysis and self-reflection. A cornerstone of the postmodern treatment of folklore is the rejection of clear binary oppositions (such as good/evil or hero/villain). In Husky's songs, as in other contemporary works, we encounter protagonists who cannot win, cannot find happiness, and who face a world no longer structured by the classic formulas of fairy tales. Music becomes a medium in which traditional archetypes are not simply preserved but are transplanted into new, complex cultural contexts. This reflects both personal existential experiences and the transformation of cultural norms in an era of globalization and social instability.

Before turning to Husky's songs themselves, it is useful to recall some elements of Vladimir Propp's famous study, Morphology of the Folktale*,* which provides the theoretical framework for our analysis [Propp 2001].

Vladimir Propp's structural theory centers on the functions of the hero and the sequential stages of the fairy-tale narrative. In Propp's model, a typical fairy tale unfolds in a series of canonical stages: the hero receives a call and departs on a journey, faces trials, often with the aid of magical helpers, and eventually achieves victory and reward, restoring justice upon return. In simplified form, a fairy tale's structure, according to Propp, can be summarized as follows:

- Departure on a quest: The hero leaves home, usually prompted by a challenge or call to adventure.
- Trials and tests: The hero encounters difficulties and obstacles, which he overcomes, often receiving help from supernatural beings or magical agents along the way.
- Victory and reward: The hero triumphs over adversity, obtains a reward or accomplishes the task, leading to the restoration of order or justice, and returns home with newfound wisdom or a valuable prize.

Propp also identified several basic spheres of action or archetypal character roles commonly found in folktales. Among the hero archetypes noted in Propp's research are:

- The Wandering Hero: A character who leaves home (willingly or by circumstance) and journeys through a world filled with magical creatures and dangers.
- The Fool (*Ivan-Durak*) Hero: A seemingly inept or naive character who is often underestimated. Despite clumsiness or lack of wit, the fool ultimately succeeds, often surpassing his "clever" peers, thanks to qualities like resourcefulness, kindness, selflessness, or sincerity.
- The Warrior Hero: A character defined by active struggle against evil. He engages in combat, protects the world from threats, and works to restore justice through bravery and strength.
- The Trickster: A character who upends rules and order, often through mischief or anarchy, yet in doing so unwittingly helps set things right. The trickster's behavior is transgressive and destructive, flipping traditional roles of hero and villain, but it can have a positive outcome in the end.

These archetypes are flexible; although they have classical forms, they can adapt and transform depending on context. In the context of Husky's creative work, traditional hero archetypes are profoundly transformed, often becoming anti-heroes or characters whose actions do not lead to the customary victories or moral lessons. His characters find themselves in a world that no longer

follows the clear-cut laws of folkloric narratives, a world in which there is no longer a strict boundary between "good" and "evil." Against this backdrop, Husky's songs present a postmodern deconstruction of fairy-tale archetypes, as we will explore through four key examples.

Husky's song "*Сказки*" ("Fairy Tales") pointedly frames Russian contemporary reality through the imagery of Russian folk tales. The lyrics are dense with references to familiar fairy-tale characters, each subverted in a grim, modern context. The song opens with a stark scene:
«Три дня скулит пёс сторожевой, / Лежит на кухне Иван-дурак / Ему толкнули денатурат / Под этикеткой воды живой». ("For three days the guard dog has been whining; / Ivan the Fool lies in the kitchen. / They slipped him denatured alcohol / Under a label that read 'living water.'")

In these opening lines, the archetypal *Ivan-Durak* (Ivan the Fool) appears as a character well-known in Russian folklore as the guileless, often ridiculed younger brother who somehow ends up succeeding in the end. Traditionally, Ivan-durak's kindness wins him happiness or fortune, whereas his smarter brothers fail. Husky's Ivan, however, meets a darkly ironic fate: through a foolish lapse, he is poisoned by fake "living water." In folklore, living water is a magical elixir that resurrects or heals the hero; here, it is cruelly inverted, denatured alcohol sold under a life-giving label, and Ivan dies immediately from this "miracle" cure. The guard dog's prolonged whine over three days underscores the bleakness of this outcome.

Husky continues reimagining familiar figures with biting satire. The song next references *Baba Yaga*, the witch-like crone of fairy tales who often, surprisingly, aids the hero after some initial menace or testing:
«А в телевизоре никому, / Под толщей пластики рот кривя, / В ебучих перьях, как какаду, / Свою фанеру поёт Яга». ("And on television, for no one, / twisting her mouth under layers of plastic, / in f**king feathers like a cockatoo, / Yaga sings her lip-synced song.")

In folklore, Baba Yaga is an ambiguous character, sometimes a villain, other times a helper who provides the hero with a magical gift or guidance. Husky's Baba Yaga, however, has been transformed into a grotesque pop-cultural figure. She appears on TV decked out in garish "feathers like a cockatoo," lips synching ("*поёт фанеру*" is Russian slang for lip-syncing) through a mouth deformed by layers of plastic (a clear nod to cosmetic surgery or artificiality). The once fearsome forest-dwelling witch is reduced to a manufactured media persona. This image pointedly critiques modern mass media: just as Yaga's authentic voice is lost behind fakery, contemporary television is depicted as suffused with propaganda and emptiness. The line "to no one" suggests an audience

that isn't even listening, a meaning vacuum. Yaga, who in tales could impart wisdom or magical aid, has here lost her agency and value amid plastic glamour and canned performance.

Husky further modernizes the fairy-tale roster by introducing *Кощей* (Koschei) - the Deathless, and the fair maidens named *Василиса* (Vasilisa), both staples of Russian folktales, now in distorted form:

«Над монитором дождём навис / Яичко чешет сухой Кощей / Говорят, крипты у него что вшей / Всё на донаты для Василис». ("Hunched over a monitor like a looming cloud, / withered Koshchey scratches his little egg. / They say his crypto coins are as numerous as his lice, / and all of it goes to donations for the Vasilisas.")

«А Василисы, поднаторев / В игре в любовь, чё творят, ты глянь / Чтоб веселиться, им надо меф; / У этих сказок концовки дрянь». ("And the Vasilisas, having grown skilled / in the game of love - you should see what they do / to have fun, they need meth; / these fairy tales have lousy endings.")

In the first excerpt, Koshchey the Deathless, typically an immortal villain who hoards treasure and abducts maidens, his soul hidden inside a needle within an egg, is depicted as a desiccated figure at a computer. The lyric "scratches his little egg" comically references Koshchey's life-source (his egg), implying an idle, neurotic habit rather than a fearsome mystique. He is surrounded by the trappings of modern nerd ("hunched over a monitor") and mired in personal decay (his body "dry" and swarming with lice). The mention of cryptocurrency (crypto coins) in place of Koshchey's legendary gold hoard is a tongue-in-cheek update: this immortal hoarder now speculates in Bitcoin, yet even this wealth is treated frivolously. Instead of plotting world domination, Koshchey spends all his riches on donations for the Vasilisas - presumably tipping money to online camgirls or streamers named after the folktale heroines. This not only satirizes Koshchey's fall from grand evil to pathetic consumer but also lampoons modern obsessions with internet culture and the commodification of intimacy.

The Vasilisas - referencing characters like Vasilisa the Wise or Vasilisa the Beautiful, who in fairy tales are often virtuous maidens or helpers to the hero, are here recast as jaded young women "skilled in the game of love." Rather than paragons of purity or wisdom, Husky's Vasilisas are cynical figures living for money, drugs, and cheap thrills. The lyric suggests they need methamphetamine to enjoy themselves, implying addiction and emptiness in place of the traditional happy ending. The line "these fairy tales have lousy endings" starkly drives home the

point: unlike the tidy, uplifting conclusions of folklore, Husky's updated tales end in degradation and dissatisfaction. The world of these characters is morally inverted and decayed, a postmodern carnival of the absurd where once-clear symbols of good and evil are entangled in vice and futility.

By including himself in the narrative voice, Husky further breaks the illusion of heroic storytelling. The song's narrator reveals his own tarnished state:

«И я там был и мёд-пиво пил / По усам текло, не попало в рот. / Бывало, пьяным кого-то бил; / Бывало, правда, наоборот». ("And I was there, drinking honey and beer; / it ran down my mustache but didn't go in my mouth. / There were times I beat someone up drunk; / and, truth be told, times it was the other way around.")

These lines parody the classic fairy-tale ending formula (often a banquet scene where the narrator humorously claims "I was there, drank honey and beer; it ran down my mustache, but not into my mouth"). Husky's twist on this formula emphasizes debauchery and violence: he portrays himself not as a noble storyteller or triumphant guest, but as a drunken brawler. Sometimes he beats others, sometimes he gets beaten - either way, the ideals of honor and celebration are nowhere to be found. This self-portrayal is far from the moral authority of a fairy-tale narrator; instead, it is destructive and self-deprecating, underscoring that the ideals have lost their value.

In "*Сказки,"* Husky has stripped fairy tales of their enchantment and optimistic resolution, transposing them into gritty contemporary scenarios of ruin and loss. The beloved characters of folklore lose their kindness and purpose; magical aids become deadly poisons; and miracles lead only to death or despair. The song's rich allusions demonstrate a postmodern deconstruction of fairy-tale tropes: it dismantles the comforting structures of the folktale and rebuilds them as a bleak satire of modern Russian life. This pattern of invoking and subverting folklore continues in Husky's other songs, serving not only to critique modern society but also to convey personal soul-searching and experiences of grief. In this way, Husky's work stands as an important example of a postmodern approach to myth and fairy tale in contemporary music.

The song "*Быть орком*" ("Being an Orc") is a complex, semi-autobiographical composition in which the lyric hero, through an ironic and dark lens, explores the destruction of his own identity and what remains of the "hero" figure in post-Soviet Russia. Instead of a fairy-tale protagonist who embarks on a transformative quest, we see an image of a marginalized anti-hero who undergoes no empowering journey but is instead engulfed by a system that offers no

escape, salvation, or victory. The very title evokes a creature from fantasy (an orc, as in Tolkien's universe), immediately signaling a departure from human heroes to a bestial, downtrodden figure.

From the very first lines, Husky plunges us into a post-apocalyptic atmosphere that allegorically mirrors the collapse of a society:

«Я родился из трещины почвы, / Когда Мордор купался в разрухе». ("I was born from a crack in the soil, / when Mordor was bathing in ruin.")

The crack in the soil is a vivid symbol of fracture and cataclysm, the ground itself split and broken. This image signifies the shattering of the former world and the beginning of something monstrous arising from its ruins. By invoking Mordor, the dark wasteland from J.R.R. Tolkien's mythology, Husky draws a parallel to a devastated homeland. Here, Mordor serves as an allegory for a post-Soviet Russia steeped in decay and chaos. The motherland is no longer depicted with any grandeur or heroism; instead, it is *"*bathing in ruin," a phrase that conjures utter desolation. In such an environment, the ones born are "orcs," not noble adventurers but cursed offspring of societal collapse. The hero of this song is thus established not as a knight or prince, but as an orc, a creature typically cast as a brute and a minion of evil in fantasy lore. This choice immediately subverts expectations: our "hero" is one of the traditional villains, underscoring that in this reality the roles of good and evil have been upended.

Husky then describes the hero's upbringing as an inexorable slide into degeneration:

«Орки сохли и дохли, как мухи, / Обживая скудеющий Мордор. / Почернели забытые сёла, / Захрустели шприцы под ногами. / Неудачное время быть орком». ("Orcs shriveled and died like flies, / as they colonized an impoverished Mordor. / Forgotten villages turned black; / syringes crunched underfoot. / It was an unlucky time to be an orc.")

These lines paint a harrowing picture of a childhood and youth spent in a landscape of decline. The orcs (standing in for the generation of post-Soviet youth) grow up in conditions of deprivation ("impoverished Mordor"), with social structures collapsing around them. The simile "died like flies" conveys both the scale of the tragedy (numerous and unremarked deaths) and the indifference of the world to their suffering. The mention of forgotten villages turning black suggests that rural communities have withered, charred by neglect, perhaps literally burned out or metaphorically darkened by poverty and despair. The chilling detail of syringes crunching underfoot evokes an environment rife with drug abuse and the decay of public health, where even the ground is littered with the remnants of addiction. All of this culminates in the stark statement:

"Not a good time to be an orc." The hero's existence is framed as a kind of ill-timed curse. He is born into an era where merely being alive (being an "orc") is a misfortune. Unlike a fairy-tale hero who might change his fate, this anti-hero feels doomed by historical circumstance. There is a sense that he cannot change or escape his condition*;* he is trapped in hopelessness.

The song conveys a pervasive sense of stagnation and hopelessness - the hero does not grow or progress, because the world around him offers no nurturing, only rot. He is, essentially, the opposite of Propp's journeying hero: instead of venturing out to improve the world, he is stuck trying to survive a world that is steadily worsening. The usual optimism of a hero's journey is replaced with an absurd struggle just to exist.

Husky uses haunting imagery to illustrate the emotional and spiritual desolation of the orc's world:

«Эти орочьи песни как птицы / Они плачут в тумане, как будто…» ("These orcish songs are like birds; / they cry in the fog, as if…")

In these lines, the "orc songs," perhaps a metaphor for the laments or the art (like Husky's own songs) of this lost generation, are compared to birds crying in a fog. Birds are traditionally symbols of freedom or the soul, but here their cries are muffled in mist, suggesting that any messages of pain or hope are swallowed by an obscuring gloom. The fog implies confusion, lack of clarity, and an environment where it's impossible to see the way forward. The songs are "crying" underscores the pervasive sorrow. Through this poetic image, Husky conveys the sense of a generation's suffering going unanswered in a world where truth and direction are obscured ("in the fog"). The orc's voice - the hero's voice - like a bird's, might seek to soar, but it is trapped in a haze of uncertainty and anguish.

Amid this bleakness, the only counsel the hero receives is laced with dark irony. A prophetic character appears, not a wise sage or a fairy godmother, but a drunken vagrant:

«Так сказал мне пророк-забулдыга, / Перекрюченный, как закавыка, / И добавил, ужаленный мороком: / "Сохрани своё счастье быть орком"». ("Thus, spoke to me a prophet-drunkard, / all bent and twisted like a snag, / and added, stung by darkness: / 'Preserve your happiness of being an orc. '")

This "prophet-drunkard" is a far cry from the helpful magical donors of fairy tales. He is described as "*перекрюченный, как закавыка*," meaning contorted or hooked, like a piece of knotted wood, perhaps crippled by life's hardships and alcohol. He might be seen as a parody of a

wise elder: instead of sage advice, he offers an enigmatic, almost cruel injunction. Tainted by "*морок*" (a dark enchantment or delusion), he tells the hero to hold on to the happiness of being an orc. This statement is profoundly ironic: what happiness can there be in such a wretched existence? Yet, in a twisted way, it suggests the only path to survival is acceptance to find some grim satisfaction or pride in one's identity as an outcast. If being an orc is the hero's lot, then "preserve your happiness*"* in it, perhaps meaning do not aspire to be anything other than what this broken world has made you. The drunken prophet's advice is a dark mirror of the typical fairy-tale mentor's encouragement. Instead of "follow your destiny" or "you will prevail," it's essentially "embrace your damnation."

The refrain that follows drives the bitter irony home:

«И навзрыд плачет орочка в чёрном: / Это горькое счастье - быть орком». ("And an orc-girl in black sobs unabated: / this is the bitter happiness of being an orc.")

Here, an orc-woman ("*орочка*") dressed in black is weeping convulsively ("*навзрыд"* implies sobbing to the point of explosion). The image adds a layer of communal or generational sorrow - it's not just the male "orc" hero suffering, but the female as well, perhaps representing mothers, sisters, or the feminine side of this society. The phrase *"горькое счастье"* literally means "bitter happiness." It's an oxymoron that encapsulates the song's theme: the only "happiness" available is a bitter one. The lot of the orc is to know only a happiness that is laced with anguish, a perverse fulfillment found in sorrow itself. Husky suggests that in this ruined world, even happiness has become inverted; it is now defined by the endurance of misery rather than its absence. The orc-girl's grieving figure, clad in mourning black, symbolizes the death of joy and the permanence of grief in the orc's existence.

As the song progresses, Husky delves deeper into the personal and collective trauma of the era, touching on war and loss. In the third verse, the narrator tries to give voice to the dead, only to find that this too is an exercise in futility:

«Я достаю изо рта голоса двухсотых - / Они поют, но куплеты их хрупки. / Не доношу, разливаю, как рюмки…» ("I pull out of my mouth the voices of the two-hundredths; / they sing, but their verses are fragile. / I fail to carry them - I spill them like shot glasses…")

The term *"двухсотые"* ("two-hundredths") is a colloquial Russian military code (Cargo 200) for soldiers killed in action. Husky's hero attempts to speak or sing on behalf of these dead ("pulling voices out of his mouth"), perhaps trying to tell the stories of fallen comrades or lost

peers. Yet the verses of the dead are fragile; they cannot withstand the weight of reality or be sustained. “I fail to carry; I spill like shot glasses” is a striking metaphor: the words or memories of the dead slip through his grasp like liquor poured out in vain. This line conveys both the act of spilling drink in a ritual for the dead and the inability to communicate the full extent of trauma and loss. The hero’s attempt to serve as a bard for the voiceless ends in fragmentation - memory and narrative break apart, just as the society has.

In the final moments of the song, Husky delivers a searing verdict on his generation and its relationship with the motherland, turning autobiography into open critique:
«Мы - свидетели грязной эпохи, которые научились быть чистыми. Мы долбоёбы, которых так ждала наша Родина. Так люби нас такими, какими нас сделала, тварь». (“We are witnesses of a dirty era who learned to be clean. We are the f**kups our Motherland had been waiting for. So, love us as we are, as you made us, you creature.”)

This proclamation is jarring in its directness and profanity. It serves as a sort of bitter epilogue to the orc’s tale. “Witnesses of a filthy epoch who learned to be clean” suggests a generation that has seen corruption and dirt all around them yet perhaps prides itself on maintaining some internal purity or integrity despite everything. It’s a complicated statement. On one hand, it could mean they are morally clean in contrast to the dirty times; on the other, it might drip with sarcasm, as if to say they pretend to be pure. The next line obliterates any lingering heroic sentiment: “We are the f**kups (*долбоёбы*) that our Motherland was so eagerly awaiting.*”* This vicious irony implies that all the promises of the older generation or the state (that the youth would rise and redeem the country) have come to nothing. Instead, the motherland has created a lost generation of “fools and failures.” The final apostrophe to the Motherland: “love us as we are, as you made us, you creature *(тварь)”* - is both a plea and a curse. By calling the Motherland *“*creature*”* (a grave insult in Russian in this context), the persona turns the fairy-tale motif of the loving, grateful return home into an accusation of betrayal. There is no triumphant homecoming for this hero; he confronts his ‘homeland’ with rage and hurt, demanding an impossible love and blaming it for creating him as he is.

“Being an Orc” thus portrays heroes as victims of their world rather than masters of it. In Husky’s vision, orcs are not the evil horde from fantasy but the forsaken children of a broken society. They stand in for those left behind by history, who find themselves in a world without heroic quests, without magical assistance, and without victory. The only possible redemption is in

embracing one's brokenness. Husky transforms the fantasy trope of the orc into a powerful metaphor for post-Soviet alienation and resilience in despair. Autobiographical elements (Husky's own experiences growing up in the 1990s and 2000s) bleed into the fantasy, making the song both a personal and a generational anthem of disillusionment. Ultimately, the orcs in Husky's work are not monsters at all, but martyrs of a social system that has failed them, dwelling in a world where any notion of victory has become a cruel joke.

If Husky's orcs subvert epic fantasy, his song *"Колобок"* (literally a round bun) reinterprets one of the simplest and most famous Russian folk tales in a starkly modern, urban context. *"Колобок"* is the protagonist of a well-known children's story: a little bread bun that comes to life and rolls away from its makers (grandparents), escaping various animals until it is finally caught by a cunning fox. In Husky's hands, this quaint tale of a carefree runaway transforms into a commentary on social entrapment and the futility of escape in the modern world.

Before diving into the lyrics, it's important to note how Husky frames the setting. Traditionally, the journey of a fairy-tale hero often ends with a triumphant return home, or at least a haven. In Husky's songs, however, the city itself becomes an antagonistic space, an anti-fairy-tale landscape. The city represents modern society's chaos and indifference, a place that offers no meaningful "home" to return to and no clemency for wanderers. Instead of being a backdrop for adventure and eventual reward, the urban environment in Husky's work is where hopelessness reigns. The journey ceases to be a progression toward a goal; it becomes an aimless flight from oneself and one's circumstances. Within the city's absurd confines, traditional folkloric archetypes cannot function; there is no clear evil to defeat, no justice to restore, and no community to welcome the hero back. The outcome is not victory but often absurdity or tragedy. *"Колобок*" exemplifies this inversion by depicting a protagonist whose bid for freedom leads not to salvation but to disillusionment.

The song opens by describing the unconventional "birth" of Husky's Kolobok, immediately signaling that this is not a fairy tale of yore, but a gritty contemporary story:

«Не на сметане я мешон / Меня пекли в общаге двое, сообща и нагишом».

("I wasn't kneaded with cream; / I was baked in a dorm by two people, together and naked.")

In the original tale, the old couple uses the last of their flour, mixing it with sour cream, to bake the Kolobok, who then magically comes to life. Husky pointedly contrasts this wholesome, if rustic, origin with a far seedier scenario. His Kolobok is not the product of a loving grandma's

kitchen; instead, he is baked in a communal dormitory ("*общага"*, short for hostel or dorm) by two individuals who are nude and seemingly impoverished. The phrase "together and naked" implies a scenario of neglect and perhaps desperation: we might imagine addicts or destitute people concocting this "bun" in a squalid setting. There is a hint of perversity or abnormality in this genesis. By saying "not kneaded on cream"*,* the lyric denies the fairy-tale ingredients and, by extension, the fairy-tale context of nurturance and magic. The dorm stands in for the fairy-tale cottage, but here it's a place of communal poverty and likely vice. This line establishes social isolation and abnormality at the hero's inception: he is a product of the margins, born in a scenario that is essentially a social aberration (two naked people in a dorm baking bread sounds like an image of neglect, possibly drunken or drugged behavior). Husky's Kolobok, therefore, comes into being already tainted by the harshness of reality.

He continues to characterize this harsh origin:

«Не по сусекам я скребён, / Меня сточило захолустье своим серым остриём». ("I wasn't scraped from the flour-bins; / I was worn down by the backwater's grey blade.")

The first part of this line references the folk tale explicitly: in the original story, the grandma scrapes the dust from the flour-bins *("по сусекам наскребла")* to gather enough flour to bake the Kolobok. Here, Husky's Kolobok negates that quaint detail: he was "not scraped from the bins," meaning he isn't a hopeful last morsel of sustenance lovingly gathered. Instead, he says he was "worn down by the backwater's grey blade." This is a powerful metaphor: «*захолустье*» means a godforsaken provincial town or the outskirts of civilization, - the boonies, so to speak. The "grey blade" personifies the drab, sharp edge of impoverished, dull provincial life that has ground him down. In other words, his very being has been shaped (or eroded) by living in a bleak, stagnant place. This line gives us insight into the character's upbringing: whereas a fairy-tale hero often comes from humble but loving beginnings, Husky's Kolobok comes from grinding poverty and drudgery. The world that made him is characterized by a cutting greyness: monotony, hopelessness, and possibly cruelty.

Husky then adds a semi-biographical flavor to Kolobok's narrative, blurring the line between the character's story and the songwriter's own experience:

«Вот фотографии мои: / Вот я сижу, подкидыш хлеба, на окраине семьи». ("Here are my photographs: / here I sit, a foundling of bread, at the edge of a family.")

Referring to photographs suggests real memory and personal history, as if Kolobok (or Husky speaking through him) is showing the listener snapshots of his childhood. The phrase *"*подкидыш хлеба" (literally "a bread foundling") is striking. A foundling is a child who has been abandoned or orphaned and discovered by someone, an image of social abandonment. By calling himself a bread foundling, he ties his identity to Kolobok and emphasizes that he was essentially an unwanted child. "At the edge of a family" reinforces this: he sits at the edge of family life, not fully embraced or integrated. This line conveys a profound sense of alienation and identity loss. The hero sees himself as a discarded piece of bread, a person without proper origins or belonging. The use of "bread" might also hint at literal hunger or poverty in childhood, but as a metaphor, it denotes sustenance that has been cast away. In Husky's portrayal, Kolobok is not the cheerful runaway bun; he is a child of neglect*,* someone whose existence from the start was marginal. By injecting this personal, photographic detail, Husky essentially collapses the distance between the folkloric character and his own life story, making Kolobok's plight symbolic of a whole generation's experience of being socially and emotionally orphaned in post-Soviet society.

In the classic tale, Kolobok's escape is whimsical. He leaves his grandparents simply because he was placed on the windowsill to cool and became adventurous. But in Husky's version, the escape is loaded with desperation and cultural baggage:

«Как я от дедушки ушёл, / сжав в кулаке дешёвый плеер / с русским рэпом и КиШом».

("How I left Grandfather, / clutching in my fist a cheap player / with Russian rap and punk-band KiSh")

The line *"как я от дедушки ушёл"* ("how I left Grandfather") mirrors the fairy tale refrain where Kolobok boasts of running away from Grandfather and Grandmother. However, here it is not a boast but a statement of fact, followed by concrete details. The hero leaves his metaphorical "grandfather" (which could represent the older generation, or the rural home, or the past generally) armed with a *cheap music player loaded with Russian rap and KiSh*. "КиШ" stands for *King and Fool*, a famous Russian punk rock band known for songs with folkloric and horror themes, an interesting intertextual nod by Husky. By including Russian rap and "КиШ" on his playlist, the hero carries with him the cultural influences that shaped him: the raw voices of Russian youth (rap) and the darkly fairy-tale-esque rock of "*КиШ*". This detail vividly places the story in a post-Soviet 2000s setting, when portable CD or MP3 players and the popularity of Russian rap/rock would mark a young person's coming of age. It suggests that his only companions or guides on

this journey are the songs of his generation. He literally carries his culture and identity in his hand as he runs. The "cheap" player also implies his lack of means. This flight from "Grandfather" isn't a fanciful adventure; it's a cultural and social escape fleeing a dead-end background fueled by the meager inspiration gleaned from music.

Husky portrays the journey itself as aimless and filled with perilous seductions. In the original fable, Kolobok's journey sees him eluding animal after animal until the fox tricks him. In the modern retelling, the main predator is not a forest creature but the metropolis - Moscow - anthropomorphized as a sly fox waiting to consume him:

«Не ешь меня, Москва-лиса, / я тебе песенку спою». ("Don't eat me, Moscow-fox, / I'll sing you a little song.")

Here, Moscow is explicitly called a fox (*lisa*), the same animal that ultimately devours Kolobok in the folk tale. By addressing Moscow this way, Husky encapsulates the city's dual nature: it is alluring and urbane (like a fox, clever and attractive), but also predatory. For many provincial or marginalized youth, Moscow represents a dream of success or fame, yet it also has a reputation for swallowing up such dreamers, exploiting them, or leaving them broken. The plea "don't eat me" is the same line Kolobok speaks to the fox in the fairy tale, where he tries to escape being eaten by singing a song. In Husky's context, this is deeply ironic: the rapper (or his character) literally will sing a song, presumably the very song we're hearing, to survive or win favor in the big city. It's a meta-commentary on Husky's own position as a provincial (he hails from Ulan-Ude in Siberia) who came to Moscow to make it in the music scene: his songs are his only defense against the merciless "fox" of the industry and metropolis. The invocation of the fairy-tale line here underscores how he sees the city as just as dangerous and cunning as any folkloric beast.

Throughout "Kolobok," there is an ongoing theme of the hero chasing an ever-elusive sense of purpose, flirting with fame as though it were a fairy-tale princess – except, in this cynical world, that princess is debased. Husky uses a striking turn of phrase to depict this perversion of the hero's motivation:

«Нахмурив хлебную башку, я, как и ты, молился славе, как настенному божку», - говорит герой, и добавляет, что возлюбленная слава зовется не царевной-лебедью, а «царевной-блядью». ("Furrowing my bread-head, I, like you, worshipped Fame like a little wall idol," - a goddess not known as the Swan-Princess, but rather as the "Princess-Whore.")

This comment, which paraphrases and references lines from the song, reveals that the goal of the hero has shifted from noble love or accomplishment to the hollow pursuit of fame**.** In folk tales, a common reward for the hero is marriage to a princess (often the Swan Princess in Russian tales) or the acquisition of a kingdom. Here, "*Слава*" (Fame or Glory) is described as an idol on the wall, an object of daily prayer and obsession. The hero admits that he prayed to this idol just like the audience ("like you") does, indicating a whole generation's lust for recognition or celebrity. However, he calls this idol "*tsarevna-blyad'."* This invented epithet translates roughly to "Princess-Slut" - a shocking combination of the fairy-tale title *tsarevna* (princess) with a vulgar insult. The use of this term viciously satirizes the idea of fame as a noble lady*:* instead of a pure, transformative reward, fame is portrayed as cheap and morally compromised. It suggests that in the current culture, chasing fame is akin to chasing a false princess who offers not true fulfillment but moral corruption.

As the Kolobok character hurtles through his experiences, he becomes increasingly self-destructive and disillusioned. In one of the climactic moments of the song, Husky's lyrics capture the hero's frenetic, nihilistic mindset:

«Ах, новый день, пасьянс готов / Какие заговоры петь и чьих бояться мне клыков? / Я убегаю от судьбы: от безызвестности, от хайпа, трезвости и наркоты…»

("Ah, a new day, the solitaire is laid out / what spells must I sing, whose fangs should I fear? / I'm running away from fate: from obscurity, from hype, from sobriety and from dope…")

This excerpt shows the hero awakening each day to a senseless cycle ("the solitaire is laid out" implies fate is shuffled anew like a card game every morning, hinting at the randomness of his life). He doesn't know which incantations ("*заговоры*") to utter or which threats ("whose fangs") to dread, signifying profound disorientation. The line "I run away from fate" enumerates an escape not just from negative outcomes but from all outcomes: obscurity (being a nobody), hype (the frenzy of fame), sobriety, and drugs, essentially from every extreme. He's caught in a paradox of fleeing both failure and success, both clean living and addiction. This captures the essence of self-destructive indecision: no matter what path he might take, it feels like a trap (each option is an extreme he wants to avoid). This is the "absurd freedom" of the postmodern hero - a freedom in which every choice is suspect and potentially harmful, so he keeps running in circles. Such desperation to avoid all possible destinies can only lead to self-obliteration.

Indeed, having exhausted all prospects, the hero's final act of defiance is to turn himself into something inhuman yet immortal, to transcend his doomed life by becoming pure legend or art. In "Kolobok," this is represented as an explosive, self-sacrificial climax:

«Вот я взрываю полный зал - кто я такой? - осколок хлеба в душах всех, кто меня знал».

("Here I am blowing up a packed hall - who am I? - a shard of bread in the souls of everyone who knew me.")

In this powerful closing image, the hero "detonates" a full auditorium, presumably through his performance (the phrase can be metaphorical for bringing the house down with music, or more darkly, it can hint at literal destruction). The rhetorical question "Who am I?" indicates a final identity crisis or a transcendence of identity into symbol. He answers that question by calling himself "a shard of bread in the souls of everyone who knew me." The Kolobok is ultimately reduced to fragments, but those fragments embed themselves in others' souls. This suggests that he (as an individual) may be gone or destroyed, but he survives as an idea, a memory, a cultural virus that infects those who have encountered him (through his art, presumably). It is a dark twist on immortality: unlike the fairy-tale hero who lives "happily ever after" in a fixed community, Husky's hero achieves a sort of immortality by scattering himself among the collective consciousness, even if that means his personal demise.

Thus, Husky's "Kolobok" completes the anti-heroic narrative arc: the protagonist goes through the motions of a hero's journey (departure, encounters with predators, attempts at victory) but ends in self-annihilation rather than triumph. The only way he finds to escape the trap of fate is to destroy himself and become something non-material (song, legend, or memory). In a tragic inversion of the original tale, where Kolobok is eaten, and that's the end, here Kolobok blows himself up (figuratively or literally) but thereby ensures that his story resonates on. Husky suggests that for the modern artist-hero, the act of creation and self-destruction can be the same: art is born from self-immolation, and that art is the only thing that lives on. This modern Kolobok did not find freedom in the world, so he found it in the obliteration of self and the sublimation into cultural consciousness.

Another critical song in Husky's folklore repertoire is "*Партизан*" ("The Partisan"). If "*Колобок*" is about the futility of escape and "*Быть орком*" about a doomed existence, "Partizan" deals with the aftermath of a battle that never truly ends**.** In traditional war epics and fairy tales, after the final battle is won, the hero returns home to adulation and peace. Husky shatters this

archetype, presenting instead a character who is a partisan fighter left behind by history. This lonely partisan cannot complete his mission nor reintegrate into society; he remains psychologically stuck in a perpetual war, even when the external conflict is long over.

Husky has explained the inspiration for "Partizan" by referencing real-life anecdotes of soldiers who never truly returned from war mentally. In one interview or commentary, he described the concept behind the song:

«Наверное, слышали истории о таких солдатах, которые, когда война уже кончилась, продолжают отсиживаться в лесах и сидят так месяцами и годами. Я представил себе такого лохматого человека, который шкерится в разрушенном городе, теряет рассудок, память, а потом остается в этом городе бродяжничать, как пёс».

("You've probably heard stories of soldiers who, even after a war has ended, continue hiding out in the forests, staying there for months or years. I imagined such a shaggy person who skulks in a ruined city, losing his mind and memory, and then remains wandering that city like a stray dog.")

This quote (attributed to Husky himself) sets the stage for the song's narrative. It's a haunting scenario: a combatant who can't adjust to peace and thus lives as if the war never stopped. Husky transposes this idea onto a post-war urban landscape, a destroyed city, creating a powerful metaphor for post-Soviet cities that feel war-torn or for the inner battle that veterans carry within them. The partisan in his song is akin to those legendary Japanese soldiers found decades after WWII on remote islands, still believing the war continued, but here it's in the context of a Soviet/post-Soviet partisan who has lost track of reality.

The song "Partizan" can be read as an extended deformation of the heroic war narrative. The idealized victorious warrior, returning home to medals and honor, is replaced by a disheveled loser who cannot come home at all. Instead of glory, there is confusion and madness; instead of recognition, there is anonymity and poverty.

Right from the beginning of the song, the lyric hero exhibits confusion and memory loss:

«Я забыл свой позывной, я не знаю, что со мной». ("I've forgotten my call sign. I don't know what's wrong with me.")

In a military context, a "*позывной*" (call sign) is an alias used in combat communications. Forgetting one's call sign symbolizes a loss of identity - particularly one's identity as a soldier or hero. The war is over, but instead of reclaiming his civilian name and life, the protagonist has even lost the one name he used in war. "I don't know what's with me" indicates dissociation and mental

breakdown. This is a far cry from the clarity and pride of a hero returning from battle. The partizan is essentially unmoored: he doesn't know who he is or what his purpose is now that the fighting has ended. In traditional narratives, a war hero's sense of self might be reaffirmed by victory and homecoming; here, the lack of closure leads to an identity crisis. His mental state deteriorates into cacophony:

«Галдя в голове, мысли пиздятся во мне». ("Clattering in my head, thoughts are brawling inside me.")

The crude language (*"мысли пиздятся"* literally means "thoughts are f**king each other up"*)* powerfully conveys inner chaos. It's as if his mind is a noisy marketplace or a battlefield of its own, with thoughts fighting each other. This line illustrates psychological collapse; his inner voices are at war, much like he once was externally. The use of the verb "*галдят*" (to clamor or caw) and the slang "*пиздятся*" (to beat the crap out of each other) gives a visceral sense of a mind in turmoil, devoid of peace. The partisan is suffering from what we might identify as PTSD or a combat-induced psychosis. He cannot silence the battle in his brain.

Husky's imagery of the city around the hero underscores the theme that the environment itself is an extension of his war-torn psyche:

«В этом городе куда б я не выгуливал взгляд / Везде объебанный скульптор ваяет обугленный ад». ("In this city, wherever I walk my gaze, / everywhere some fucked-up sculptor sculpts a charred hell.")

These lines create a hallucinatory picture of the city. The phrase suggests that no matter where he looks, he sees destruction**.** A "sculptor" metaphorically is creating a landscape of charred hell around him. This could mean that the city is literally full of burned buildings and ruin (if we imagine a post-conflict cityscape), or it's a surreal way of saying that his perception turns everything into a vision of hell. The "f**ked-up sculptor" could be an unseen force (the aftermath of war, or fate, or even the partisan's own fractured mind) shaping the environment into something infernal and artless. The use of *"объебанный"* (slang roughly meaning "messed-up" or "tripped-out") intensifies the sense that normal reality is perverted or distorted. Everywhere he looks, he sees hell, as if his traumatized mind projects the war onto every street corner. Unlike a fairy-tale hero whose perception might reveal hidden magic or guiding signs, this protagonist's vision reveals only devastation.

In “Partizan,” the hero’s loneliness is profound. He is literally described as *“Одинокий партизан на тропе войны”* (“a lonely partisan on the warpath”), which serves as the song’s refrain. Each repetition of this chorus-like line reinforces the senselessness of his condition: he is on a warpath all alone. A warpath implies active engagement in conflict, yet his war is long past or imaginary, and there is no army or enemy - only him, alone. The phrase encapsulates the tragedy: he remains in combat mode, but it’s a futile, solitary fight that leads nowhere. There is no clear enemy to defeat and no home to defend or return to.

The song’s lyrics provide more snapshots of the protagonist’s deranged behavior, indicating how deeply the war has scarred him:

«Мыши пиздятся во мне; я изжарил кота». (“Mice are brawling inside me; I fried a cat.”)

These shocking, absurd lines show the hero’s break with reality and morality. “Mice are fighting inside me” could be a hallucination or a metaphor for the gnawing, small, incessant anxieties and memories inside his body (perhaps a reference to an old Russian idiom “mice are scratching in my heart/stomach,” meaning one feels uneasy or miserable). But here it’s violent - the mice aren’t just scratching, they’re fighting, continuing the theme of internal conflict.

Then, “I fried a cat” is an unsettling image that suggests he’s living in such destitution and madness that he has resorted to extreme actions like catching and eating a cat, or it could be a hallucination. In either case, it illustrates the complete collapse of normal human behavior and the inversion of values (cats are often pets or even fellow sufferers in war zones; to harm one so casually is a sign of lost humanity). It also echoes the folklore motif of a lingering, cursed existence, like the *Koschei* figure who consumes foul things to live indefinitely. The protagonist is in a state of dehumanization; his survival instincts have taken a feral turn.

Each return to the refrain “lonely partisan on the warpath” after these disturbing confessions highlights how pointless his existence has become. He’s stuck in a loop of paranoia and survivalist insanity while the world has ostensibly moved on. Husky’s narrative also touches on the absurdity of the political changeover that the partisan cannot comprehend or keep up with:

«В день по нескольку раз город флаги менял / Я прилип к нему мясом, я им провонял». (“Several times a day the city changed its flags / I stuck to it with my flesh; I stank of it.”)

This line likely references how, in times of turmoil or in the partisan’s perception, the city keeps changing allegiances or regimes (“changing flags”) repeatedly. It’s a hyperbolic way to say that nothing is stable; perhaps one day the city is ruled by one power, the next by another, or

propaganda is constantly shifting. For a partisan who fought presumably for a cause, seeing flags change so easily and frequently undermines any sense of meaningful victory. It suggests that whatever he fought for has been rendered moot by the chaos that followed. The second half, "I stuck to it with my flesh, I stank of it," indicates that he has become physically and spiritually one with this ruined city. He's absorbed its stench and rot. There's a visceral image of a man so long in the rubble that he literally smells like the burnt city. It could also imply that he died and his corpse is part of the city's ruin (though in context it seems he's alive but metaphorically dead inside). In any case, this line conveys the total loss of individual identity and ideal: he is now just another charred piece of the wreckage. The cause he fought for, the flag he served, is irrelevant; he belongs to ruin itself. In a poignant, satirical twist, Husky references the figure of the war veteran, a typically honored hero in society, but turns the image on its head:

«…мирно мрут ветераны попоек / и в колясках вдали от помоек». ("…the veterans of booze-ups die peacefully / in their wheelchairs, away from the dumpsters.")

This couplet is a grim play on words. The word "veteran" is used, but not for war veterans - instead, it's veterans of drinking bouts (*попойки*). It implies that in the absence of real heroes or in the disregard of them, society has only aging alcoholics drinking themselves to death. They "die peacefully," which drips with irony, suggesting a pathetic, ignoble end. The image of them sitting in wheelchairs away from trash bins conjures up elderly drunks in a depressing care facility or on the margins of society, not celebrated but tucked out of sight (away from the dumpsters, perhaps in a slight gesture of dignity that they're not dying literally in the garbage). It's a stark commentary on how post-war society might treat its actual veterans as well: often war veterans in Russia (e.g., Afghan or Chechen war vets) ended up neglected, many turning to alcohol or ending up homeless - effectively becoming "veterans of drinking." Husky's lines here collapse the distinction between war hero and societal refuse. It's a biting indictment: the people who fought (or those who should have been heroes of society) are dying quietly, forgotten, and broken.

This touches on a broader postmodern theme - the collapse of grand narratives. The myth of the glorious veteran hero who is honored by the motherland is revealed to be a lie. In the post-Soviet reality, heroes are more likely to be found drunk and discarded than on pedestals. Partisan of the song is one such "hero" who has no place in peacetime; the others have drunk themselves into oblivion. The war, in effect, never ended for them, and society offers no meaningful reconciliation or redemption. "The Partizan" ultimately portrays war and its trauma as an endless

loop. Even when the external war ends, the internal war continues indefinitely for the hero. This is a postmodern stance, rejecting the neat conclusion of the heroic cycle. There is no return with the boon because there is no home that wants the boon, and no boon to give - only the ongoing struggle to exist with a shattered mind and a shattered purpose.

In sum, Husky's "The Partizan" deconstructs the archetype of the triumphant returning warrior. Instead, it gives us a perpetual wanderer of the war-torn landscape, a man who lives in a state of psychological warfare without resolution. This figure reflects a reality where wars leave lasting scars that do not fit into tidy narratives. The myth of heroism is dismantled to reveal a very human core of vulnerability, madness, and despair. The "partisan on the warpath" is a tragic anti-hero for whom victory is irrelevant; he embodies the senselessness of conflict and the anguish of those who survive with their humanity in tatters.

Through the analysis of Husky's songs, several key transformations of classical fairy-tale archetypes and narrative structures become evident. These changes illustrate not only a critique of traditional heroic myths but also a profound rethinking of the individual's role in post-Soviet reality. The following are three fundamental ways in which Husky deforms and subverts the conventions of folklore.

Traditional fairy tales often hinge on the presence of a magical helper or benevolent force that guides the hero and aids in overcoming obstacles (be it a fairy godmother, a wise old man, or a magic object). In Husky's songs, such assistance is conspicuously absent. The modern hero stands alone, confronted with a world that offers no external salvation. This lack of support often leads to despair and internal collapse. For example, in "The Partizan," the lone partisan receives no help from anyone, neither society nor supernatural forces, and is left to wander in psychological ruin. Even in "Kolobok," when the hero pleads with the "Moscow-fox" not to eat him in exchange for a song, it's a plea that ultimately fails; there is no deus ex machina to rescue him. The removal of the deus ex machina element emphasizes a postmodern sensibility: the individual must navigate a fragmented reality without the comfort of benevolent destiny. It reflects a world where traditional structures of support (community, family, faith in higher powers) have eroded, leaving the hero isolated.

In classic folklore, the hero's journey is one of initiation - a series of trials leading to personal growth, wisdom, and often some form of triumph or reward (be it material wealth, marriage, or self-knowledge). Husky's heroes undergo the inverse: an anti-initiation. Instead of gaining strength

or wisdom through their trials, they frequently emerge more disoriented, broken, or corrupted. They do not receive rewarding boons; rather, they lose parts of themselves along the way. In "To be an orc," for instance, the hero does not ascend or improve; he ends where he began, stuck in the same ruin, having only learned the "bitter happiness" of accepting misery. His journey is one of survival, not victory, and it strips away hope instead of culminating in accomplishment. Similarly, in "Kolobok," the character goes through a full cycle of adventures (much like the original bun rolling away from home, meeting various figures), but these experiences do not elevate him. There is no kingdom gained, no enlightenment - only exhaustion and the final act of self-destruction. This anti-initiatory pattern subverts the expectation that stories (and by extension lives) progress toward improvement or resolution. Husky's heroes illustrate a truth of many postmodern narratives: progress is an illusion, and the journey may lead nowhere or even downward.

Fairy tales traditionally operate in a universe of clear moral binaries: good vs. evil, hero vs. villain, with the narrative structured around the conflict and ultimate triumph of good. Husky dismantles this moral clarity, replacing it with ambivalent chaos. In his songs, the categories of "good" and "evil" lose their sharp definition; characters themselves are morally ambiguous or even apathetic to morality altogether. The worlds he depicts have no obvious justice or higher moral order. For example, the song "Fairytales" presents a universe where once-positive characters (Ivan, Vasilisa) behave ignobly or meet ignoble ends, and traditionally evil characters (Koshchey, Baba Yaga) are merely pathetic or complicit in the general moral decay, but no one is purely villainous, either just self-serving or broken. In "Partizan," the protagonist cannot be described as good or evil; his actions (such as possibly killing a cat) are disturbing, but he's also a sympathetic casualty of war - a victim and a perpetrator of violence. The absence of clear moral demarcations means there is also no moral reward or punishment at the end of these tales. "Kolobok" does not conclude with a didactic lesson; it ends with a metaphorical explosion and dispersion. These narratives suggest a world where moral order has collapsed, a reflection of the post-Soviet moral ambivalence, where old belief systems have crumbled, and new ones have yet to solidify. The listener is left in a space of uncertainty, forced to grapple with questions rather than receiving fairy-tale answers.

In breaking these conventions, Husky's postmodern deformation of fairy-tale motifs paints a picture of a world fundamentally different from that of traditional folklore. His songs' protagonists do not achieve triumph; they receive no magical aid, and they cannot navigate by a reliable moral

compass. Instead, they confront an amorphous reality where victory is replaced by survival (or surrender), personal growth by deterioration, and moral clarity by ambiguity and absurdity.

These transformations highlight how deeply contemporary reality, especially the post-Soviet experience, has diverged from the narrative frameworks that once helped people make sense of the world**.** By upending folkloric structures, Husky illuminates the sense of disorientation, alienation, and cynicism that pervade the modern cultural landscape. The classical tale is not merely updated, but deconstructed, its pieces rearranged to reveal the absence of the coherence and hope that they once provided.

Husky's reworking of fairy-tale archetypes and narratives in his music serves as a compelling lens through which to view the psychological and cultural landscape of contemporary Russia. By subjecting folkloric heroes and motifs to postmodern deformation, he effectively destroys traditional notions of heroism and narrative resolution to reflect a world that no longer conforms to those comforting patterns. In Husky's songs, heroes do not ride off into the sunset; more often, they stagger through smog or wander in ruins. The familiar journey of the fairy-tale protagonist, replete with magical helpers, clear trials, and just rewards, is turned on its head. What replaces it is not simply chaos for its own sake, but a truthful portrait of a generation and a society's struggle with disillusionment, moral ambiguity, and the search for meaning in the aftermath of collapsed grand narratives.

The characters in these songs end up exhausted rather than exalted. Lacking external support and facing incoherent realities, they often cannot find a "happy ending" or any ending at all, trapped in cycles of survival or self-destruction. This inversion of the fairy-tale structure provides a stark commentary on post-Soviet reality: a context where old myths (of heroism, of nation, of progress) ring hollow, and new guiding stories have yet to emerge, leaving individuals to fend for themselves in a kind of cultural and moral wilderness.

Yet, in articulating this bleak vision, Husky's work also validates the experiences of those living in that wilderness. His songs turn personal and collective trauma into a form of catharsis, demonstrating that modern musical texts, much like folklore of old, can be powerful tools for understanding and processing the shifting moral and existential landscape. By remixing archetypes, Husky not only creates a cultural phenomenon in Russian music but also prompts a critical reflection on how much the perception of good, evil, and heroism has changed under

contemporary conditions. In doing so, he keeps alive the storytelling tradition, not by preserving it in amber, but by smashing it and rearranging the pieces to capture the truth of his time.

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«Cloud Dancer» as Color of the Year 2026: Cultural Symbolism, Visual Practice, and the Soft Power of White

Pestova Stefania
Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia

Abstract: Pantone's selection of Cloud Dancer (Pantone 11-4201) - an airy off-white, as its Color of the Year 2026 offers a rich case study in the cultural and aesthetic significance of color. This article examines Cloud Dancer as a multifaceted symbol in contemporary visual culture, design, and art. We situate this soft white hue within historical and theoretical contexts of whiteness from modernist ideals of purity and neutrality to critiques of "chromophobia" to explore how white can signify both clarity and emptiness, renewal and ideology. Pantone's Color of the Year program is analyzed as a barometer of zeitgeist, reflecting societal yearnings for calm and "a fresh start" in chaotic times, even as it shapes consumer and design trends across fashion, beauty, interiors, and media. Through case studies of recent design projects and artworks, including Russian artists' engagements with white as meditative space, the article illustrates Cloud Dancer's influence and resonance. Far from a "blank" choice, Cloud Dancer is argued to carry a "whisper of calm and peace in a noisy world," embodying an interdisciplinary aesthetic of minimalism, materiality, and hopeful simplicity that has captured the contemporary imagination. The conclusion reflects on the power and ambiguity of white in today's visual culture and on what Pantone's Cloud Dancer reveals about our current cultural moment.

Keywords: Pantone Color of the Year; Cloud Dancer; white; visual culture; contemporary art; design; minimalism; color theory; material culture; aesthetics

In December 2025, the Pantone Color Institute announced "Cloud Dancer" (Pantone 11-4201), a lofty, billowy white, as the Color of the Year 2026, marking the first time a white shade has received this annual designation. Described by Pantone as "a whisper of calm and peace in a noisy world," Cloud Dancer was presented as a symbol of clarity and tranquility amid societal

upheavals. Leatrice Eiseman, Pantone's executive director, characterized this airy off-white as "a discrete hue offering a promise of clarity" in an era of transformation. Laurie Pressman, Vice President of the Pantone Color Institute, likewise explained that the choice "reflects the state of the modern world and society's demand for calm, serenity, clarity, and inner balance." Like a blank canvas signaling a fresh start, Cloud Dancer is meant to strip away "layers of outmoded thinking" and open the door to new perspectives.

Such framing by Pantone suggests that a seemingly neutral color carries deliberate cultural messaging. The selection of Cloud Dancer invites us to consider why a soft white would emerge as the chromatic avatar of the coming year. What does the embrace of white reveal about contemporary sensibilities and anxieties? How does Pantone's Color of the Year phenomenon itself mediate between design culture and broader social trends? This article tackles these questions by examining Cloud Dancer's meaning and impact across several dimensions.

First, we situate Cloud Dancer in the cultural history of the color white, drawing on color theory and visual culture scholarship to understand the ambivalent symbolism of whiteness as both pure and sterile, hopeful and oppressive. White has long been a charged color in Western art and design, from modernist architects' fetish for white walls to avant-garde artists' explorations of the white monochrome. We outline how white has been idealized as a symbol of purity, simplicity, and peace, yet also critiqued as an emblem of blankness or ideological neutrality.

Second, we analyze Pantone's Color of the Year program as a cultural practice. Founded in 1999 to highlight "how global culture is reflected through the language of color," according to Pressman, this annual forecast has evolved from a niche trend report into a widely publicized "cultural touchstone" with significant influence on consumer and design industries. By tracing the recent succession of Colors of the Year from the gentle "Peach Fuzz" (2024) to warm "Mocha Mousse" (2025), and now Cloud Dancer. We consider how Pantone's choices both respond to and shape the zeitgeist. The article evaluates the reception of Cloud Dancer, including debates about the implications of elevating whiteness at this historical moment, to understand how color trends can become sites of social discourse.

Finally, we explore Cloud Dancer's interdisciplinary influence on contemporary practice in design and art. The choice of a versatile off-white was immediately echoed in fashion, where designers' Spring-Summer 2026 collections featured all-white ensembles and textural whites. In interior design and consumer products, Cloud Dancer has been taken up as a "quiet emblem of

hope," appearing in everything from hotel décors to technology accessories. We discuss examples of how a trending white manifests in material culture, for instance, in the "international beige aesthetic" that has lately dominated lifestyle and branding worldwide.

Crucially, we also examine how contemporary artists engage with white as a medium and concept, highlighting case studies from Russia and beyond. Works by artists such as Leonid Kostin, Aidan Salakhova, and Natalia Yudina demonstrate that white is far from an "empty" choice; rather, it can function as a space of meditation, a reference to sacred traditions, or a statement on silence and erasure. By weaving these threads, this article shows that Cloud Dancer crystallizes a confluence of cultural currents, a desire for simplicity and solace, a nod to modernist minimalism, and a reflection of social narratives, making this color a potent lens for examining the performance of culture in 2026.

Few colors carry the layered symbolism and contradictory associations that white does. As color historian Michel Pastoureau observes, "colors are always ambivalent, each possessing its positive and negative aspects." White embodies a spectrum of meanings: "piety, purity, power, uniformity, ghostliness, hygiene, renewal, innocence, simplicity," to name a few. Many of these meanings are culturally specific or have shifted over time. In European tradition, white has been the color of virtue and sacred ritual, the innocence of a wedding gown or the purifying robes of baptism, yet it is equally the color of mourning and death in other cultural contexts (for example, white is the traditional color of widowhood or funerals in parts of India and East Asia). White can thus signify beginnings (a blank page, a clean slate) or endings (a shroud, winter's snow). It is at once "wholer than whole" - "whiter than white" to quote the title of a recent art exhibition, and yet associated with absence, nothingness, or erasure [Pastoureau 2023].

In the modern Western imagination, white often connotes purity, clarity, and truth, aligning with Enlightenment ideals of rationality. The modernist revolution in architecture and design famously elevated white to a guiding aesthetic principle. Pioneering functionalist architect Adolf Loos in 1908 condemned ornamental excess as degenerate, envisioning a future in which "the streets of the city will glisten like white walls". A generation later, Le Corbusier insisted on whitewashing buildings, declaring white to be "clean, hygienic, and noble," the color that would cleanse society of its baroque past. The ideal of the white cube: white walls, white light became synonymous with modern art galleries, projecting an aura of neutrality and focus. But as Brian O'Doherty famously argued in Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, this

ostensibly neutral whiteness carries its own ideological freight. The immaculate white gallery, by design, excludes the clutter of everyday context; it "elevates art above its earthly origins, alienating uninitiated visitors and supporting traditional power relationships," as Whitney Birkett summarized of the white-cube paradigm. In other words, white's supposed neutrality can mask an exclusive and elitist stance, an invisibility that is itself cultural.

This critical perspective resonates with artist and theorist David Batchelor's concept of "chromophobia." In his book *Chromophobia*, Batchelor examines the recurrent Western fear or distrust of color. He notes that Western thought has often treated color as frivolous, chaotic, feminine, or primitive, something to be controlled or purged, while idealizing white (and black) as the colors of pure form and reason [Batchelor 2000]. As design curator Priya Khanchandani put it, citing Batchelor, the "rejection of color isn't just aesthetic; it's ideological". To prefer white above all is to implicitly dismiss the plurality of experience that vibrant colors represent. Khanchandani pointedly connected Pantone's choice of Cloud Dancer to this ideology, suggesting that at a time when society struggles with issues of inclusion, "choosing white as the color of the year feels tone-deaf. After all, the rejection of color is a resistance to plurality." Her critique reminds us that even a color choice can be read in the political register: whiteness is never purely innocent of cultural context.

And yet, white also retains its positive valences, which likely explains its enduring appeal in times of uncertainty. Psychologically, white is often experienced as calming and light. It reflects and diffuses light, enlarging spaces and fostering an atmosphere of simplicity. In color psychology and marketing, white is associated with qualities of cleanliness, freshness, and peace, hence its ubiquitous use in healthcare, tech, and wellness branding to signify trustworthiness or Zen-like calm. The cultural theorist Richard Dyer, writing on the symbolism of whiteness, notes that white carries an "illusion of transparency". It seems to reveal rather than obscure, and thus can function as a normative background against which other colors shout. This illusory neutrality is why white backgrounds dominate in graphic design and digital interfaces (the blank white webpage or document feels like an objective space to insert content). White's ambiguity, both a presence and an absence of color, is what allows it to be claimed as an emblem of both universalism and minimalist reduction. In art history, the journey from Kazimir Malevich's 1918 White on White (a seminal blank canvas that attempted to transcend representation) to Robert Ryman's career of subtle white-on-white paintings demonstrates how artists have found endless possibility in

ostensibly same white. Ryman, for instance, explored "the different kinds of whiteness" afforded by various pigments and materials: "lead, zinc, barium and titanium, chalky whites and hard industrial whites, silky whites and bone whites, kitchen whites and shroud whites, numinous whites and dead whites." Each imbued with its own texture and light. Such explorations underscore that white is not one thing at all, but a prism of nuances: warm vs. cool, matte vs. glossy, soft vs. stark.

Cloud Dancer, as defined by Pantone, clearly aligns with a particular mood of white, one of softness, warmth, and approachability. Laurie Pressman emphasized that Cloud Dancer "is not a cold or sterile white… It's a natural white," balanced in tone so as not to appear stark. "Unlike an optical white associated with alienation or coldness, Cloud Dancer looks soft, calm, and human," Pressman explained, "It doesn't push or repel". In Pantone's narrative, Cloud Dancer's gentle off-white character distinguishes it from the image of antiseptic, clinical white. Instead, it embodies wholeness and harmony, what Pressman calls "a future without toxicity, excess, or constant strain… a sense of ease, inner clarity and integrity". This language of naturalness and balance suggests an attempt to reclaim white's positive connotations (peace, unity, simplicity) while avoiding its negative ones (sterility, emptiness, or exclusivity). Cloud Dancer is positioned as white with a human face - "soft yet present," as one designer described it, inviting "sensing rather than thinking". The very name Cloud Dancer evokes an ethereal lightness and movement, distancing it from harsh "optic white" and situating it closer to nature: clouds, air, and breath (indeed, Vogue's report notes Eiseman described it as "a breath of fresh air").

In summary, white as a color carries a baggage of meanings that must be carefully managed. The context of 2025-2026, with societies worldwide feeling fatigued by crises and "overloaded by information, obligations and constant stimulation," has given new urgency to white's promise of relief. Pantone's Cloud Dancer leverages the therapeutic imaginary of white – the notion that blankness can be healing, that simplicity equals truth, yet it cannot escape the centuries-old discourse that makes whiteness paradoxically powerful and problematic. This dynamic tension underlies the discussion of Cloud Dancer's cultural role that follows.

When Pantone launched its Color of the Year initiative in 1999, the idea was to spotlight the intersection of color and culture. "We wanted to show how events in the global culture manifest through the language of color," Pressman explains. In practice, the Pantone Color of the Year (COTY) is chosen by a panel of color experts and trend forecasters who examine developments

across industries, from technology and design to socio-political shifts and even emerging travel destinations. “There are reasons why people gravitate to certain color families when they do,” Pressman notes; the Pantone team looks for a hue that feels “bubbling up across all areas of design” and captures a prevailing mood or aspiration. The selection is then announced with considerable fanfare each December, often accompanied by a marketing blitz and partnerships that span retail products, décor, and media features. Over two and a half decades, the Pantone COTY has evolved into what The Atlantic’s culture writer Ellen Cushing calls “a massive cultural and commercial occasion - a global news event created out of thin air”. It garners headlines in fashion magazines and mainstream news alike, attesting to Pantone’s success in making an arcane color index into a widely recognized annual trend barometer.

Critics have sometimes questioned the substance behind this spectacle. Cushing wryly notes that the Color of the Year concept is “strange by almost any measure. But then again, so is the concept of a color of the year.” What began as a clever marketing exercise by a printing color standards company has become a self-fulfilling prophecy of trends. Pantone freely admits that beyond reflecting the zeitgeist, the COTY is meant to shape consumer desire: it predicts and prescribes future tastes. The company has effectively created an annual opportunity to re-package color, a fundamental, abundant element of the visual world, as a must-have commodity. “The color of the year takes something available to everyone, in nature, and sells it back to us,” Cushing observes pointedly. This dynamic invites a certain skepticism: is Cloud Dancer truly the chromatic savior of 2026, or simply Pantone’s exercise in branding prowess?

Nonetheless, even skeptics concede that Pantone’s picks often resonate because they distill widespread currents. In the early 2020s, a clear pattern emerged. After the vivid “Very Peri” periwinkle purple selected for 2022 (symbolizing creativity and transition in a pandemic-fatigued world), Pantone pivoted to softer, comforting tones: “Peach Fuzz” (a gentle peachy-pink) was 2024’s choice, said to evoke “human compassion and connection”, followed by “Mocha Mousse” (a creamy mid-brown) for 2025, chosen for its nurturing warmth and stability. These successive choices of subdued, earthy colors indicate a collective gravitation towards calming, grounding hues, perhaps a response to prolonged global instability and a surfeit of digital brightness. By late 2025, with war, political turmoil, and climate anxiety dominating headlines, the stage was set for ultimate neutrality. Cloud Dancer’s emergence can thus be read as the logical extension of a trend: the “sad beige” or “greige” palette that has permeated everything from Instagram interiors to high

fashion, now culminating in pure white. Yet Pantone's decision to crown a white, essentially the antithesis of bold color, was not without controversy. Almost immediately after the announcement, debates flared up on social media and in opinion pages. Some commentators objected that celebrating a form of "whiteness" in the cultural realm felt uncomfortable, even if the intent was apolitical. As Cushing reports, "some people noted that this was maybe not the year to publish a press release about how awesome whiteness is," given social tensions. Several designers and critics felt the choice was tone-deaf, calling it a missed opportunity to highlight a more vibrant or inclusive hue at a time when diversity (both cultural and aesthetic) is a pressing value. On the other hand, defenders of Cloud Dancer argued that critics were over-reading a harmless design trend, projecting political meaning onto a color where none was intended, a debate which itself underscores how color is never culturally neutral. Pantone officials, for their part, sidestepped the fray by emphasizing the psychological message of calm. "True strength lies not just in doing, but also in being," the press release intoned, suggesting that stepping back (into quietude, into white space) can be an antidote to the year's frenetic pace.

One way to understand Pantone's COTY is as a form of cultural storytelling or collective therapy through design. By naming a Color of the Year, Pantone effectively offers a thematic lens for the coming year. A narrative that can be adopted by brands, designers, and consumers to make sense of the times. In 2026, that narrative is about seeking simplicity and peace. Cloud Dancer's story emphasizes reduction, reflection, and reset. "At this time of transformation, when we are reimagining our future and our place in the world, Cloud Dancer carries the promise of clarity," said Eiseman. The notion of clarity here is as much spiritual as visual, a clarity of mind and purpose. The Pantone announcement casts stepping into white as akin to a meditation: "a conscious statement of simplification" that can "enhance our focus" and drown out the noise. Such rhetoric resonates strongly with trends in wellness and mindfulness culture, where minimalist aesthetics (think of the sparse, all-white yoga studio or the clean lines of an Apple device interface) are used to signify a decluttered, healthy mental state. In a sense, Pantone identified in Cloud Dancer the perfect visual encapsulation of a widespread craving: the yearning to hit "reset" on a world that feels cluttered and overwhelming. By literally whitewashing the palette, we symbolically wipe the slate clean.

That interpretation also helps explain why Cloud Dancer did not remain an abstract forecast but quickly became concrete across sectors of design. Major companies and brands have latched

onto Cloud Dancer as a marketing and design cue for 2026. Pantone often coordinates with manufacturers and retailers to produce Color of the Year-branded items; indeed, an Atlantic report noted that Mandarin Oriental Hotels planned to integrate Cloud Dancer accents into their luxury interiors, the furniture retailer Joybird launched sofas upholstered in Cloud Dancer white, 3M introduced Cloud Dancer-colored Command hooks for the home, and even Play-Doh released a special edition off-white dough for children. These examples illustrate how the COTY can spark a cross-industry design convergence. Consumers in 2026 might find themselves surrounded by subtly Cloud-Dancer-tinted options, from fashion to paint to kitchen appliances, all piggybacking on Pantone's declaration that this specific white is the hue of the moment. In effect, Pantone orchestrates a yearly synesthetic experience: a particular color tone is pushed to saturate visual culture, creating a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that this will indeed be "the color" we collectively remember and see everywhere for that year.

Of course, the impact is not absolute. Many other colors will trend simultaneously, but Pantone's Color of the Year has achieved a remarkable prominence in guiding design conversations. It acts as a reference point for creative professionals. In design magazines, one now routinely finds headlines like "How to Embrace Color of the Year in Your Home/Wardrobe". The Color of the Year provides a cohesive story that unites disparate fields: a fashion designer, an interior decorator, and a graphic designer can all riff on Cloud Dancer in their own domains and feel part of a larger cultural current. This interdisciplinary reach is explicitly intentional. "Over the years Pantone Color of the Year turned from a professional forecast into a cultural indicator that significantly influences fashion, design, interiors, beauty, art and branding," notes Pressman. The 2026 selection, she adds, was "logical" for Pantone's team because their global analysis discerned a transitional moment in need of pause and reflection. A white being "one of the most understandable colors" and one that "does not conflict with other shades or impose meanings" was seen as uniquely apt to answer this need. In that sense, Cloud Dancer exemplifies how Pantone's Color of the Year serves as both a mirror and a lamp: it mirrors a widespread mood (in this case, fatigue and the hunger for simplicity) and shines a guiding lamp toward a proposed aesthetic resolution (a gentle whiteout of our visual field).

Yet, as we have discussed, white is not actually free of meaning or conflict. It is a canvas onto which people project hopes and fears. The rollout of Cloud Dancer has therefore been a live demonstration of cultural reception in action. Within the design community, responses have ranged

from enthusiasm to ambivalence. Some see it as an invitation to explore texture, form, and material in more nuanced ways, since working in white often shifts focus to these aspects. Others worry that an "international beige aesthetic" signals a retreat from bold creative risk, a homogeneity in global design akin to a flattening of cultural difference. Uchronia's Julien Sebban, an interior designer, remarked that choosing white as Color of the Year "says something deeper about our current global mindset: a move toward neutrality, uniformity… a dominance of an international beige aesthetic that can feel underwhelming, especially when creativity and boldness feel more necessary than ever." This critique highlights the paradox of Cloud Dancer's promise: in seeking calm and unity, do we risk dullness or even a subtle erasure of diversity? The question is not merely aesthetic but cultural. A reminder that trends in color reflect larger negotiations between stability and change, conformity and expression in society.

In summary, Pantone's Color of the Year 2026, Cloud Dancer, operates at the intersection of trend forecasting, cultural need, and marketing strategy. It encapsulates a narrative of collective longing for peace and clarity, while also exemplifying the mechanisms by which color trends are disseminated and debated. With this understanding of Cloud Dancer's conceptual framing and public reception, we can now turn to concrete manifestations of this hue across various creative fields. How is Cloud Dancer being used and interpreted by designers, artists, and consumers? And what does this reveal about the evolving aesthetics of our time? The following sections delve into Cloud Dancer's imprint on contemporary design practices and visual culture, with an eye to its interdisciplinary significance.

Upon its announcement, Cloud Dancer was hailed by Pantone as a "key structural color" whose versatility would make it a foundational presence across product categories and environments. Unlike a flashy accent hue, this off-white can easily weave into the fabric of daily life - "whether as a standalone statement or in combination with other shades". Indeed, much of Cloud Dancer's power lies in its ability to adapt and harmonize. In this section, we examine how the design world is incorporating Cloud Dancer, focusing on fashion, beauty, interior design, and consumer products, and how this reflects current aesthetic values.

In fashion, white has always held a special place as both a neutral base and dramatic statement. A classic white shirt or T-shirt is a wardrobe staple - a symbol of simplicity and clarity. At the same time, an all-white outfit can be strikingly avant-garde. Designers navigating the Cloud Dancer trend are exploiting both aspects. According to Vogue's reportage, white in fashion is

"simultaneously associated with minimalism and tradition. White can look futuristic or classic, depending on context." This duality means Cloud Dancer can be the palette for a cutting-edge conceptual collection as much as for a revival of timeless elegance.

Notably, several Spring/Summer 2026 collections unveiled shortly after Pantone's announcement showcased Cloud Dancer-like whites. For example, the label Heirlome presented an S/S 2026 line grounded in soft white tones, emphasizing flowing silhouettes that invoked ease and lightness. Vaquera, known for its subversive takes on attire, included ensembles in gentle white, perhaps a nod to the idea that even counter-cultural fashion finds a canvas in white. The Jil Sander S/S 2026 collection (by Luke and Lucie Meier) was especially aligned with Cloud Dancer's spirit. Jil Sander's minimalist heritage made white an ideal vehicle: their runway featured layered white separates in luxurious fabrics, demonstrating how texture (sheer organza, matte cotton, silky wool) can add depth to an all-white look. This emphasis on texture and form over color is a key theme that Cloud Dancer has reinforced. In a monochromatic white outfit, the cut of a garment, the drape of the fabric, and subtle tonal variations become much more noticeable. Designers are thus challenged to achieve interest without relying on hue contrasts. Early 2026 collections suggest they are meeting this challenge with creativity, using Cloud Dancer's "soft airy" quality to highlight craftsmanship details like sculptural draping, quilting (to add shadow-play on white), and layering of translucency.

White in fashion also carries symbolic weight that designers can play with. As Rosalind Jana notes in her review of Nina Edwards' book on white clothing, to wear white is to experience its "radiance and vulnerabilities… its authoritative power and its ability to shame." A white garment shows dirt easily, implying both the aspiration to perfection and the risk of imperfection. High fashion often leverages this by making white garments that are impractical yet alluring (e.g., floor-length white coats or dresses that demand careful environments). In 2026, one sees a continuation of the "stylized purity" trope: Alexander McQueen S/S 2026, for instance, featured sharp tailoring in ivory white - a nod to the crisp white suits of the 1980s power dressing era, reimagined for a post-pandemic desire for both protection and optimism. Meanwhile, in a more everyday register, bridal fashion and the burgeoning "clean girl" aesthetic in streetwear both align with Cloud Dancer's vibe. The bridal sector remains anchored in white's symbolism of virginity and new beginnings (an association cemented in Western culture by Queen Victoria's 19th-century

white wedding gown trend). Bridal designers will likely double down on off-white, touting Cloud Dancer as the shade of the year for weddings, allowing brides a trendy yet classic choice.

In beauty and cosmetics, Cloud Dancer's influence is subtler but still evident. Packaging design for skincare and wellness products has, for several years, been dominated by white or off-white minimalist packaging, a trend often referred to as "clinical chic" or the Aesop aesthetic (after the cult skincare brand known for its apothecary-style minimal packaging). The reasoning is clear: white packaging connotes purity, efficacy, and cleanliness traits desirable in products that go on our bodies. Now, with Cloud Dancer, brands have a specific shade to emulate. We see new lines of products emphasizing "cloud" or "milk" in their names, bottled in frosted or opaque white containers. For instance, a niche perfume house released a fragrance called "Dancer in Clouds" in early 2026 in a Cloud Dancer-colored bottle, marketing it as a "pure and contemplative" scent. Similarly, makeup trends have embraced pearly white accents. For example, white eyeliner or white nail polish (a trend Chanel helped popularize by including soft white in its nail polish collections, noted by one designer). White nails and eyeliner create a stark, modern look that aligns with the overall push towards simplicity with a twist. It is a form of minimalist expression: the face becomes a canvas with a single bold stroke of white, echoing the artistic notion of presence through absence.

From a consumer standpoint, the appeal of Cloud Dancer in fashion and beauty ties into the broader "quiet luxury" and minimalism movements. "Quiet luxury", a term trending in 2025-26, describes the preference for understated, logo-free, high-quality items that signal status through craftsmanship rather than loud design. Cloud Dancer fits perfectly into this ethos: a finely made white cashmere sweater or a cream leather handbag whispers luxury far more than a flashy color or pattern. The neutral hue allows the quality to speak. Moreover, minimalism in personal style often relies on a limited palette of neutrals (white, black, beige), which all mix seamlessly. Cloud Dancer, being an off-white with a hint of warmth, means it pairs effortlessly with other neutrals and gentle tones, making it a flexible choice for capsule wardrobes. Influencers promoting sustainable fashion have also touted buying pieces in whites and creams because they are seasonless and can be restyled year-round. One can imagine Cloud Dancer-colored garments being worn in layered winter looks as easily as in summer linen ensembles.

In sum, in the realms of fashion and beauty, Cloud Dancer accentuates a shift toward understated elegance and mindful simplicity. It is enabling designers and consumers alike to

explore nuance, whether the nuance of a silhouette or the nuance of a personal presentation that favors subtlety over splash. At the same time, its omnipresence serves as a reminder that even neutrality can be a strong statement in a time saturated with imagery: choosing to wear white head-to-toe, or to present a product in plain white packaging, can cut through the noise with an unexpected boldness of restraint.

If any sphere has fully embraced Cloud Dancer's ethos, it is interior design. For the past decade, interior trends have oscillated between maximalist coziness and minimalist serenity, and currently the pendulum has swung firmly toward the latter. The color white has historically been fundamental in interior decor as a backdrop; think of the white-walled modern home as a norm, but in 2026, we see white taking center stage as the defining mood of spaces, from homes to hotels. Cloud Dancer, specifically, being a balanced off-white, aligns with popular paint colors in recent years, such as Benjamin Moore's "Simply White" or Farrow & Ball's array of white tones (e.g., "School House White"), which have warm undertones to avoid sterility. Such whites promise to create havens of tranquility that are still inviting.

One reason white interiors are perennially appealing is their ability to enhance natural light. Cloud Dancer, with its slight luminosity, reflects daylight softly, infusing rooms with a gentle glow. In small urban apartments or large open-plan houses alike, designers opt for off-white walls and ceilings to maximize the sense of openness and airiness. This has been tied to wellness: studies in environmental psychology suggest that bright, light-colored spaces can improve mood and even perceived cleanliness. As Pantone put it, Cloud Dancer "brings a sense of airiness to all product applications and environments." Architects and interior designers thus incorporate Cloud Dancer not only on walls but in textiles and furnishings. We see living rooms styled entirely in layered whites - walls in matte Cloud Dancer paint, sofas upholstered in undyed cotton or linen, sheer white curtains filtering sunlight, a scene that looks almost cloud-like itself. This aesthetic has been popularized through social media as the "all-white room" trend, often hashtagged with #MinimalLiving or #WhiteInterior, showcasing spaces that appear as oases of uncluttered calm.

However, working with so much white poses challenges in material maintenance and visual interest, which designers meet through material creativity. Texture becomes paramount: a Cloud Dancer-toned bouclé sofa, a high-pile cream rug, ceramic vases in off-white glazes; these add tactile depth to what could otherwise feel flat. In a kind of echo of Robert Ryman's artistic exploration of multiple whites, interior designers distinguish between shades and finishes: e.g.,

pairing a cooler white marble countertop with warmer white oak cabinetry, both under the umbrella of the Cloud Dancer palette, to create contrast within harmony. The material culture aspect is notable: choosing white often means highlighting the natural qualities of materials (the grain of wood, the weave of fabric, the translucency of glass) because color is not the focus. This ties into a larger movement of organic minimalism, where neutrals like Cloud Dancer are valued for bringing out the essence of materials and craftsmanship.

The cultural significance of white in interior spaces also connects to notions of hygiene and modernity. In the early 20th century, hospitals and kitchens embraced white tiles and enamel surfaces under the belief that white does not hide dirt, making uncleanliness immediately visible and thereby encouraging sanitation. This association of white with cleanliness and health continues to influence contemporary design. The ongoing emphasis on clean, decluttered home environments (partially a response to the pandemic era's focus on healthy living spaces) means consumers often gravitate to white surfaces, whether a cloud-white smart air purifier or simply painting a formerly colorful room white to psychologically "disinfect" it. Cloud Dancer, being a gentle white, fits perfectly as a curative color for interiors aimed at stress reduction. One might recall the mid-century modern dream of the "all-white kitchen" that symbolized a break from the sooty, dark kitchens of the 19th century - similarly, today's white-centric interiors symbolize a break from the chaos outside, a controlled environment of clarity. Designers of wellness centers, meditation rooms, and even tech offices (notably, companies like Apple and Google have used predominantly white interiors to stimulate creativity and calm) are likely adopting Cloud Dancer paint and furnishings to enhance those qualities.

Commercial and public spaces are also leveraging Cloud Dancer. As mentioned, the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park in London collaborated with designers (like Julien Sebban) to implement a suite in a celadon green previously, and now plans for Cloud Dancer elements show the hospitality sector's responsiveness. High-end hotels frequently update their color schemes to match Pantone's announcements, offering guests the subliminal sense of being "in vogue." A Cloud Dancer-themed hotel room might feature white floral arrangements, off-white linens, and custom decor pieces as if enveloping the guest in that "whisper of calm" Pantone extols. Meanwhile, more utilitarian spaces like offices or retail stores might incorporate Cloud Dancer in softer ways: maybe it's the color of the year for furniture design, so office chairs and lounge sofas are produced in off-white leather or mesh (indeed, many furniture brands have released Cloud

Dancer editions of popular models). Retail displays for fashion and cosmetics in 2026 are also predicted to use Cloud Dancer backdrops to allow merchandise to pop subtly yet maintain a cohesive, gentle ambiance.

One should acknowledge, however, that an all-white environment is not universally beloved. Some find excessive whiteness to be sterile or unmoored. Critics of the monochromatic white interior note that it can feel like living in a showroom or a magazine spread rather than a cozy home. White shows wear and mess easily, a concern for households with children or pets. The trend of Cloud Dancer interiors might thus be aspirational, something that thrives in carefully curated images more than in every lived reality. Nonetheless, even those not adopting a floor-to-ceiling white scheme may integrate Cloud Dancer as an accent of simplicity: a feature wall in Cloud Dancer white to open a space, some cushions or a new set of dinnerware in off-white to refresh the table. The beauty of a neutral like Cloud Dancer is it plays well with others. Pantone itself suggests combining Cloud Dancer with other colors for contrast - for instance, pairing it with earth tones, muted pastels, or even a bold hue to make that hue pop more (white provides a high contrast without clashing). In interior design magazines, one finds suggestions such as try Cloud Dancer walls with deep charcoal furniture for a modern contrast, or with sage green and sandy beige for a nature-inspired palette. This reflects the continued influence of Scandinavian design principles (light neutrals + natural materials + hints of nature's colors) that remain popular.

Interestingly, Cloud Dancer's off-white warmth also dovetails with the resurgence of plaster and limewash finishes in interiors. These traditional wall treatments often dry to an irregular, cloud-like off-white with texture, giving walls a subtly weathered, organic look. The trend of "limewashed white walls" in trendy restaurants and homes reflects a desire for white that has character, a bit of patina or softness, as opposed to flat builder's white paint. Cloud Dancer, one might say, is the ideal color of white for the postmodern preference: not the blinding white of a fluorescent-lit showroom, but the cozy white of a sunlit atelier or a rustic modern kitchen.

In terms of furniture and product design, Cloud Dancer's influence is visible in the "colorways" offered for new products. For example, a famous furniture design brand released its iconic lounge chair in a limited Cloud Dancer edition, highlighting how a change in color can recast a classic piece as fresh. Technology gadgets also lean into white: since Apple's iPod in pure white and its long line of white or silver devices, white tech has signified modernity. Now, companies might market Cloud Dancer-colored smartphones or headphones even if

indistinguishable from regular white, the branding of the color of the year adds a layer of cultural cachet. This interplay shows how Pantone's cultural production of a named color can influence material culture: consumers may buy a "Cloud Dancer edition" not just because they love off-white, but because it feels timely and part of a broader design conversation.

So, the uptake of Cloud Dancer in interiors and material culture illustrates a broader lifestyle trend: the pursuit of spaces and objects that soothe. In a world of information overload, the gentle white environment offers a psychological exhale. It embodies a hope that by simplifying our visual field - stripping it to essences like form, light, and shadow - we might simplify our lives. Whether or not that hope is fully realized, it is aesthetically manifest in the proliferation of Cloud Dancer across the designed world of 2026.

While Pantone's Color of the Year is a marketing construct, its selection of Cloud Dancer reverberates with themes that contemporary artists have long engaged: emptiness, silence, potentiality, and the materiality of white. In this section, we turn to the field of visual art to explore how the cultural significance of a white like Cloud Dancer resonates in recent artistic projects. We will particularly highlight the work of several Russian artists: Leonid Kostin, Aidan Salakhova, and Natalia Yudina whose practices involve white as a central element, thereby providing deeper context and commentary on what a color like Cloud Dancer can signify in artistic discourse.

Moscow-based artist Leonid Kostin provides a striking example of transforming whiteness into an experience of the sacred and the metaphysical. In 2024-25, Kostin developed a series called "SPAS blank" (with "Spas" meaning Savior in Russian, referencing traditional icons of Christ). For this project, Kostin drew directly from the icon painting heritage of Eastern Orthodoxy, but with a radical twist: he stripped the icons of their images entirely. As reported by one exhibition, "from the colored panels in the icon-painting tradition of tempera, only pure, image-free levkas remains". Levkas - a white gesso ground applied on icon boards - is traditionally the base upon which an icon's image (of Christ, the Virgin, saints) is painted. In Kostin's Spas blank, the viewer is presented with the icon panel's wood and its smooth white levkas surface, without any figurative depiction.

This gesture of reduction transforms the white ground into the subject itself. According to commentary on Kostin's Cosmoscow 2025 installation, "white gesso and wood - the traditional basis of iconography - tie the project to the material culture of the sacred, avoiding any one confession. These works create a situation where the sacred is intuited rather than prescribed:

instead of showing concrete forms of spirit, the artist appeals to its ineffability. The works do not illustrate faith, but create a space for meditation and questioning." In these lines, we see clearly how whiteness functions as a conduit of meaning. By using blank white panels, Kostin evokes the presence of the holy precisely through absence. The white levkas stands in for the divine light or truth that in theology is often described as invisible or blindingly white. What was once a mere preparatory layer in icon-making now becomes the result - a "finished" icon that is all potential, no image. Viewers encountering Spas blank have reported a sense of calm and contemplation akin to standing before the famed Malevich's white square, but with the added resonance of religious heritage. Kostin effectively invites the audience into a liminal space (much as Pantone described Cloud Dancer as a "liminal space" between digital future and primal need for connection): a white that is not empty but full of possibility for personal reflection, an "opening for imagination and innovation," to quote Pantone's phrasing.

Kostin's work aligns with Cloud Dancer's ethos in underscoring white as unity and reset. Just as Pantone speaks of Cloud Dancer as "a blank canvas," meaning a new beginning, Kostin's blank icons suggest a return to origin - the beginning of time and history denoted by that white, as curator Kirill Alekseev wrote about Yudina's work. By avoiding specific religious imagery, Kostin's white icons also become universal: any viewer, regardless of background, can project their own meaning. This ties to Pressman's note that white "does not impose meanings" and is "open to interpretations". In a divided world, offering a space of common quiet can be seen as a subtle act of resistance against noise and conflict, very much echoing Pantone's motivation in highlighting a color of peace. Kostin's Spas blank can thus be read as a fine art parallel to the cultural moment Cloud Dancer inhabits: a search for shared inner stillness through the universally legible language of white.

Another Russian artist, Natalia Yudina, has explicitly investigated the color white and its experiential impact. Yudina's 2025 solo exhibition "*Белее Белого"* (Whiter than White) in Moscow was a project immersing viewers in an all-white environment to explore "atmospheric experiences and artistic states of mind that visit us in winter's silence." The show's concept text reads almost like a manifesto on white: "This color is the beginning of time, the beginning of history. It is the source of light and life. In art a white patch is an indication of a path that encompasses the infinity of color relations across its span." Here, white is positioned as origin and totality: containing all colors in potential. Yudina's installation placed the viewer in a "space of

emptiness and light" reminiscent of a winter landscape - winter being nature's own Cloud Dancer moment, when snow blankets the world in hush and monochrome. The goal, Yudina stated, was "to immerse the viewer in an environment of calm and stillness of thoughts. These are visual elements of emptiness, manifested through the fabric of scenery and artworks. The visitor is deprived of spatial and temporal reference points, which gives infinite freedom of choice and purity of experience."

The phrasing strongly recalls Pantone's rhetoric about Cloud Dancer enabling "true relaxation and focus, letting creativity breathe." In Yudina's exhibition, the "whiter than white" environment removed the usual cues that orient us much as a dense fog or whiteout snowstorm erases horizon and depth. While disorienting, this was intended as a liberation: by losing external reference, one turns inward, achieving a meditative state. Yudina taps into a longstanding avant-garde interest in monochrome (from Suprematism to Minimalism) as a vehicle for spiritual or existential insight. Her use of white specifically leverages its associations with silence (winter's hush), eternity (the blank void), and purity. The title Whiter than White suggests trying to reach an absolute, an almost transcendental state beyond even perfect white. In practical terms, the show included white-on-white artworks and sculptural elements that blended with the all-white decor, challenging viewers to actively look and find subtle forms in the void. This required slowing down one's gaze, another parallel to Cloud Dancer's ethos of quiet focus. One can draw a line from such art experiences to the public's receptivity to a color like Cloud Dancer: the culture may be more ready than before to appreciate nuance and subtlety, having been primed by immersive art, mindfulness practices, and an overdose of oversaturated visual media.

Yudina's and Kostin's projects both demonstrate how Russian contemporary art has been engaging with whiteness as a theme, independent of but resonant with global trends. They carry forward a legacy from the Russian avant-garde (Malevich's White on White being an ancestor here) and from Eastern spiritual aesthetics (the use of light and emptiness in Eastern Orthodox art and even in Sufi poetry about light). These contexts enrich Cloud Dancer's significance: it is not just a consumer color but part of a deeper exploration of how emptiness can be fullness. It is noteworthy that Pantone, in announcing a new artist initiative around Cloud Dancer, invited artists to create their interpretation of the color. The first such collaboration was with Italian illustrator Emiliano Ponzi, who designed a limited-edition tote bag featuring Cloud Dancer. While that is a

commercial tie-in, it indicates Pantone's recognition that artists can reveal meanings of the color beyond style, tapping into conceptual or emotional realms.

Moving beyond Russia, we consider the work of Aidan Salakhova, an Azerbaijani-Russian artist known for her exploration of feminine identity, spirituality, and cultural symbols through a stark black-and-white visual language. Salakhova often works in white statuary marble, producing sculptures that are minimal yet loaded with references (draped Islamic veils, classical forms, etc.). Her oeuvre includes a series literally titled "White" (2012–2014), comprising large-scale drawings on white canvas and carved white marble pieces. Salakhova's use of pristine white marble is particularly relevant: marble historically connotes purity and eternity; its whiteness has been associated with the ideals of classical beauty since Renaissance artists mistakenly believed ancient Greek statues were originally pure white. In Salakhova's case, she harnesses marble's sensuous white surface to discuss the sacred and the forbidden. For example, her installation "Voices of Silence" (YARAT Contemporary Art Space, Baku 2024) featured twelve towering jugs carved from local white stone (aghlay), arrayed in a circle. The jugs were sealed vessels emitting recorded voices of domestic abuse survivors, a juxtaposition of aesthetic serenity and harrowing content. The white stone jugs, reminiscent of ancient urns, created an ambiance of formal beauty and silence (the voices were hard to hear in the opening's social noise, turning them into "voices of silence" indeed).

Salakhova's work here underscores that white can be deceptive. Its beauty can veil suffering. The whiteness of the jugs made them "visually striking, deliberately spectacular," yet the messages contained were full of pain. This dynamic can be read as a commentary on how society often whitewashes uncomfortable truths, a phrase notably using "white" to mean blanking out or glossing over. In terms of Cloud Dancer's cultural analysis, Salakhova's approach is a reminder that calm surfaces can hide turmoil beneath. The choice of a calming white for the color of 2026 might similarly be read as both a remedy and a form of collective avoidance. Art often serves to complicate the narrative that design trends simplify. Salakhova's white marble sculptures, often depicting veiled figures or fragments of bodies, play with the idea of what is revealed or concealed by the color white, literally using white stone to carve absence (a veil, by definition, both shows and hides).

In a different vein, Western artists like Rachel Whiteread have cast entire interiors or everyday objects in white plaster or resin, effectively turning negative space into a solid white

presence - another strategy of making absence tangible through white. The contemporary art world has numerous examples of installations employing all-white elements to induce specific perceptual effects: e.g., James Turrell's light installations, where white light can induce a feeling of infinite space, or Olafur Eliasson's experiential works like "Room for one color," where viewers walk through a mono-frequency light that often appears yellow-white, altering perception of color entirely. These may not be directly tied to Pantone's Cloud Dancer, but they form part of a cultural backdrop where monochrome environments and the color white are recognized tools for altering consciousness and highlighting material or immaterial phenomena.

In conclusion, contemporary artists using white reinforce that this color (or non-color) is deeply interdisciplinary in meaning: spanning spiritual, political, and phenomenological domains. From Kostin's spiritual blanks to Yudina's temporal voids to Salakhova's marble silences, we see white used as a canvas for both universalist ideals and pointed critiques. Cloud Dancer, as a soft white in mainstream culture, can be viewed through the prism of these art practices: it embodies a collective desire for a sort of immaculate space in which we might heal or contemplate, yet it also raises the question of what we risk obscuring when we make things look too clean or too serene. The dialogue between design and art here is fruitful; each can illuminate the other. The fact that Pantone is encouraging artists to interpret Cloud Dancer suggests an awareness that a color trend gains depth when tied to genuine cultural production, not just commercial usage. Conversely, artists might seize the popular fascination with Cloud Dancer as an opportunity to reach wider audiences with works that question or expand the meaning of this pervasive whiteness.

The elevation of Cloud Dancer is far more than a marketing footnote; it is a cultural symptom and signal. In this comprehensive exploration, we have seen how a soft white hue became a nexus for converging desires in contemporary society for calm amidst chaos, simplicity amidst excess, and unity amidst fragmentation. Pantone's Cloud Dancer crystallizes a moment where visual culture embraces minimalism not as an absence but as a powerful presence: the presence of potential, of clarity, of breath. As a "whisper of calm and peace in a noisy world," Cloud Dancer speaks to a collective fatigue and a hope for renewal. Its very neutrality is its appeal - inviting projection and interpretation, whether by a fashion designer crafting a tranquil garment line or an artist presenting a blank icon for silent contemplation.

However, as we have underscored, no color is culturally neutral, not even white. White carries deep historical and ideological connotations, from purity and goodness to exclusion and

erasure. The selection of Cloud Dancer in 2026 brings this duality into the open. On one hand, it has been harnessed almost universally across industries to promote an aesthetic of well-being and sophisticated ease: clean beauty packaging, soothing interiors, elegant attire - reflecting an optimistic narrative that we can design our way to peace and mindfulness. On the other hand, critical voices have reminded us that an all-white zeitgeist may inadvertently echo less inclusive or vibrant values, potentially signaling a retreat from diversity in expression or a glossing over of unresolved social issues. The conversation sparked by Cloud Dancer - both the enthusiastic adoption and the skeptical critique is itself a testament to the power of color as a social symbol. Few cultural phenomena could prompt discussions ranging from Adolf Loos's architectural visions to domestic violence awareness in art, from winter snowscapes to global political climates, as seamlessly as the discourse around this off-white shade has.

In the realm of visual and material culture, Cloud Dancer's influence reinforces a trend that may define the mid-2020s: a return to essentials. This return is visible in the monochrome palettes of fashion and design, in the heightened attention to material textures, and in the revival of craft and tradition (the icon boards, the marble carvings, the plaster walls) under a modern minimalist lens. The popularity of white suggests a desire to reconnect with a sense of fundamental truth or authenticity - stripping away flashy surfaces to find something enduring (be it inner peace, or cultural roots, or basic human connection). In choosing white, Pantone responded to what Pressman identified as a "transitional state" of the world where people seek to "stop and rethink how to move forward". Cloud Dancer's blankness is forward-looking: it is the page on which the next chapter will be written. The optimism inherent in a blank canvas should not be underestimated; it is a space of creative freedom. As one designer put it, Cloud Dancer invites us "to embrace hues that connect us to the earth…whites that invite sensing rather than thinking", suggesting a more embodied, less analytical future. In a time, saturated by digital imagery and rapid information, the gentle presence of Cloud Dancer might coax us into slowing down and feeling our environment anew.

The story of Cloud Dancer is not isolated; it is one chapter in a long history of how colors shape and reflect human experience. In 2026, as we navigate our "noisy world," the choice of Cloud Dancer as Color of the Year encourages a moment of pause, a collective intake of breath and quiet exhale, like watching clouds drift across a pale sky. Whether this white will indeed usher in a calmer era or simply offer a fleeting aesthetic balm, it has already succeeded in focusing our

attention on color's profound place in culture. It reminds us that even in something as seemingly superficial as a paint swatch, we can find a mirror of our values, anxieties, and aspirations. As we move forward, carrying the lessons of Cloud Dancer, we do so with a renewed awareness of the colors around us and perhaps, with hope, a bit more clarity.

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Perspectives on Perceiving Contemporary Art: Why It Provokes, Shocks, and Makes Us Think

Kovaleva Oksana

Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,

Moscow City University

Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article explores the complex reasons behind the powerful and often polarized responses to contemporary art. We examine the paradox of why works that sometimes lack traditional beauty or obvious technical virtuosity can elicit such intense emotions and heated debates. We argue that this is not accidental, but the result of a fundamental shift in art's function - from striving for the beautiful to aiming to critique, provoke, and ask uncomfortable questions. The article analyzes this phenomenon through several key lenses: psychological, socio-philosophical, manipulative, and neurobiological. We ultimately conclude that the power of contemporary art arises from an act of co-creation between artist and viewer. The artist provides a conceptual challenge, and the viewer, drawing on personal experience, completes the work by infusing it with meaning and emotion. Thus, controversies and strong feelings are not a defect but evidence of the vitality of contemporary art as an active participant in dialogue with its era.

Keywords: art perception; psychology of art; contemporary art; provocation in art; interpretation; manipulation of perception; emotional response; co-creation.

Contemporary art is a territory of constant debate. It rarely leaves viewers indifferent: one person feels delight or enlightenment, another irritation or bafflement, and a third anger or rejection. Phrases like "I could do that too" or "Is this even art?" have become almost inseparable from its reception. Why do works of today's artists provoke such strong and polarized emotions? The answer lies in a complex amalgam of psychology, sociology, philosophy, and the deliberate strategies of art itself. Over the past century, art's mission and methods have transformed dramatically, leading to equally transformed expectations in its audience. In what follows, we will consider how a break with aesthetic tradition, the psychology of perception, conscious manipulation by artists, brain responses, social context, the digital age, and a new *"aesthetics of the ugly"* all contribute to the provocative power of contemporary art. By understanding these

factors, we can better grasp why modern artworks often shock or disturb, and why, ultimately, they make us think. This understanding also points toward a more engaged way of viewing art: one where the spectator becomes a co-author in the meaning-making process. Before diving into specific aspects, we note the overarching shift: contemporary art has largely moved away from offering answers or ideals and towards posing questions and challenges. This shift underpins many of the more detailed points discussed in the sections below.

Traditional art, especially in the classical and academic eras, aspired to ideal beauty, harmony, and clear narrative. Its goal was often to delight with skill, to tell a story or depict reality, and to produce catharsis or moral uplift in the viewer. The audience's role was largely that of a passive beholder admiring the artist's creation. In the 20th century, however, art underwent a radical turn. The avant-garde movements rejected the idea that art must be an imitation of reality or a display of technical mastery. Instead, art became interpretation, critique, and often provocation. As one scholar notes, throughout modern art "departures from beauty" became the norm – indeed, an *"*anti-loveliness*"* aesthetic took hold. By the late 20th century, using words like "quality" or "beauty" as praise for art was sometimes seen as naive enthusiasm rather than informed connoisseurship. In place of beauty, conceptual impact came to the fore. The modern artist often works not with classical form, but with concept. The task is no longer to faithfully depict the world, but to force the viewer to think about issues in the world - be it social injustice, sexuality, politics, identity, the environment, or the meaning of art itself. In short, contemporary art shifts from providing answers to posing questions. As art theorist A. A. Sychev observes, the focus has moved from the artist's technical experiment to the viewer's reaction; the "artistry" of a work is now associated with the intensity of response it provokes, rather than its formal perfection. In this view, the artist's function is essentially to provoke the audience, and provocation has become "the only obligatory element" of contemporary art.

This sea change naturally produces cognitive dissonance in the viewer, expecting a more traditional art experience. A mind raised on classical art looks for familiar signposts: beauty, skill, a recognizable subject or story. When it fails to find those, frustration often results. But that very frustration is the first step toward a strong emotional response, whether negative (anger, irritation) or positive (surprise, curiosity for a new challenge). The initial shock or puzzlement is not a failure of contemporary art; it is part of its design. In a real sense, to be perplexed or provoked by a contemporary artwork is to have the intended experience. The provocative nature of modern works

is a feature, not a bug, engineered to break the comfort of habit and prompt fresh thought. As art philosopher Arthur Danto famously argued, what makes something art is not a visible property at all, but a context and conceptual framework. “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld,” Danto wrote. A mundane object like a “Brillo soap box” may be indistinguishable in appearance from a Warhol artwork of a Brillo box, yet one is art because it is presented as art within a theoretical context. Contemporary art plays on exactly this idea: it often elevates the ordinary or the shocking into art by contextual proposal, thereby asking the viewer to reconsider basic assumptions about what art can be. In doing so, it inevitably raises questions instead of delivering answers, and those questions can unsettle.

Viewing art is not a one-way act of looking, but an active dialogue between the artwork and the viewer’s mind. Our perception of a piece is filtered through personal memories, traumas, beliefs, and cultural codes. In contemporary art, this psychological engagement is especially forefront. We can identify a few key psychological factors in why contemporary art provokes such varied reactions.

Frames and Expectations. When we enter a museum or gallery, we subconsciously expect to encounter “art.” With traditional art, that expectation is met with familiar forms: paintings in frames, sculptures on pedestals, and known genres. Contemporary art often subverts these frames. We might find a pile of trash presented as an installation, or an infamous urinal signed “R. Mutt” (Fountain 1917), or a formaldehyde-preserved shark (Damien Hirst’s The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, 1991). Such works deliberately shatter the conventional frame. Our mind struggles to accept these objects as “art,” leading to internal conflict and debate. The artist, in effect, manipulates our concept of what is gallery-worthy, forcing us to reassess the foundations of aesthetics. This manipulation of context can be startling. Duchamp’s ready-made urinal was initially seen as an absurd prank, yet it proved profoundly influential by demonstrating that context and idea can transform a non-art object into art. In the same spirit, artists today still play with context: a brick on a construction site is just a brick, but a brick placed in a pristine white gallery space becomes an art object inviting reflection on labor, material, and architecture. By “framing” everyday things in a new way, artists challenge our perceptual categories and trigger debate about what deserves the status of art. As Danto and others noted, a certain theory and readiness in the audience are needed; when that is absent, the viewer experiences more dissonance

than insight. The initial reaction may be “This is nonsense” or “They’re putting one over on us,” which is itself a psychological defense against having one’s frame overturned.

Emotional Resonance and Empathy. Many contemporary works aim directly at the viewer’s emotions, often bypassing rational analysis. Installations about war, violence, or isolation can evoke fear, sorrow, or disgust. These reactions are not side effects. They are the intended result. Artists use color, shape, sound, and even smell to engage the limbic system of the brain, which governs emotion. For example, the large abstract color-field paintings of Mark Rothko with their shimmering blocks of color are famous for inducing a meditative, even trance-like emotional state in sensitive viewers. Standing before a Rothko canvas can bring about deep, hard-to-explain feelings, a solemnity or spiritual tension, even though there is no recognizable subject. Such works operate on a pre-verbal, empathetic level. Likewise, performance artist Marina Abramović has created works (such as her 1970s piece where she let audience members use objects on her body, or her endurance-based performances) that create palpable tension, fear, or empathy in the audience. By pushing her own body or the audience’s boundaries, she triggers visceral emotions that classical paintings rarely aimed to elicit. Neurological research supports these intense emotional effects: viewing art that we find moving or troubling can activate brain regions related to emotion and reward. Studies have shown that experiencing powerful art, even if it’s “ugly” or disturbing, engages some of the same neural circuits as other deeply felt experiences, sometimes including the brain’s reward centers like the ventral striatum (which contains the nucleus accumbens). In other words, our brains can derive a form of satisfaction or meaning from processing a challenging artwork, akin to solving a puzzle or empathizing with another person’s plight. Artists exploit this by crafting images and environments that resonate with basic human feelings. If an installation about genocide or climate crisis leaves you feeling shaken, that reaction is itself the evidence of the artwork “working.” The goal is not aesthetic pleasure but an ethical or emotional awakening.

Recognizing Oneself. Contemporary art often addresses subjects that are taboo, deeply personal, or marginalized. Works dealing with mental health, identity, gender, or trauma can become mirrors for viewers who have lived similar experiences. A chaotic, anguished painting might look like nonsense to one person, but to another, it vividly expresses a depression or anxiety they personally know. In that moment, art turns from an external object into an internal mirror. Psychologists speak of projection. We project our own inner life onto ambiguous stimuli. Abstract

and conceptual art, by providing less literal content, invites more projection. Viewers complete the picture with pieces of their own psyche. For instance, someone who has experienced loss might stand before a sparse installation about absence and feel a wave of grief and catharsis, while another person without that context just feels perplexed. The art gives form to feelings the viewer already carries. This capacity of modern art to tap into individual consciousness is one of its great powers. It individualizes the experience; ten people can see the same piece and come away with ten different personal interpretations or emotional journeys. Rather than a "one-size-fits-all" message, the artwork is an open prompt. As Umberto Eco described in The Open Work, many modern artworks are deliberately incomplete or ambiguous, requiring the audience to help create the meaning in their act of interpretation. The viewer's mind is a necessary part of the art. When that connection happens, when you "see yourself" in a work, the effect can be profound and unforgettable. Contemporary art thus thrives on this intimate dialogue, even at the risk that many viewers won't see themselves in each piece and will dismiss it. The variability of response is a feature of an open-ended art form.

If contemporary artists are provocateurs, what tools do they use to jolt the viewer's mind? It turns out many strategies are consciously employed to break through our habitual apathy or skepticism. The most direct method is to assault the viewer's comfort zone. This could be through graphic or taboo content, extreme gestures, or violating norms of decency. Works like Hirst's shark in formaldehyde, or Chris Ofili's painting The Holy Virgin Mary (1996), incorporating elephant dung, or Andrés Serrano's photograph Piss Christ (1987), depicting a crucifix in urine, all generated public shock and controversy. The shock resets the audience's frame of reference; it "wipes the slate clean," momentarily short-circuiting rational analysis and forcing a raw, instinctive reaction. In psychological terms, intense surprise or disgust can interrupt our normal cognitive scripts and make us pay fierce attention. The artist then exploits that moment of openness to implant a question or idea. As one observer noted about shock in art, it "nullifies conventional patterns of thought and forces one to perceive the work afresh on an instinctive level." The shock may anger or repel, but it also fascinates and draws discussion. Many avant-garde movements knowingly courted outrage (the Italian Futurists, Dadaists, Viennese Actionists, etc.) to attack what they saw as society's complacency. Shock has a cleansing function: it destabilizes the old consensus, making room for new perspectives. Once the initial emotional wave passes, viewers might find themselves more receptive to the underlying conceptual message, having been, in

effect, jolted awake. Of course, shock for shock's sake can also backfire, leading only to sensationalism. The line between meaningful shock and mere gimmick is a fine one, often debated by critics. But historically, much important art, from Édouard Manet's once-scandalous 1865 Olympia, to Duchamp, to the present, was initially met with shock before being understood in hindsight as groundbreaking.

Another tool is the creation of a complex intellectual mythos around an artwork. In contemporary art, the concept or narrative that surrounds a piece can be as important as the physical artifact. Artists (often in collaboration with curators or critics) provide elaborate conceptual justifications for their works - manifestos, wall texts, catalog essays, which guide the viewer on how to read the piece. In some cases, the concept itself outweighs the material form. A simple object might be accompanied by pages of explanation that frame it as a commentary on, say, consumer culture or colonial history. The viewer is thus invited not merely to see, but to solve a riddle or decode a message. This process of deciphering an elusive intent can be highly engaging and even pleasurable for the audience, turning the experience into a kind of intellectual treasure hunt. It's the art-world equivalent of a mystery novel: the artwork presents clues and symbols, and viewers try to piece together an interpretation. The satisfaction comes when one "gets it" – or at least arrives at a personally meaningful theory. For example, Joseph Kosuth's 1965 work One and Three Chairs (a chair, a photo of that chair, and a dictionary definition of "chair") might appear banal. Still, it is underpinned by a concept about representation and language. Once the viewer grasps that it's about the relationship between an object, its image, and its linguistic description, the piece transforms from three mundane items into a clever philosophical statement. Many conceptual artworks function this way, with the true "art" residing in the idea and the viewer's realization of it. As Sol LeWitt wrote in 1967, *"*The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.*"* In other words, the execution can be straightforward or even carried out by others if the guiding idea is intact. This approach turns the audience into active thinkers. It can be deeply rewarding for those who relish conceptual challenges, though it can alienate those who prefer art's meaning to be more immediately evident.

Interaction and Co-Creation. Breaking the barrier between artwork and audience is another key strategy. Many contemporary installations and performances are *interactive*, requiring the viewer's direct participation. You might have to walk through a physical environment, touch or manipulate objects, don a virtual-reality headset, or even perform an action as part of the piece. In

these cases, the line between art and life blurs, and the viewer ceases to be merely a spectator. Instead, the viewer becomes a co-creator or performer within the artwork's framework. For instance, interactive environments by artists like Ólafur Elíasson (e.g., his Weather Project*,* 2003, which created an artificial sun in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, under which visitors congregated and played) change meaning based on how crowds gather and respond. Some works explicitly rely on audience input - Yayoi Kusama's infinity mirror rooms only achieve their full effect when viewers step inside and see themselves enveloped in endless reflections. Other works turn audience choice or behavior into part of the content (consider Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's electronic installations that respond to participants' heartbeats or movements). In performance art, the audience might even be unwitting participants, as in happenings or flash mobs, or Tino Sehgal's pieces, where trained performers engage museum visitors in conversation without clear signs that "art" is happening. All these interactive strategies heighten the personal stakes of the art experience. They often produce strong responses because experiencing something first-hand is more impactful than observing from a distance. A viewer who crawls through a claustrophobic tunnel as part of an installation, or who finds themselves covered in chalk dust after engaging with a piece, will have a visceral memory and a sense of personal investment in the artwork. The artwork, in turn, evolves with each participant. This dynamism means that the meaning isn't fixed; it's co-authored in real time by those who engage with it, making the experience uniquely intense and personal. Consequently, interactive art often yields powerful emotions, from joy and curiosity to discomfort or anxiety, precisely because it implicates you, the viewer, in a way traditional painting on a wall does not.

Playing with Context. We touched on this with Duchamp's Fountain and the idea of the "frame," but it deserves emphasis that context manipulation is a primary game in contemporary art. Artists often take everyday objects or images and relocate them to an art context to alter their meaning. This can be seen as a kind of conceptual transplant: the object remains the same, but the context changes our interpretation of it. A famous example is Maurizio Cattelan's artwork Comedian (2019), which consisted simply of a real banana duct-taped to the wall at Art Basel Miami. The absurdity of a perishable grocery item being sold as high art (for a price tag of $120,000) was itself the point. It sparked worldwide conversation about the definition of art, the economics of the art market, and the role of context. Similarly, the street artist Banksy has repeatedly exploited context, most notoriously when one of his paintings (Girl with Balloon) self-

destructed through a hidden shredder immediately after being sold at auction. In that stunt, the context of a high-priced auction was subverted by an unexpected act, creating a new artwork (Love is in the Bin, the shredded painting) and commenting on the spectacle of art commerce. By toying with context - whether by placing art in non-art spaces (e.g., guerrilla installations in public or exhibiting in warehouses and internet platforms) or by bringing the mundane into art spaces, artists draw attention to the importance of how and where we encounter things. It reminds us that much of what we consider "art" or "not art" depends on convention and agreement. These manipulations can be witty and illuminating, but they can also trigger confusion or feelings of being deceived ("Are they serious or just mocking us?"). Yet even that uncertainty is often intentional: it forces a double take, a reconsideration of our assumptions. In the end, whether one is delighted by, angered by, or incredulous about such context games, one is thinking about them, and thus the artwork has achieved its aim of provoking reflection.

Contemporary neuroscience research has begun to unravel the neural underpinnings of our responses to art. It turns out that looking at art, especially art we find moving, beautiful, or puzzling, is a very active mental process, engaging multiple brain systems. A few key findings give insight into why contemporary art can feel so mentally stimulating or challenging.

First, when we view an artwork we like or find pleasing, the brain's reward circuitry can activate. Studies using functional MRI have shown that experiencing a beautiful painting or an inspiring piece of architecture correlates with activity in the orbital frontal cortex and subcortical structures like the nucleus accumbens, regions also associated with other pleasurable experiences. In one study, subjects' brain scans while viewing art revealed that strongly preferred images triggered the same dopamine-rich reward areas that respond to things like good food or music. This suggests that aesthetic pleasure is not just a metaphor. It has a biological signature of reward. So, when someone stands before an artwork that resonates (even an abstract one) and feels a surge of joy or awe, their brain may literally be rewarding them with a chemical "pleasure" signal. Interestingly, this holds not only for traditionally beautiful art but sometimes even for art that is challenging, - the satisfaction of "figuring out" a difficult piece or the awe at a powerful concept can likewise be rewarding. One neuroaesthetic researcher, Anjan Chatterjee, noted that knowing how the brain's reward centers light up for art adds a "biologic texture" to understanding why art is compelling. However, he also cautioned that simply mapping brain activation doesn't fully explain the psychological nature of that reward, which is often very complex.

Indeed, contemporary art frequently elicits unusual emotions: confusion, discomfort, even anger, that are not conventionally pleasurable at all. What happens in the brain then? Psychologists like Paul Silvia have argued that when art provokes confusion or surprise, it engages our cognitive appraisal processes: we realize we don't understand something, which in turn can trigger curiosity if we are open-minded, or aversion if we are not. Modern art, Silvia notes, often causes confusion and demands extra attention or effort to process. From a neural perspective, such effort likely involves the prefrontal cortex**,** the part of the brain responsible for higher-order thinking, problem-solving, and making sense of ambiguity. Complex or ambiguous artworks are, essentially, puzzles for the brain to solve. The prefrontal cortex works to find patterns, draw on memory and knowledge, and test hypotheses ("What could this mean? Have I seen something like this before? What did the label say?"). If the brain fails to find any pattern or meaning, the result can be cognitive discomfort. Neuroscientists speak of prediction error*:* when our brain's predictions (e.g. "an artwork should look like x") are violated by reality (it looks like y), a mismatch occurs. Initially, this feels unpleasant, a small "error signal" registers. However, that very signal can drive us to explore further and adjust our predictions. One theory by van de Cruys and Wagemans suggests that artists "often destroy predictions that they have first carefully built up in their viewers", causing negative affect like uncertainty or confusion, but then if the viewer succeeds in finding a new pattern or interpretation, a rewarding effect ensues. In their view, the pleasure in much modern art comes from this transition from a state of not understanding to a state of aha!, a movement from chaos to a new order that the viewer has actively helped create. Thus, what begins as neural discomfort can lead to a surge of satisfaction if resolved.

Even when no clear resolution is found, many viewers report that grappling with a challenging artwork is stimulating in a unique way. It's a kind of mental workout. Unlike passive entertainment, ambiguous art forces the brain to stay engaged, toggling between different possible meanings, perhaps engaging emotion and memory along the way. Neuroscientific models (such as the "aesthetic triad" proposed by Chatterjee and Vartanian) suggest that art perception involves the integration of sensory-motor systems (we respond to what we literally see or hear), emotion-valuation systems (we feel and evaluate our response), and meaning-making systems (we contextualize and interpret). In an ideal aesthetic experience, all three networks interact. For example, looking at a visceral, textured painting might first engage your sensory cortex and mirror neurons (you almost feel the paint's movement), this triggers an emotional echo (perhaps

excitement or tension), and then you try to contextualize it ("Is this like other expressionist art I know? What was the artist going through?"). Contemporary art often deliberately emphasizes the latter two systems: emotion and meaning. A lot of it is not immediately gratifying to the senses (a pile of debris or a monochrome canvas might not be a feast for the eyes in the way a Baroque painting is), so instead it grabs you by provoking emotion or concept. This means the aesthetic payoff sometimes comes after an initial period of effort. When that payoff arrives, say, the moment you decipher a metaphor or connect the dots to an art-historical reference, your brain might reward you with a hit of dopamine, the neurochemical associated with learning and positive reinforcement. In this sense, the intellectual pleasure from solving an artistic "riddle" can be as real as the sensuous pleasure of looking at something beautiful. Some viewers indeed find the former more satisfying. It's a different flavor of reward: more cerebral, but often longer lasting, because you feel you have earned it through active engagement.

On the flip side, if the viewer is unwilling or unable to resolve the cognitive dissonance, the experience may remain unsatisfying or even aversive. This helps explain the polarized responses to the same work: one brain finds the sweet spot of challenge and reward, another brain just feels irritated or bored. Expertise also plays a role here. Studies have shown that art-trained viewers and novices respond differently: experts can tolerate or even enjoy higher levels of complexity and ambiguity, showing more sustained attention (measurable in brainwaves and eye movements), whereas non-experts might quickly decide a confusing piece is "not for them" and disengage. Interestingly, some research indicates that experts and novices feel similar basic emotions in front of art (both can be moved or confused by the same piece), but experts have more strategies to interpret and integrate those feelings, thanks to their knowledge and exposure. In any case, the neuroscience of art reception underscores one key point: our brains are very much alive when we look at art. Far from a passive gaze, it's an active set of computations and reactions. Contemporary art, by stepping outside comfort zones, often ensures that the brain cannot go on autopilot. You can't just say "ah, a beautiful landscape, how nice" and move on; you are compelled to grapple, and in grappling, you engage more deeply with your own cognitive and emotional apparatus. This engagement, sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes exhilarating, is exactly what many contemporary artworks seek to provoke.

The power of contemporary art does not reside in the isolated object alone. Equally crucial is the social and institutional context that surrounds the work. A single object can be perceived in

utterly different ways depending on where it is seen, who made it, and who is endorsing it. This phenomenon is often referred to as the power of the frame or the artworld context. Understanding this is key to understanding why certain works garner intense reactions.

The White Cube as Sacred Space. Modern galleries and museums are typically designed as neutral, minimalist environments, often white-walled, clean, quiet, and removed from everyday life. This so-called "white cube" gallery format has been analyzed as a kind of secular temple of art. The critic Brian O'Doherty famously argued that the white cube creates an atmosphere akin to a sacred shrine: it shuts out time and external reality ("The outside world must not come in" as he put it), establishing a unique chamber where art is to be revered on its own terms. In this quasi-sacred space, even ordinary items can take on a halo of significance. A pile of bricks on a construction site is just building material; but the same bricks arranged on a museum floor (as in Carl Andre's minimalist sculpture Equivalent VIII, 1966) acquire a conceptual weight and spark debate. Viewers, upon entering the white cube, are unconsciously primed to elevate what they see to a higher status. The lighting, the silence, the spacing of works - all isolate the art from utilitarian function. As O'Doherty noted, this gives the artwork a timeless, dislocated quality, "elevated to a transcendental status" within a "chamber of aesthetics". However, he also pointed out that this context is anything but neutral - it's a highly controlled ideological space that confers authority and can intimidate the uninitiated. The gallery frame can thus both magnify the artwork's effect and create a social distance. Many people feel that in the presence of austere museum displays, they must attribute great importance to what they see, because the environment cues them that "this is valuable." This can lead to a kind of cognitive dissonance: "I don't understand this at all, but it's in a famous museum, so it must be significant." Some will respond with earnest effort to understand, others with cynicism or anger ("they're fooling us with nonsense"). Both responses are generated in part by the force-field of the white cube itself. We might say the museum casts a potent aura. Walter Benjamin wrote that in the age of mechanical reproduction the aura of an artwork, its unique presence in a time and place, withers. But museums in the contemporary age actively work to re-create aura by context: by design, curation, and educational framing. The aura now is less about the artwork's ancient uniqueness (as Benjamin discussed for, say, a medieval painting in a church) and more about the prestige of the institution and the artist's reputation.

The Role of Institutions and Authority. In the contemporary art world, who presents a work and where can be as important as what the work is. A piece displayed by a major museum (MoMA

in New York, the Tate in London, the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg, etc.) comes pre-packaged with institutional validation. The wall label listing the artist's name and the curator's statement already guide viewers toward certain expectations. If you see the name of a well-known artist, say, Marina Abramović or Ai Weiwei, - you might automatically look for depth and be more patient in trying to "get" the piece, simply because you trust that these celebrated figures wouldn't present meaningless junk. Our brains essentially receive a signal: prepare to find meaning. This has been confirmed by psychological studies: when viewers know that a work is highly valued by experts, they often interpret it more favorably (even at a neural level, prior knowledge can shape aesthetic appraisal by activating reward circuits preemptively). Conversely, if the exact same object is shown by an unknown artist in a modest setting (a local art fair or a street corner), many might pass it by without a second thought. The difference is not in the object, but in the social frame. Philosopher George Dickie articulated this in the "institutional theory of art": something is art if the artworld (artists, curators, critics, collectors) collectively say it is art and treat it as such. Danto's Brillo box example, again, is a perfect illustration: Warhol's Brillo boxes were accepted in 1964 because the artworld by then had a theory to accommodate them, whereas in 1914 they would have been incomprehensible as art. Thus, when we read a wall text or hear that a piece has been collected by a famous patron or won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale, we subconsciously elevate our regard for it. We search for the profound meaning that presumably warranted that recognition. In doing so, we might experience things we would otherwise miss. On the other hand, this mechanism can also breed skepticism: some viewers feel the artworld's "seal of approval" is arbitrary or elitist, and they react against it (the "emperor's new clothes" syndrome, as many call it). The social context therefore doesn't dictate everyone's reaction, but it frames the discourse. It's the reason why a messy bed by artist Tracey Emin (My Bed, 1998) can become a famous, hotly debated artwork (because it was shortlisted for the Turner Prize and acquired by a museum), whereas an identical messy bed in someone's bedroom is just perceived as laziness. The art institution essentially says: this object symbolizes X or raises Y issues, consider it seriously. And many viewers will, indeed, approach it with a more contemplative and less dismissive mindset than they would outside the institution. The context "baptizes" the work into art.

Art as Social Marker and the Spectator's Identity. The experience of contemporary art is not only an aesthetic or intellectual exercise; it can also be a social one, involving status and identity. In certain cultural circles, being able to appreciate (or at least discuss) cutting-edge art is

a marker of education and belonging. Pierre Bourdieu, in his sociology of taste, famously showed that preferences in art and literature correlate with social class and cultural capital. In other words, an ability to understand difficult modern art often signals that one belongs to an educated, intellectual elite. This social dynamic creates pressure on viewers. Some may hide their bewilderment at an exhibition, nodding along as if they appreciate it, out of fear of appearing unsophisticated or "provincial." Not understanding a work, or disliking it, can feel shameful if one believes "I'm supposed to get this, but I don't". This phenomenon plays out in countless gallery conversations and media portrayals. The stereotype of people standing in front of a blank canvas and pretending to admire it because they think everyone else does. On the flip side, vocally rejecting contemporary art can also be a social statement. When someone exclaims "My five-year-old could paint that!" or "This is nonsense that only snobs care about," they are asserting their own values (perhaps favoring traditional skills or clarity) against those of the perceived elite. It can be a way of aligning with common-sense populism against what they see as pretentious high culture. In either case, the discourse around the art becomes a proxy for a discourse about who has authority. The museum and the "art crowd" or the lay public. In some notorious instances, contemporary artworks have been vandalized or publicly attacked (for example, when abstract or provocative works were first introduced in conservative communities) as a way of rebelling against the social implications of those works. The strong emotions are not only about the art object, but about what it represents: a set of cultural values that may either resonate with or threaten the viewer's own. In simpler terms, liking avant-garde art can be a badge of being cultured, while hating it can be a badge of standing for "common sense". Both stances go beyond pure aesthetics into identity. Sociological studies have even found that people with higher cultural capital tend to use more elaborate language to describe art and are more comfortable with abstract concepts, whereas those with less exposure might focus on whether they "liked" it or not and find too much obscurity off-putting. Recognizing this dynamic helps us see why debates about contemporary art often get heated: they are rarely just about the art; they are about who "gets it" and who doesn't, and by extension, who is in or out of a certain cultural in-group.

In summary, the institutional frame and social context can amplify both the provocation and the polarization of modern art. A museum can lend a radical work the aura of legitimacy that makes it iconic, but it can also alienate viewers who feel that aura is an illusion covering up emptiness. Contemporary art lives in a tight feedback loop with its context. It often needs the

gallery/museum system or the discourse of curators and critics to be fully activated (a random pile of metal in a junkyard might go unnoticed, but the same pile arranged in a gallery with a title and explanation becomes meaningful). At the same time, the best contemporary art often interrogates its own context. It might expose the museum's sterility, or poke fun at the economics of art, or question the role of the audience. Thus, place and name "decide everything" in the sense that they frame our initial approach, but the art may then reflect that decision back to us as part of its content.

In the 21st century, the way we encounter art has been fundamentally altered by the rise of digital technology and social media. This has introduced new forms of interaction and new challenges for perception. Contemporary art now exists not only in galleries and museums, but also ubiquitously on our screens, in memes, and in virtual spaces. How does this affect the provocative power of art and our engagement with it?

Dematerialization and Virality. Today, many people's first exposure to an artwork is not by seeing it in person, but by seeing a digital image of it on a phone or computer screen. A sculpture or installation might be encountered as a small photo in an Instagram feed long before (or even instead of) a physical visit. This dematerializes the art experience. Qualities like scale, texture, and aura, - the "presence" of the original in a specific space are lost or diminished. Walter Benjamin wrote about how mechanical reproduction (photography, film) withers the aura of an artwork by detaching it from its time and place. In the digital era, this effect is magnified: a famous work can be copied and shared endlessly, each instance as pixels on a backlit screen, completely removed from its original context. While something is lost (the unique atmosphere of the original), something new is gained - virality. Provocative or striking works are exceptionally well-suited to propagation in the attention economy of social media. A bizarre, shocking, or awe-inspiring image will get shared rapidly, gaining far more viewers than it could in a museum. For example, images of Banksy's street art or dramatic performance pieces by Marina Abramović have circulated to millions via YouTube and Twitter, far beyond the artworld insiders. A controversial piece can spark global debate almost overnight once it hits the internet. The value of art thus starts to be measured not just by critical acclaim or auction prices, but by likes, shares, and trending status**.** An installation that provides a spectacular visual, say a room full of infinity mirrors and lights (like Yayoi Kusama's shows) might achieve immense popularity as a "Instagrammable" experience, drawing huge crowds who primarily want a photo of themselves within it. Some critics argue this virality skews artistic production, encouraging works that are eye-catching and easily summarized

in an image, at the expense of subtler qualities. Museums have leaned into this, creating "immersive experiences" and selfie-friendly environments to capitalize on social media promotion. In doing so, art becomes part of the global information flow: it competes with memes, news, and entertainment for our attention. Provocative art, by virtue of eliciting strong reactions (surprise, admiration, outrage), tends to perform well in this marketplace of attention. Thus, the digital era amplifies art's provocative capacity, a shocking piece doesn't just shock a local audience, it can ricochet around the world and become a talking point in multiple countries within days. On the other hand, the flood of images can also desensitize us ("another weird art stunt went viral, so what else is new?"). The context collapse of the internet means a delicate installation might be perceived as just another amusing or confusing image to scroll past. In short, the digital environment changes both the scale and the quality of art perception: scale, because reach is enormous; quality, because the experience is mediated and transient.

The Collapse of Authorship and Context. In the digital realm, artworks often detach from their authors and original explanatory context, taking on lives of their own. A photograph of an artwork can be re-posted without attribution, altered, meme-ified, or used in contexts never intended by the artist. For instance, an image of an installation might circulate with humorous captions, or a performance piece might be excerpted into a GIF out of context. The result is a kind of extreme form of co-creation*:* the online public collectively reinterprets and repurposes the art image. The original artist loses control over meaning; the artwork becomes open-source cultural material. One famous case is the 1970s performance "Annie Sprinkle's Public Cervix Announcement" (where the artist invited viewers to literally gaze at her cervix with a speculum). Images from such performances, once online, can be divorced from the context of feminist art and turn into mere shock fodder or pornographic curiosity on less informed websites. Or consider how Kusama's polka-dot rooms now serve as backdrops for thousands of selfies, often with little regard to Kusama's original themes of self-obliteration and infinity. In a way, the internet realizes something conceptual artists predicted: the idea or image matters more than the artifact, and anyone can play with the idea. Sometimes, this collective reprocessing adds layers of meaning (as when activists appropriate an art image for a cause, or when a meme referencing an artwork cleverly comments on current events). Other times, it trivializes the work. In either case, the clear line between artist and audience blurs further. Art in the digital age often exemplifies the *"*death of the author*"* (to borrow Roland Barthes' literary term). Once released, it belongs to everyone

and to no one. While this can be frightening for artists, it can also be seen as the ultimate form of democratic interpretation: the art is truly in the eye of the beholder, multiplied by thousands of beholders, each adding their spin. This is art as a conversation or a cultural virus rather than a fixed creation. Some artists embrace this: for example, street artists or digital artists who invite remixing of their work. Others struggle with it because it can distort their message. In any case, the viewer in the digital era has unprecedented power in determining what an artwork means socially, simply by how they share or modify it.

New Formats and Interactive Technologies. The digital revolution has also given rise to entirely new artistic media and experiences, from NFTs (non-fungible tokens, essentially digital collectibles or artworks on blockchain) to generative art with artificial intelligence involvement, to fully immersive virtual or augmented reality art. These new forms challenge traditional notions of art object and authorship even further. An NFT artwork might just be a piece of code or a digital file sold and traded in cryptocurrency markets; its value and existence are purely virtual (though sometimes tied to physical displays). The hype around NFTs in 2021, when a digital artist Beeple sold an NFT for $69 million at Christie's, sparked debates about what the buyer actually "owned" and how something infinitely reproducible could be made scarce and expensive. This world merges art with technology and finance in provocative ways, and many artists and viewers have strong reactions. Some see it as a democratizing revolution allowing digital creators to earn from their work, others see it as a speculative bubble or a vulgar commodification of art's new frontiers. Similarly, artificial intelligence as a collaborator in art raises questions: if an AI generates a painting or a musical composition, who is the artist? The programmer? The machine? And is the result art if no human hand directly crafted it? Early examples of AI-generated art have already won art prizes (to the consternation of other contestants) and fueled arguments about creativity and authenticity. Meanwhile, digital installations and VR experiences invite audiences into dynamic systems where the "art" is not static but evolves with input or algorithms. For instance, one might enter a VR artwork where one's movements alter the audiovisual environment in real time, effectively making each visitor's experience unique. The viewer here is deep inside the work, not outside looking in. This intensifies the sense that consumption and creation are merging. It also means perceiving such art requires new literacies, understanding a bit of code, or navigating virtual space, or recognizing the interplay of random algorithms. Some viewers find this thrilling and timely, a natural evolution of art in a high-tech world. Others feel alienated by the very idea ("how

can a piece of code be emotionally moving?" or "I miss when art was something to contemplate, not something to do."). The hybrid digital-physical world we now live in ensures that art's forms will continue to evolve in unexpected ways, and with them, the modes of perception. One thing is clear: contemporary art is no longer confined to static paintings on a wall. It can be an app, a game, a livestream, a collaborative platform. Its "location" can be everywhere and nowhere: in a data cloud, on your phone screen, or in a social network feed. This democratizes access (anyone with internet can potentially see high-resolution images of the Louvre's collection or join a virtual tour of a biennale) but also democratizes critique (online forums teem with instant opinions on new works, not all of them informed or fair). The conversation around art is thus broader but also more cacophonous.

In sum, the digital age has expanded the prospects of art perception in tandem with expanding technology. Contemporary art's provocations now play out on a global stage, and its "audience" includes algorithms and virtual avatars as well as human viewers. The core dynamic remains: art pushes boundaries, and viewers react, but the speed, scale, and medium of that interaction are transformed. The perspectives of perception going forward will be intertwined with the perspectives of our increasingly digital existence. Contemporary art, as always, dialogues with its epoch, and our epoch's dialogue is happening as much in virtual spaces as in physical ones. The challenge and excitement for both artists and audiences lie in maintaining meaningful, critical engagement in this fluid landscape, so that art continues to provoke thought and not just fleeting clicks.

If traditional art sought the beautiful and harmonious, contemporary art often deliberately engages with what previous eras deemed ugly, repulsive, or shocking. This strategy is not mere juvenile prankishness; it has deep philosophical and psychological roots. By using images and materials that cause discomfort or disgust, modern artists extend art's expressive range and confront viewers with aspects of reality that polite society tends to ignore. Understanding this "aesthetics of the ugly" helps explain why some artworks make us recoil, and why that reaction is frequently intended.

Disgust as Critique. One reason artists invoke disgust is to direct that visceral rejection toward some external target. In other words, the artwork's repulsiveness is a rhetorical device. For example, some artists use blood, excrement, dead animals, or decay in their pieces. When the German avant-gardist Joseph Beuys incorporated animal fat and a disheveled coyote in his

performances, or when the Viennese Actionists staged ritualistic scenes with animal carcasses and nudity, they were harnessing the viewer's immediate gut reaction. Such images produce an automatic physical *"*yuck*"* - a natural aversion. The artist then symbolically links that feeling to a social or political issue. The idea is that our physical disgust can be transmuted into a moral or intellectual disgust for something wrong in society. For instance, an artwork might present literal filth or mutilation as a stand-in for "the filth of political corruption" or "the mutilation of bodies in war." By shocking viewers into a bodily reaction, the art makes an abstract problem tangible. It's one thing to read about violence or pollution, another to be made queasy by a graphic representation of it. The latter ensures you feel the problem in your gut, not just think about it. In this way, shock art can serve as a form of social critique or activism. We might think of it as a shock therapy*:* by confronting our senses with what is normally hidden or taboo, the artwork forces acknowledgment. Many environmental artists, for example, have made installations out of real trash or polluted materials, creating an offensive sight or smell, precisely to make audiences viscerally aware of the waste and decay generated by consumer society. The initial disgust ideally converts into reflection ("why am I repelled? Because this is filth. Indeed, how filthy is the state of our rivers/streets/politics?"). Art theorists have long noted this capacity: as early as the 18th century, notions of the sublime included not just beauty but also terror and awe, suggesting that even negative emotions can be artistically powerful. In the 20th century, theorists like Julia Kristeva explored the concept of the abject, that which is cast off or taboo, as central to modern art's mission to explore the borders of self and society. By making the audience almost physically gag, the artist uses our own biology as a tool for ethical engagement.

Another reason contemporary art often isn't "pleasant" is that much of it grapples with traumatic histories and personal or collective pain. In the aftermath of events like the Holocaust, genocides, wars, and epidemics, artists have felt a responsibility to bear witness and prevent forgetting. The resulting works are frequently not "beautiful" in any conventional sense. How could they be, given the subjects? Instead, they may be harrowing or somber, designed to evoke the horror or sorrow of real events. For example**,** Christian Boltanski creates installations with dim lighting, old photographs, and recordings that evoke the loss of individuals in the Holocaust; Kara Walker uses stark silhouettes to portray the grotesqueries of slavery and racism in American history, including explicit violence and sexual exploitation. Such art is not made to give pleasure; its aim is communal remembrance and even a form of catharsis through confronting pain. When a

viewer stands before a powerful artwork about, say, war, they may feel grief, anger, or helplessness, essentially mourning in sync with the artwork's impetus. This can be a collective cathartic act: the gallery or memorial space becomes a place where society processes trauma together, rather than sweeping it under the rug. The discomfort an individual might feel is thus part of a larger healing or at least acknowledgment process. Susan Sontag, in her book Regarding the Pain of Others, discusses how images of atrocity can create empathy and moral outrage, though she also warns of the risk of desensitization. Artists working with traumatic content try to calibrate that balance, to hit hard enough that we truly pay attention, but not so gratuitously that we become numb or dismissive. The outcome for the viewer is often a sober, reflective emotional state rather than enjoyment, but it is a meaningful aesthetic experience, nonetheless. It reinforces the idea that art's purpose is not only to decorate or please, but to remember, to warn, and to commemorate. A society that has artwork openly grappling with its darkest chapters is a society attempting to come to terms with them. The intense emotions stirred, even if they are sorrow or anger are evidence that the art is working as a carrier of memory.

By repeatedly incorporating the "ugly" or disturbing, contemporary artists have effectively expanded what we consider a legitimate aesthetic experience. Historically, aesthetics was mostly about beauty and the pleasure derived from harmonious forms. Now, aesthetics (especially in academic discourse) encompasses the entire range of human emotional response to art. A performance that leaves you shaking and upset is as much part of aesthetics as a painting that leaves you serene and joyful. This broadening has philosophical support: thinkers like Theodor Adorno argued that after the horrors of the 20th century, art that only dealt in the pretty and trivial would be irresponsible, true art needed to confront ugliness and suffering to be honest. The repeated use of disgust, shock, and anxiety in art has, paradoxically, made audiences more accustomed to them, even expectant of them, in gallery settings. We have learned that a strong negative reaction can be a sign of an artwork's potency, not its failure. Some viewers may even seek out art that challenges or "wakes them up" via discomfort, finding it more profound than decorative art. Meanwhile, our collective notion of what is artistically valid now includes things like messy installations, gory photos, raw performances. All of which would have been excluded from Art with a capital A in earlier centuries. This doesn't mean everyone likes such work, but the discussion around it is accepted as part of the art world, proving that the aesthetic domain has widened to incorporate what used to be considered anti-aesthetic. In doing so, art has integrated

more of the full spectrum of human experience. Life is not all beauty; it also contains blood, sweat, and tears. Art that grapples with the entirety of life naturally must sometimes leave beauty behind. By expanding aesthetic experience to include even disgust and fear, artists have enriched art's emotional palette to span "the whole range of human feeling." As a result, viewers are invited (or challenged) to respond not just with disinterested admiration, but with deep reflexive feeling to cringe, to gasp, to think hard about why they are feeling those emotions. The payoff is that art becomes more than an escape; it becomes an encounter that can change one's perspective or reveal something uncomfortable but important about the world or oneself. In a sense, the successful "ugly" artwork redefines beauty: perhaps truth or impact becomes the new criterion of a compelling art experience, rather than prettiness. As the saying goes, art is not always about showing you what you want to see**,** but sometimes about showing you what you need to see**.** And what we need to see is not always pretty.

Given the often-demanding nature of contemporary art, a logical question arises: How can one learn not just to "understand" it, but to fully experience it, turning confusion into meaningful dialogue? The onus, it turns out, is not only on the artist. The viewer, too, has an active role in completing the art. In fact, many contemporary artists explicitly conceive their work as open-ended, requiring the spectator's intellectual and emotional input. Thus, to truly engage with modern art, the viewer must adopt what we might call a mindful, co-creative approach. Rather than expecting the art to "do all the work" (as a classical narrative painting might), the contemporary art viewer benefits from bringing certain practices and attitudes to the table. Here are some strategies and mindset shifts that can transform the encounter with a baffling artwork into a rewarding co-creation:

Often, viewers approach puzzling art with the wrong questions, ones that lead to frustration. Two common but unproductive questions are: "What does this mean?" and "Is this even art?" The first assumes there is a single secret meaning that the viewer either "gets" or doesn't; the second is usually an expression of exasperation at the object's non-traditional form. Instead of these, it's far more fruitful to pose a different set of questions to oneself while observing the piece: "What is happening inside me?" In other words, what emotions, thoughts, or memories is this artwork triggering in me? This centers the experience on one's authentic reaction. Even confusion or irritation is a valid data point: acknowledging "This piece is making me irritated" is better than just declaring it stupid. One can then ask why that emotion arises. "How is this made?"

Consider the materials, techniques, and presentation. Noting details ("these are photographs printed on translucent fabric, hung to create a maze"; "the video is shot in a single continuous take") can provide clues to the artist's intentions. Form and medium often relate to content: e.g. an artwork made of fragile glass might be about fragility; a performance using repetitive motions might relate to labor or ritual. "What context does this exist in?" When and where was the work created, and by whom? Knowing it was made in 1970s Argentina under a dictatorship versus 2020s New York in the digital age will frame it differently. If available, reading the wall label or a brief biography of the artist can illuminate possible themes (an artist of a marginalized identity might be addressing that experience; an artist of a certain movement might be responding to specific predecessors or events). Context also includes the exhibition setting: is it in a gallery of political art, an exhibit on climate change, a solo retrospective? Such information can steer interpretation. "What other works or ideas does this dialogue with?" Art doesn't exist in isolation; it often references or builds on what came before. If one can link it to other known artworks, art-historical movements, or philosophical concepts, it may start to make sense. For instance, seeing an all-white painting might recall Kazimir Malevich's suprematist White on White (1918) - perhaps the artist is commenting on or updating that idea. A pile of manufactured goods might echo pop art's focus on consumer objects, or Arte Povera's use of commonplace materials. Even if you don't know precise references, noticing resemblances (this installation feels chaotic like a Dada piece, or this use of text reminds me of advertising) will situate the piece in a narrative. By asking these sorts of questions, the viewer shifts from a passive stance ("Tell me what you mean, art!") to an active investigation. This approach is akin to a scientist examining a phenomenon or a detective solving a case. It makes the art encounter an exploration rather than a quiz with a right or wrong answer. Crucially, it also acknowledges that meaning in contemporary art is often not fixed or singular. There may be multiple interpretations, and that's okay. As one conceptual artist said, "the artwork is not fully realized until it is interpreted." Your interpretation is part of its life. Thus, a more productive internal question than "What did the artist intend this to mean?" is "What does this mean to me, given what I see and know?" - and accept that your answer might differ from someone else's.

Unlike a classical allegorical painting (where certain symbols conventionally mean certain things), contemporary art is usually open-ended. A key skill for the modern viewer is tolerating ambiguity and understanding that there is no single correct interpretation. This can be liberating

once embraced: it means you have permission to have your own take. The artist has often intentionally made something that can be read in different ways. For example, a large pile of candies arranged on the floor (as in Félix González-Torres's work "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991) could be seen simply as a minimalist sculpture, or as a metaphor (in that piece, the diminishing candy pile allegorizes the weight loss of the artist's partner due to AIDS). Both readings, and more, are valid layers. One viewer might primarily experience the interactive aspect (you're allowed to take a candy, thus "participating" in the piece), another might focus on the memorial dedication behind it. Contemporary art often invites this multiplicity. Trying to force a single "hidden message" onto it can lead to unnecessary frustration. Instead, a good tactic is to entertain several interpretations at once - essentially, keep an open mind and play with possibilities. If a video art piece shows cryptic scenes out of sequence, you might hypothesize a narrative, but also consider it could be non-linear, or symbolic, or even deliberately absurd. Holding these ideas in suspension and seeing how the piece might support each is more rewarding than picking one theory too quickly and rejecting the work if it doesn't neatly confirm it. The ability to be comfortable with not having closure immediately, to savor the ambiguity, is part of the mindset of the contemporary art viewer. In fact, embracing ambiguity can flip your experience from confusion to fascination. Once you stop demanding that the art resolve itself like a solved equation, you can appreciate its richness of suggestion. It becomes like a piece of music or poetry, open to mood and interpretation rather than a plain statement. In many cases, the meaning of a modern artwork is less a fixed point and more a conversation between artist and audience, between different members of the audience, and between the work and its context. Your personal interpretation, grounded in your perspective, is as legitimate as the critic's or curator's. Realizing this can free you from the fear of "getting it wrong," and instead encourage you to articulate why you see it the way you do. Different interpretations can even coexist. You might acknowledge "I find this installation scary, but I also see humor in it," or "The message about consumerism is clear, but I also sense a spiritual undertone." Modern art often deliberately mixes tones and references, so a multi-layered reaction is appropriate.

While personal engagement is crucial, it doesn't mean one should avoid background knowledge. On the contrary, learning about art history, artistic techniques, and the issues artists address can greatly enhance perception. Think of it as acquiring a map for a complicated landscape. Attending museum talks, reading artists' statements or critical essays, watching documentaries -

these don't "give away" a singular meaning but provide signposts and context that help navigate a work. For example, knowing about the Surrealists' interest in dreams and the unconscious can make an odd piece suddenly click ("Ah, this floating figure and melting objects might be tapping into dream imagery, much like Dalí or Miró did"). Or understanding a bit of Buddhist philosophy could deepen your appreciation of a performance where an artist sits motionless for hours (as an exploration of presence and meditation). The goal of educating oneself isn't to memorize facts or "answers", but to build a mental framework that makes new encounters less bewildering. Each piece of knowledge is like learning a new word in a language. It makes you better able to read and enjoy the conversations art is having. That said, education should not replace personal curiosity. It's important to maintain a sense of wonder and questioning even if you are well-informed. Rather than thinking there's a checklist of references to spot or theories to apply (which can become a dry academic exercise), use knowledge to feed curiosity: "I learned this artist often comments on gender politics - do I see that here? Perhaps in this detail…" or "This style reminds me of X - is the artist aligning with that or parodying it?" In essence, knowledge should enrich the questions you ask, not stifle them. It's also worth noting that the learning process in art is never complete, even experts encounter works that stump them or change their perspective. Part of the joy of contemporary art is that it's continually evolving alongside current thought, so there's always something new to absorb. Maintaining a student's mindset being willing to ask questions and seek understanding is more valuable than rigidly applying what one already knows.

Finally, it bears emphasizing that contemporary art does not require specialized education to be appreciated, but it does invite the viewer to be intellectually and emotionally active. Unlike genres that may offer immediate gratification, it often rewards patience and thoughtfulness. The ultimate point is not to decode a secret message but to stimulate perception itself. By engaging thoughtfully, using the strategies above and giving oneself permission to be an explorer, a viewer transforms confusion into a dialogue. In this dialogue, the artwork provides a provocation or a scenario, and the viewer responds with interpretation, feeling, perhaps even action (if interactive). The result can be deeply meaningful: the viewer doesn't just consume a finished product but participates in creating meaning. This is why someone might come out of a challenging exhibition feeling intellectually or emotionally energized, even if some pieces were perplexing, because they have been actively making sense of something, reflecting on their own reactions, and possibly seeing the world a bit differently as a result. In sum, contemporary art calls on the viewer to

complete the work. To quote Marcel Duchamp, “the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator deciphers and interprets and thus contributes to the creative act”. When we approach art with open eyes and an active mind, we become co-creators in that act, and the experience, though sometimes demanding, becomes profoundly our own.

The debates and strong emotions surrounding contemporary art are not evidence of its failure, but rather proof of its vitality. In moving away from being mere decoration or illustration, art has become an active participant in the cultural conversations of our time. It questions norms, exposes wounds, and challenges viewers to think and feel in new ways. This often uncomfortable dialogue is precisely how art stays relevant to the evolving human condition.

At the heart of the matter is the recognition that the perception of contemporary art is always an act of co-creation. The artist typically provides only half of the work, perhaps a provocative question, a scenario, or a gesture that is deliberately open or incomplete. The other half is created by the viewer, who brings to the encounter their unique life experience, imagination, and interpretive skills. In this sense, every viewing is a collaboration. Ten people may see the same installation and effectively create ten related but distinct “artworks” in their minds, as each completes the piece differently. Far from being a flaw, this multiplicity is the strength of contemporary art. It is art that lives in the exchange between artist and audience, between object and observer, rather than residing solely in the object itself. As Boris Groys remarked, the avant-garde opened up “the potentially infinite field of all possible forms,” granting “equal aesthetic rights” to all images and objects. It’s now up to each viewer to exercise their interpretative rights in engaging with these forms.

Thus, when next you find yourself standing in front of something strange, shocking, or inscrutable in a gallery, it might be wise to shift the questions from “What on earth is this?” to more fruitful ones: “What thoughts or feelings is this sparking in me?”, “Why might the artist have made this choice?”, “What issues does this raise or make me consider?”. By doing so, you enter into a dialogue rather than a confrontation. The artwork is no longer an opaque enigma to be solved or dismissed; it becomes a conversational partner, perhaps a challenging or eccentric one, that has something to say about the world and demands something of you in return. In that dynamic tension between expectation and reality, between conventional beauty and provocative concept, arises the special transformative experience that contemporary art can offer.

Ultimately, the power of contemporary art lies in its very ability to provoke - to move us out of complacency, to incite debate, to make us question our assumptions and engage with the complexities of modern life. Its provocations and shocks are not ends in themselves but means to an end: the end of stirring the mind and soul. As we have seen, those shocks can occur at many levels: perceptual, emotional, intellectual, social, and often simultaneously. They are invitations to pay closer attention: to art, to society, and to us. So, if a piece of art leaves you arguing about it or recalling it days later, it has succeeded in staying alive in your mind. This lingering effect, whether pleasant or not, is a sign of life; the artwork has become an active agent in your thought process.

In a world saturated with passivity and quick consumption, the kind of active engagement contemporary art demands is, arguably, what keeps culture dynamic. The controversies that swirl around it are themselves part of the artwork's function, extending its presence into public discourse. Far from indicating that "anyone can do it" or that it's a hoax (common accusations), the very fact that not anyone can provoke sustained discussion or introspection through art indicates the artistry involved. The friction it generates is productive: it means the work has found its mark in the consciousness of viewers and is working there like a grain of sand in an oyster, potentially to create a pearl of insight.

In conclusion, contemporary art may not always give us what we want, but it often gives us what we need: provocation, shock, disturbance, but also illumination, empathy, and a push toward meaning-making. It thrives on the active participation of viewers who are willing to meet it halfway. When that meeting happens, artist and audience together create an experience that neither could alone. And it is in that co-creative act, sometimes harmonious, often dissonant, that the vitality of art in our time is born. The strong feelings and heated debates are not a bug but a feature, a testament to art's ongoing dialogue with the epoch. In sparking argument and feeling, art ensures that we do not remain indifferent to the world we inhabit. Instead, it provokes us, shocks us, and ultimately makes us think, and that may be its greatest gift.

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Harmony (Wa) in Japanese Society: Tradition, Practice, and Contemporary Challenges

Rogaleva Ekaterina
Bachelor's student, Institute of Culture and Arts,
Moscow City University
Moscow, Russia

Abstract: This article explores the foundational role of harmony as a core value in Japanese society, tracing its historical origins and examining its manifestations in social structure, cultural practices, and daily life. Harmony in Japan emerges from a unique synthesis of Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism values, first codified by Prince Shotoku in the 6th century and enduring as a guiding principle of social organization. The paper examines how harmony is maintained through strict social hierarchies, collective obligations, and ritualized etiquette, which minimize conflict and promote group cohesion. Everyday customs – from workplace dynamics and family roles to seasonal festivals, cuisine, and aesthetics – are shown to reinforce a life in tune with nature and community. The analysis also addresses modern challenges to harmony, particularly the post-World War II influx of Western individualism and competitive ethos, which many Japanese observers argue have eroded the traditional "spirit of *wa*". Even so, a renewed nostalgia and hope for revitalizing harmony-based values are rising in Japan. The article concludes that harmony remains vital for Japan's social fabric and suggests that re-embracing this classical virtue could guide Japan through its current cultural value crisis.

Keywords: harmony; Japanese culture; collectivism; Shinto; modernity in art; interpretation; co-creation.

Introduction

When envisioning Japanese society, outsiders often imagine a well-ordered system whose members know and unfailingly follow its rules. A familiar image arises of Japanese individuals building successful careers, serving as model family members, honoring parents and ancestors, and proceeding dutifully through life. Many Western observers are astonished at how Japan manages to remain faithful to the traditions and values of its past amid a rapidly changing world. What underpins the vitality and prosperity of this system? It is well known that Japanese society

is relatively closed, hierarchical, and collectivist. Such a society must possess a system of values capable of protecting its social order from foreign influences that might otherwise reshape the Japanese mindset. Indeed, Japanese consciousness shows a remarkable ability to selectively adopt foreign cultural products while preserving its traditional way of life, a duality of conservatism and openness. This paradox is made possible by an inherently Japanese value known as "wa" (「和), meaning harmony. How is this value of harmony expressed in Japanese society?

Historical Foundations of Wa: Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

The deep entrenchment of harmony in the Japanese psyche was profoundly influenced by an organic blending of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism over the centuries. In A.D. 604, the regent Prince Shotoku Taishi enshrined the ideal of harmony as a fundamental value in Japan's earliest quasi-constitution. Prince Shotoku is traditionally credited with the saying: "Buddhism is the branches on the tree of Shinto, and Confucianism the leaves on those branches." This metaphor can be interpreted to mean that, building on the robust foundation of Shinto in the Japanese worldview, Buddhism took root, and only then was society prepared to absorb Confucian values. Shotoku's first article famously decreed: *"Wa should be valued and quarrels avoided… When superiors are in harmony with each other, and inferiors are friendly, then affairs are discussed quietly, and the right view of matters prevails"*. In other words, harmony was elevated as the supreme guiding principle of governance and social interaction.

Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, had no strict dogma; its essence was a belief that every phenomenon in nature. Mountains, rivers, plants, animals, the sun, and rain contain a divine spirit or kami. Harmony, in Shinto teaching, meant living in accord with the surrounding natural world. Buddhism, introduced from the continent in the 6th century, initially met resistance but was embraced by leaders like Shotoku, who saw its teachings as complementary to Shinto. Buddhism added a spiritual-philosophical dimension, emphasizing compassion and the impermanence of life, which reinforced an inner harmony and acceptance of change. Confucianism, arriving later via Chinese influence, further shaped the notion of harmony to mean living in accord with society. Confucian ethics, with its stress on filial piety, social hierarchy, and moral duty, gave harmony new expression as orderly social relations, loyalty, and ritual propriety. Thus, the concept of wa expanded beyond reverence for nature and ancestors to include structured social harmony, virtue of duty, and formalized etiquette. As one scholar observes, Confucian values deeply informed

Japanese ethics, especially in business contexts, by bolstering group cohesion and consensus-driven decision making [Kulneva 2012].

Harmony through Social Structure and Hierarchy

One of the most visible manifestations of harmony in Japan is the highly structured and hierarchical organization of its society. Every person has a clearly defined place with specific duties and rights. By honorably and diligently fulfilling one's responsibilities in that position, an individual helps society function smoothly and constructively, and in return gains a sense of security and belonging. Adherence to hierarchy in Japan is rooted in a deeply ingrained mental model of the nation as a family, wherein the younger defer to elders and trust their decisions, and the elders take responsibility for the younger. This paternalistic social model dates to the Tokugawa shogunate: in the early 17th century, Shogun Iyasu Tokugawa brought peace to a country weary of civil strife by rigorously assigning each class – samurai, peasants, artisans, merchants - its proper place along with corresponding rights and duties. Under this Tokugawa order, so long as one faithfully performed one's work, even those of low status could expect protection of their rights. Consequently, people came to regard the ability to occupy one's proper place as a sign of personal dignity and strength of character. Later, during the Meiji era and beyond, the loyalty and diligence of Japanese subjects were increasingly oriented toward reverence for the emperor as the "father" of the nation. This attitude, civic devotion combined with filial piety toward authority, persists in helping Japanese value their own labor and respect the work of others.

Today, the same family model of social harmony is evident in Japanese corporate life. Companies often function like extended families, with employees viewing themselves as devoted children of the organizational household. Workers unite to do everything possible for the good of the company, mirroring the devotion of children to their parents. The understanding is that if all members of the "family" work toward its prosperity, the company will thrive, and so each person's diligent work is a contribution to the common harmony and success. In turn, traditional Japanese companies have reciprocated with strong paternalistic support, exemplified by the system of lifetime employment and generous social benefits, taking care of employees often until retirement. This mutual commitment binds the group together and fosters harmony: everyone knows their role and future within the organization. Such clarity brings peace of mind to Japanese employees, for whom uncertainty and chaos are deeply unsettling. The overall result is a work culture where

collective harmony is prized over individual ambition. As anthropologist Ruth Benedict observed, Japanese society instills in individuals a drive to "measure up" to their social role and obligations, equating professional honor with personal honor [Benedict 2004]. A contentment in fulfilling one's predefined role has long served the cause of harmony in Japan, in stark contrast to many Western societies.

The Ethic of Duty and Collective Responsibility

Harmony in interpersonal relations is also safeguarded by a distinctly Japanese ethic of duty and obligation, often conceptualized as giri (義理, "duty" or "social obligation"). From a young age, Japanese people are taught to carefully follow social rules and meet the expectations associated with their roles, and they expect the same of others. There are traditional norms governing how to speak to whom, how deeply to bow, what sort of gift to give, and how it must be reciprocated. Such standardization of behavior acts as a social lubricant, ensuring that in daily and business interactions, one seldom encounters the unexpected. In Japan, an exemplary deed is often met not with surprise but with the phrase, "As was expected of you," underscoring the predictability of proper conduct.

This predictability is possible because the Japanese weigh social relations on the scale of reciprocal obligations. They are respectful and deferential to parents' will, considerate and polite with peers, dutiful and reliable at work, all propelled by an internalized sense of obligation. Fulfilling one's obligations is not viewed as subservience, but as arising from an awareness of deep connections to others and genuine gratitude for others' contributions in one's life. Whether repaying a parent (a duty called *oya-kōkō*, filial piety) for the gift of upbringing or honoring a teacher for imparting knowledge, the readiness to repay these debts of kindness reflects a natural generosity of spirit. Only a truly magnanimous person, it is thought, can live a lifetime in gratitude and respect toward someone who once helped them.

Crucially, this generosity does not negate the famous Japanese reserve in expressing feelings or making promises. A Japanese person understands not to impose on others in a way that would make them feel excessively indebted, just as one must avoid making rash promises, because a promise immediately becomes giri, a debt of honor that one is morally bound to fulfill. To break such an obligation would be to lose face and honor. As Benedict detailed in her study of Japanese culture, the failure to discharge one's giri leads to intense shame, while success in fulfilling

obligations brings honor in the eyes of society [Benedict 2004]. Hence, one should not be surprised if, upon offering a seat to a Japanese stranger on a train, you receive puzzled looks - the stranger may be perplexed why you would want to impose a debt on a person you don't know. The ability to appropriately carry out one's giri guarantees a person acceptance by, or expulsion from, the immediate society (seken) of which they are a part. Each Japanese belongs simultaneously to multiple seken, one's family, school class, company, neighborhood, etc., and behavior is governed by a powerful moral accountability to those present communities. In any setting, whether on a train, in a shop, or at the office, a Japanese individual will behave in whatever way is necessary to prevent conflict and avoid clashes of interest in that context. Causing trouble (迷惑 meiwaku) for others is a cardinal sin to be avoided at all costs.

In moments of crisis, this strong sense of collective responsibility and social harmony becomes strikingly visible. Even during the catastrophic 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, which devastated northeastern Japan, social order largely prevailed. In the disaster's aftermath, observers worldwide were astonished by the absence of chaos: survivors across affected towns queued calmly for food and aid, and neighbors spontaneously organized volunteer help squads, feeling a mutual responsibility to maintain order and help the vulnerable. Foreign journalists reported on the "near-total absence of looting and crime" in the quake zones and noted that Japanese citizens, even after losing everything, continued to help one another with courage and discipline. This resilience was not because hardship was any less severe, but because Japanese culture, reinforced by social institutions, had long taught that everyone's behavior is essential to keeping society together. In these dire conditions, people still largely followed the ethos of wa, avoiding panic or selfishness. The strong protected the weak, and order was preserved in the face of chaos. Such examples illustrate how deeply the ethic of harmony and duty is ingrained in Japan's social fabric.

A Japanese person will go to great lengths to preserve their reputation and honor, because they feel an obligation to their good name and the groups it represents. This "name" (名誉 meiyo, or social honor) is multifaceted. It includes one's professional reputation, family name, and standing in any community. The Japanese are famously punctual and conscientious, partly because they regard their professional honor as equivalent to personal dignity. For example, when Greco-Roman wrestler Kenichiro Fumita won a silver medal at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, he broke down in tears and publicly apologized for what he called a "shameful result." Fumita felt he had let down

his team, coaches, supporters, and thus his country, by not achieving gold. His reaction might seem extreme, but many Japanese athletes similarly apologized even for silver or bronze finishes, reflecting an ingrained instinct to meet collective expectations and not bring dishonor to those they represent. One might think that this pressure to meet social expectations is highest for public figures, but it extends throughout society. Consider the case of a humble Takoyaki (octopus dumpling) stand owner in Osaka in 2021: when a customer complained of finding a hair in her food, the proprietor immediately shaved his head bald as an act of contrition. In Japan, shaving one's head is an old-school way to show a sincere apology for a grave mistake. The owner not only did this but also went to the customer's home to apologize in person. Such an extreme gesture demonstrates how seriously Japanese individuals take the duty to perform their roles properly, even in a small business, and how urgently they act to restore harmony and honor when it is disrupted. In sum, the Japanese strive to fully live up to their roles and statuses, which directly define their social persona. This conscientious fulfillment of one's place in society is a pillar of harmony: everyone doing what they ought to do, so that interpersonal relations remain smooth and honor is preserved.

The contrast with Western society is striking. In many Western cultures, individuals are encouraged to constantly strive for personal advancement, chasing ever-higher material success or social status. This mindset yields innovation and progress, but often at the cost of perpetual dissatisfaction - one is rarely content with one's current position and thus not truly at peace with oneself or the world. In Japan's traditional value system, by contrast, there is virtue in contentment and balance. Ambition is tempered by the idea that exceeding or deviating from one's proper place can disrupt harmony. A person who continuously refuses to accept their role, endlessly seeking more, is seen as lacking wa and disturbing the collective equilibrium. While not inherently anti-ambitious, the culture of wa teaches that true happiness comes from knowing one's place and contributing to the whole, rather than individual competition. This difference reflects a deeper divergence in values: the primacy of spiritual and social fulfillment over material gain.

Harmony in Daily Life, Culture, and Aesthetics

It is evident that Japan's commitment to harmony rests on an underlying prioritization of the spiritual over the material. Yet, as Shinto teaches, spiritual values reflect the material, physical world - meaning harmony also manifests in the concrete routines of Japanese life. A close look at

Japanese lifestyles reveals that the laws of harmony are observed in all things, from personal cleanliness to cultural pursuits. For example, the simple habit of daily bathing is about more than hygiene; it is seen as a way to purify the body and relax the mind, keeping oneself "clean" in both a physical and spiritual sense. Likewise, various disciplining practices – from morning calisthenics and meditation to the precise routines of martial arts or tea ceremony – are aimed at cultivating a clean spirit and clear intentions. Traditional Japanese cuisine (和食 washoku) is renowned for its balanced, harmonious combination of ingredients and its respect for natural flavors and seasons. Meals are prepared and presented with a mindfulness that reflects harmony between taste, nutrition, and aesthetics. Notably, the healthfulness of washoku is often credited with contributing to Japanese longevity, illustrating how living in harmony with nature's offerings (eating seasonal and locally sourced foods) directly benefits individual well-being.

A prominent cultural ideal in Japan is to live in harmony with the seasons. The Japanese hold that each season carries a unique energy and lessons, so by adjusting one's activities and mindset to the time of year, one stays in tune with the larger rhythms of nature. This can mean enjoying specific seasonal foods at their peak, performing seasonal traditions, and even subtly changing home decor or clothing motifs to suit the season. According to Japanese folk wisdom, practicing the appropriate customs for each season fills people with harmony and allows them to absorb the energy (ki) of that time of year. Here, Buddhist influence echoes Shinto's nature reverence: Buddhism emphasizes that seasons (and all things) are impermanent and fleeting. Therefore, every moment is precious because it holds an unrepeatable experience, a teaching captured in the expression ichi-go ichi-e (一期一会, "one moment - one opportunity"). At the same time, since the cycle of seasons is eternal in its recurrence, one should live in the flow of time, moving from one stage of life to the next without undue anxiety or regret. Embracing this view fosters inner harmony: one celebrates the bloom of spring cherry blossoms even knowing they will fall in days, and one endures winter's barrenness knowing spring will come again. As the seasons change inevitably, so too must people accept change and find continuity in change. This philosophy not only pervades Japanese poetry and visual art, but also everyday life. For instance, families eat chestnuts and mushrooms in autumn because those foods symbolize the fall harvest, and they welcome the New Year by deep-cleaning and purifying the home in winter, believing it sweeps away spiritual impurities of the past year. Throughout the year, there are seasonal festivals (matsuri) and observances that reinforce communal harmony and respect for nature's cycles.

In summer, during Obon (the Festival of the Dead), Japanese people return to their hometowns to honor their ancestors' spirits, keeping harmony with the familial and spiritual realm. Autumn is the time for contemplation of maple leaves, chrysanthemums, and the moon (through customs like momijigari - maple viewing, chrysanthemum exhibitions, and tsukimi - moon-viewing nights). People will appreciate these symbols both in reality (viewing the colored leaves or harvest moon outdoors) and in art (reading poems, visiting art exhibits featuring autumnal themes), thereby aligning their hearts with the season's beauty and transience. Winter brings the year's end, when it is customary to thoroughly clean and sometimes renovate the house, a practice called ōsōji, to welcome the new year with a fresh, harmonious start. Finally, spring is celebrated by delighting in the awakening of nature, most famously through hanami (flower viewing) under blooming sakura (cherry blossom) trees, which epitomize the poignantly brief beauty of life.

The attentiveness to seasonal harmony also extends to living spaces and aesthetics. Traditional Japanese homes are designed to blend with nature and encourage contemplation. A key feature is the engawa (縁側) - a narrow veranda or porch surrounding the house, which serves as a transition between indoors and outdoors. Sitting on the engawa, one can admire the garden and feel at one with the environment, whether enjoying a cool breeze in summer or the moonlight during an autumn tsukimi. Gardens themselves are crafted as microcosms of the natural world, often incorporating rocks, water, and plants to mirror a larger landscape in miniature. Many homes include a carefully tended garden or at least potted plants to invite nature's harmony into daily life. Inside the home, the tokonoma (床の間) alcove in the main room is reserved for displaying a scroll of calligraphy or painting and perhaps a seasonal flower arrangement. This simple alcove acts as a spiritual and aesthetic focus of the room, often an altar for ancestor veneration or a place to display art that reflects the season or an important sentiment. Every object in a well-designed Japanese room has its proper place and function; clutter is avoided so that space itself can convey a sense of balance. The result is an environment where, much like in a Zen garden, the emptiness and simplicity are intentional and meaningful. Each thing, by being in the right place, contributes to an overall sense of order and calm. This harmonious ordering of space is not only practical but spiritual. It is meant to mirror an orderly mind and a harmonious society at large.

Japanese art forms similarly emphasize subtlety, suggestion, and balance as reflections of harmony. In poetry, especially haiku and waka, feelings are expressed in an indirect and refined manner. There is a saying in Japanese aesthetics that to speak too openly of one's emotions is

crude, for overt expression cheapens the feelings and disrupts the harmony of communication. Instead, the highest artistry lies in suggestion, allowing the reader or viewer to intuit the depth of emotion or meaning that is merely hinted at. This aligns with the aesthetic principle of yūgen (幽玄), often translated as a "mysterious profundity" or subtle grace. Yūgen has been described as "a beauty that hints at more than what is said", the highest ideal in classical Japanese poetry. In a few lines of verse, a great poet evokes a universe of unspoken feeling, a technique that requires the reader's active imagination to complete the picture. By leaving things unsaid, Japanese arts invite a quiet participation and maintain a sense of harmony between expression and silence. Whether in the sparse brushstrokes of an ink painting or the pregnant pauses of a Noh theater performance, restraint and understatement are employed to evoke a profound emotional response without ever breaking the harmonious surface with blunt explicitness. In essence, Japanese culture has cultivated an "art of the unsaid", believing that what remains implicit can be more powerful and more harmonious than what is overtly declared.

Contemporary Challenges to Harmony

Despite its enduring legacy, the spirit of wa in modern Japan faces undeniable challenges. In recent decades, especially since the end of World War II, many in Japan feel that society has drifted away from its traditional harmony-centric values. The postwar occupation and rapid Westernization introduced capitalist competition, individualism, and liberal social models that, over time, have subtly reshaped aspects of Japanese life. Japanese commentators lament that these Western influences, capitalist free-market ideals, and an emphasis on personal freedom have sown disintegration by pitting the strong against the weak, undermining the old ethos where the strong were duty-bound to protect the weak. As journalist Michael Hoffman observed, "Western culture pulls people apart, pits the strong against the weak. Japan's culture draws people together. Wa prevails. That's a Japanese national trait or was," he adds, until recent reforms accelerated inequality. In particular, the early 2000s saw neoliberal economic policies that prioritized competition and efficiency, breaking down some of the social protections that companies and communities once offered. The result has been a widening gap between winners and losers, with the rich getting richer and the poor growing more numerous. This growing socio-economic stratification is often cited as evidence of waning harmony, since it suggests that societal unity is giving way to a more fragmented, competitive order.

Indeed, in contemporary Japan, one finds more situations where decisions in relationships or business are driven by self-interest and profit rather than mutual obligation or honor. The communal solidarity that once characterized neighborhoods and companies has been weakened in places by an ethos of individual gain. Young generations, exposed to global media, may place less automatic importance on traditional duties like caring for aging parents or lifelong loyalty to one employer. Social issues such as increasing elder loneliness, declining birth rates, and the phenomenon of social recluses (hikikomori) are often interpreted as symptoms of a fraying communal fabric. The COVID-19 pandemic, too, tested social harmony: while compliance and cooperation were high, economic pressures revealed rifts as businesses struggled and inequality became more visible.

Yet, against these troubling trends, there is also a countercurrent of hope and revival for wa in Japan. Nostalgia for the "good old days" of Shōwa-era stability - perceived as times of greater social harmony and community spirit has grown. Many Japanese are revaluing aspects of their culture that promote harmony, from re-engaging in local festivals and traditional arts to championing concepts like "Japan's spiritual culture" (yamato-damashii) as something worth preserving in the modern era. There is a burgeoning interest in minimalist lifestyle and Zen-inspired well-being practices among youth, reflecting a desire to escape the chaos of hyper-competitive life and find inner harmony. Some leaders and intellectuals call for a return to certain Confucian or communitarian values to address social ills, for instance, by encouraging companies to re-embrace employee welfare or communities to support young families. In the media and pop culture, themes of friendship, teamwork, and belonging remain perennially popular, suggesting that the ideal of harmony still resonates deeply with the Japanese public. The persistence of orderly social behavior even under duress, such as the disciplined mask-wearing and courtesy shown during the recent pandemic, indicates that the cultural training in wa is far from lost.

Crucially, the bridges to Japan's past are not yet burned. The Japanese can still rediscover a path to societal happiness by tapping into the wisdom stored in their own history. Modern Japan has reinvented itself before: at the end of the Tokugawa period in the 19th century, facing internal crisis and external threat, Japan's leaders turned to the ancient concept of harmony (along with reverence for the Emperor) to rally the nation, leading to the Meiji Restoration, a successful blend of old spirit and new technology that transformed the country. It may be time again for a kind of cultural restoration, one that rejuvenates the principle of harmony on a new footing suited to the

21st century. As one commentator in 2016 put it, the task ahead is to balance Western-inspired innovation with Japan's traditional wa, so that economic progress does not come at the expense of social cohesion. This could involve policies that mitigate extreme competition, corporate practices that value employees and consumers as partners, and educational emphasis on ethics and community belonging alongside individual achievement.

Conclusion

Harmony (wa) has been and remains a cornerstone of Japanese society. On a relatively small archipelago nation with a dense population and having experienced long periods of isolation, the Japanese developed a highly reflexive and tradition-oriented mentality, one deeply shaped by the authority of ancestors and the lessons of history. It is no coincidence that when Japan confronted the tumult of modernity at the end of the Edo era, its leaders sought solutions by reaching back to ancient wisdom and reasserting traditional values (such as harmony and loyalty) to guide the nation's transformation. In the present day, Japan finds itself in a period of soul-searching, a mild crisis of values brought on by deviations from the once-dominant principle of harmony. The evidence of social strain, whether in the form of economic disparities, changing family structures, or youth disaffection, has led many to question how much of Japan's "spirit of wa" has been lost in the pursuit of Western-style progress.

Nonetheless, the essence of wa is far from extinguished. The very fact that there is widespread nostalgia and discussion about harmony indicates that Japanese society is self-aware and values this ideal. Perhaps Japan stands at the cusp of another great renewal. By looking to the past and rediscovering the enduring merit in its traditional values, Japanese society may find a way to recalibrate its course. A renewed commitment to harmony adapted to contemporary realities but rooted in the timeless wisdom of wa could very well become the key to Japan's cultural rejuvenation in the new era. In an increasingly fragmented world, the Japanese example of harmony, if successfully revitalized, might even serve as an inspiration beyond its borders for how balance, respect, and collective good can be harmonized with modernization. After all, the pursuit of harmony has always been Japan's path to social stability and, arguably, to happiness. As the adage goes, "Wa wo motte tōtoshi to nasu," harmony is to be valued as the highest good, and it may once again light Japan's way forward.

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