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The Beauty of Storytelling and the Story of Beauty

Edited by Joanna Szczepanik
& Kalina Kukiełko

CONTENTS

Introduction

Under the title *The Beauty of Storytelling and the Story of Beauty*, this special issue of *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* explores the intricate and reciprocal relationship between the narrative impulse and aesthetic valuation, asking how beauty emerges, transforms, and persists within acts of narration. Storytelling has accompanied humanity since the dawn of time: as long as human collectives have existed, so too have stories. In the social sciences and humanities, narratives are recognized not merely as forms of entertainment, but as fundamental tools for self-knowledge, the interpretation of the world, and the construction of social bonds. Yet the question remains: what is the place of beauty in this discursive and cultural practice today?

Over a century ago, the artistic avant-gardes challenged the primacy of beauty, displacing it from its position as the paramount aesthetic value in favor of originality, shock, and innovation. In the complex landscape of the twenty-first century, this contestation continues, further complicated by the proliferation of new media and the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which introduce new dimensions for scrutinizing authorship, intentionality, and aesthetic ideals. In a tradition of aesthetic reflection that resists strict formalism, Władysław Tatarkiewicz proposed that beauty may be understood as an inherent feature of narrative itself, encompassing both form and content "whether it be color, sound, or thought."

This issue argues that the *story of beauty* is far from over; rather, it is continuously being rewritten through diverse narrative modalities. The volume bears witness to the heterogeneity of storytelling practices, forms, and media, recognizing narrative as a potent vehicle for comprehending reality. From ancient myths and legends to contemporary reportages, immersive digital environments, and algorithmically generated stories, the essence of storytelling remains remarkably resilient. It enables the taming of fears, the preservation of cultural values, and the projection of possible futures. Through stories, the past intersects with the future, and individual experiences are woven into the rich fabric of collective memory.

The contributions gathered in this issue approach storytelling not only as an art form, but also as a methodological perspective, particularly within art-based research and qualitative inquiry. Drawing on narrative, several texts examine biographical and experiential accounts as instruments of meaning-making and identity construction. At the same time, the volume acknowledges an inherent ambivalence toward storytelling. On the one hand, narratives are valued for their authenticity, emotional resonance, and capacity to evoke empathy; on the other, they demand critical vigilance. The subtle play of emotions may blur the boundary between sincerity and staging, between shared meaning and manipulation.

Importantly, this volume expands the notion of storytelling beyond verbal language. Stories do not always require words; they can be conveyed with equal force through images, sounds, dace, choreography, gestures, music and performance practices. Design occupies a particular place within this expanded field, revealing patterns of existence and experience that often elude traditional scientific description.

In *The Beauty of Storytelling and the Story of Beauty*, we invite readers to reflect on the contemporary condition of beauty as a fundamental aspect of narrative experience. The volume explores how human and non-human agencies, including AI, coexist in the creation of stories across time, cultures, and continents, reshaping established notions of authorship, creativity, and aesthetic responsibility. Whether digital, organic, embodied, or hybrid, narratives continue to enchant, persuade, and structure our understanding of the world. This issue ultimately proposes a renewed engagement with the classical Greek triad of truth, goodness, and beauty, reconsidered through the prism of narrative complexity, medial plurality, and contemporary cultural challenges. We ask, finally: is there still a place for beauty in the stories we tell about ourselves and our world, and if so, how is it being reimagined today?

Joanna Szczepanik, Kalina Kukiełko

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Rômulo Eisinger Guimarães*

How a Story Can Be Recounted or Read Aesthetically? Notes on Authorship, Reception, and the Socio-Historical Materiality of Works of Art

Abstract

Drawing on Enunciative Semantics, Discourse Analysis, Reception Aesthetics, and Reader-Response Criticism, this paper aims to delineate problematic aspects of the conception that a work of art is autonomous and capable of generating meaning independently, thereby demonstrating the fragility of such invoked autonomy. Given that both the production and reception of art are socio-historically determined activities, this dual determination is argued to fundamentally compromise the work's presumed independence and quality of being aesthetic.

Keywords

Autonomy of Art, Aesthetic Production and Reception, Enunciation, Interpretation, Socio-Historical Materiality

1.

Following certain theoretical precepts of Romanticism, Aestheticism is an intellectual movement asserting that "art is self-sufficient and need serve no ulterior purpose, whether moral, political, or religious" (Chilvers, Osborne 1988, 6).[1] Advocating for *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), this post-

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[1] For non-English references, all translations are my own, and as such, "my translation" will not be indicated at the end of each quotation. For Aristotle's works, I use the page number and column from the Bekker numbering, as found in the 1831 edition published by the Königlich-Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften. The abbreviation

Romantic trend largely waned in influence at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it is notable that the concept of art as having value independent of its representational or symbolic content "would scarcely elicit any particular dispute in our time, [and] some might even be inclined to reproach it for a certain banality" (Jimenez 1997, 34).

As a matter of fact, one might argue that the idea of the autonomy of art clearly survived post-Romantic Aestheticism. This is evident not only in the so-called breakdown of figuration in Malevich's Suprematism—a movement contending that art should not be a mere representational vehicle "if it is to fulfil its task" (Grassi 1962, 116)—but also in Clive Bell's theory of significant form, according to which a responsive attitude towards a work of art relates solely to the "combination of lines and colours," and not to that which is represented (Bell 1987, 12).

However, in light of the contributions from the Semantics of Enunciation, Discourse Analysis, and Reception Aesthetics, can we still, with sound justification, speak of the autonomy of a work of art? The aim of this paper is precisely to examine whether, and to what extent, such a notion of autonomy can still be sustained—both in what a work of art tells one and in how one reads it.

In what follows, I propose that every work of art functions as an enunciation—an utterance shaped by the artist's perspective and directed at an audience. By expanding the concept of language to include artistic expressions, the notion of art's autonomy is challenged, showing how this idea has, since the Renaissance, developed in tension with the cultural, political, and ideological determinants that condition artistic creation (section 2).

Arguing, then, that our current conception of the autonomy of art does not originate in the Renaissance, I examine how this conception relates to Kantian aesthetics. In defining the judgement of taste as disinterested, Kant establishes the autonomy of aesthetics from other domains. However,

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Poi refers to *Peri poietikês*. Quotations from Hegel follow the format: VÄ, WE (volume number): page. The acronyms VÄ and WE refer, respectively, to *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* and *Werke in 20 Bänden*. Quotations from Kant's works follow the *Akademie-Ausgabe*, the same standard officially adopted by international Kant societies. The citations adhere to the format: KU, AA (volume number): page. The acronyms KU and AA refer, respectively, to *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and *Akademie-Ausgabe*. Quotations from Marx, in turn, follow the format: EZKpÖ/ÖPM, MEW (volume number): page. The acronyms EZKpÖ, MEW, and ÖPM 1844 refer, respectively, to *Einleitung [zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie]*, *Marx-Engels-Werke*, and *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*. Finally, unless otherwise stated, any emphasis is present in the original texts.

by differentiating natural from artistic beauty, he recognises that a work of art, as an intentional product of human reason, cannot be entirely disinterested and, therefore, is not entirely autonomous (section 3).

In view of this, it is arguable that the contemporary notion of *l'art pour l'art* exaggerates the Kantian conception of aesthetic autonomy. For, while aesthetics should not be subjected to disciplines such as morality or religion, the work of art is always intrinsically linked to its author's social and historical context. Thus, its production is inseparable from the ideological and material determinations that precede the artist's intention (section 4).

Having discussed the autonomy of a work of art's productive pole, the text then turns to its receptive pole. Contrasting a (supposedly) univocal poetics with Umberto Eco's notion of the "open work," it is argued that every work of art implies a field of interpretative possibilities structured by the author. However, its interpretation remains dependent on the social and ideological context in which the receiver is situated, and this reliance undermines the autonomy of one's reading of a work of art (section 5).

If this is the case, the idea of a work of art's autonomy—i.e., the notion of how a story can be told or read aesthetically—appears quite untenable. Both its production and reception are marked by ideological positions and socio-historical contexts. Indeed, if one understands a work of art as an enunciation directed at an audience, its very creation is conditioned by the author's viewpoint, and its interpretation is shaped by the receiver's perspective (section 6).

2.

Let us consider language as a code, an instrument employed by speech, and speech as a language-in-operation, i.e., actualised (cf. Ducrot 2001, 133-134). Let us further consider that "the individual act of actualising the language in a given communicative context" (Reis, Lopes 1988, 107) is the enunciation, i.e., the emergence of a statement.

Assuming that "language" can refer not only, in a strict sense, to the system of codes employed by linguists, but also, in a broader sense, to any "set of regularities whose functioning is autonomous [...] [, i.e.,] constituted by relations that are proper to it" (Guimarães, Zoppi-Fontana 2010, 123), it follows that:

(i) not only the language of words but also pictorial, sculptural, and other poetic languages—each endowed with its own system of internal codes[2]—can be included under the term "language";
(ii) when put into use, these languages manifest as speeches; and
(iii) when these speeches occur within a particular, specific context, they also become statements.

Put differently, I suggest thinking here that, for example, pictorial language can correspond to the code[3] (which the painter has at their disposal); the act of painting (language-in-operation) corresponds to speech; and the painting itself (the pictorial work) corresponds to the statement. If this is the case, the same applies to the languages of sculpture, drawing, engraving, and ceramics (whose products we call works of art), so that every work of art, as poetic language actualised in a given communicative context, can be understood as a statement.[4]

Now, it is said that a statement is language actualised in a given communicative context because it involves the point of view of an enunciator, who impregnates, so to speak, the statement with a perspective, causing this "language-in-operation" to signify something for someone: a recipient, a "you" to whom the "I"-enunciator is addressing (cf. Ducrot 2001, 137). But if this is the case—that is, if a work of art can be understood as a state-

[2] A system that is, in turn, internalised by those who employ these codes.

[3] On the one hand, one is aware of the risks involved in employing (or, more accurately, extending the use of) a terminology from linguistic science to the study of artistic languages as a whole. On the other hand, what can justify this "terminological appropriation" is the fact that the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure—considered the precursor of modern linguistics—has transcended the field of linguistics, influencing theorists in the most diverse areas of culture throughout the twentieth century. To gain insight into Saussure's comprehensive influence, see Lechte (1994), where, to a greater or lesser extent—especially in the first half of the work—the debt of authors such as Bachelard and Bourdieu to the Genevan linguist is underlined.

[4] I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for recommending, at this point, a reference to the discussion on the existence (or non-existence) of a "language" and/or "code" in cinema—specifically, whether a filmic image operates through a single code or via superimposed and cooperative codes. This also pertains to whether it is possible (or even legitimate) to speak of the "speech" of cinema, or the "speech" of images, and to treat them as statements—thereby falling within the scope of *parole*. For this discussion, see, e.g., Eco (1968, 149ff.), Metz (1971, 28ff.), and Worth (1981, 36ff.)—to name but a few.

ment and, consequently, endowed with the point of view of an enunciator (who attributes meaning to the language in operation)—then one can, I believe, legitimately question to what extent a work of art can be enunciated autonomously, as something inseparable from the perspective of the one who utters it.

It is perhaps to the Renaissance that one should look for a nascent notion of the autonomy of artworks. This is because, from the thirteenth century onwards, with the implementation of new artistic techniques (such as oil painting, combined with easel painting) and a change in worldview—from medieval theocentrism to a scientific-naturalistic anthropocentrism—the very act of artistic creation was also modified. No longer confined within religious temples and producing mosaics and altarpieces under the tutelage of the Church, the guild artisan—imbued with the experimental spirit of the age and the advent of new techniques—began to observe nature and to value the human figure. Through *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato*, in parallel with studies of anatomy and perspective, as exemplified by Lorenzo Ghiberti, Masaccio, and, subsequently, Leonardo da Vinci and Raffaello Sanzio, the images thus produced became more naturalistic representations of the observable world.[5]

Furthermore, if each producer of images observes nature, to the extent possible, in their own manner, it is by virtue of this particular manner that they are, at this point, recognised and commissioned through private orders. Consequently, those who were formerly artisans in the service primarily of the medieval clergy—producing objects of religious worship—"cease producing useful works for collective use. Formerly members of a guild, they transform into salaried individuals remunerated by the clientele" (Jimenez 1997, 41); they transition from (almost invariably) anonymous manual labourers to artist-creators who sign their own works.

Nonetheless, although Renaissance artistic production significantly abandons the religious sphere—so that it is no longer theology that dictates (exclusively) what art should be—"it is pertinent to distinguish art as

[5] It should be clear that even these "naturalistic" representations are idealized representations, based on rigorous canons. In this sense, "naturalistic" should be understood as derived from what is observed in nature. However, nature itself is not represented precisely as it is observed; rather, what best serves an ideal representation is extracted from all observed models. Indeed, within the Renaissance conception, an ideal representation is fragmented within nature. To achieve it, the observation of various models is necessary, appropriating that which most closely approximates this ideal beauty. In this way, Renaissance art does not cease to be a pretext for science.

an activity enjoying a specific autonomy, dearly acquired by artists since the Renaissance, and art as a phenomenon linked to the economic, political, and ideological history of a society" (Jimenez 1997, 210). Indeed,

> the Renaissance witnesses the emergence of the notion of autonomous creation. Gradually, the artist emancipates themselves from the religious, political, and social constraints of the Middle Ages, and distances themselves from scholastic theology and philosophy. However, despite this liberation, and notwithstanding the growing dignity afforded to their social status, two centuries elapse before aesthetics establishes itself as a specific discipline and art constitutes a fully autonomous sphere, independent not only of the Church and political power, but also of science and morality (Jimenez 1997, 45).

3.

Perhaps, then, one could argue that the conception of the autonomy of art that has reached our time stems from a (partially misguided) reading of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic theory. As a matter of fact, if it is with Alexander G. Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750) that a philosophical discipline—hitherto not seriously explored—is founded, one that deals with a theory of knowledge arising from sensibility (both as opposed to logical-rational knowledge and, one might say, to complement epistemology with a form of knowledge that is neither purely rational nor empirical, but instead rooted in sensible experience) and, consequently, of "liberal arts" (Baumgarten 1989, 2), namely modern Philosophical Aesthetics, it is G. W. F. Hegel who, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), systematises these arts as the "product of human activity" (VÄ, WE 13: 44) and appreciates them as such—i.e., as the activity of humankind and the reflection of a given historical moment. Situated historically between them, however, it is in Immanuel Kant—more specifically in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790)—where we find elements that, even today, lead one to consider Aesthetics (and, above all, artistic production) as autonomous.

That Aesthetics is autonomous for Kant is evident in the title of the first paragraph of his *Analytic of the Beautiful*—i.e., of his systematic approach, which deals not with the "analysis of the diversity of beautiful objects, but [with] the analysis of the judgment in which the predicate 'beautiful' is attributed to objects" (Kulenkampff 1994, 23). This is because Kant states there, categorically: "the judgment of taste is aesthetic" (KU, AA 05: 203). It is not by mere chance that he thus begins his analysis of the judgment of taste

concerning that which we term "beautiful"; rather, he justifies that "the aesthetic judgment on the beautiful takes notice of this [quality of disinterest] first" (KU, AA 05: 203, footnote).

By aesthetic, then, one should understand, in judgements of taste, independence from interest. As Kant clarifies, interest is called "the satisfaction that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object." Thus, "if the question is whether something is beautiful, one does not want to know whether there is anything that is or that could be at stake, for us or for someone else, in the existence of the thing, but rather how we judge it in mere contemplation" (KU, AA 05: 204). What might sound rather obscure at first glance—i.e., disinterest even in the existence of an object of judgment—can be elucidated in the following manner: to say that something is "beautiful," it is indifferent whether one is confronted with the object of judgment itself, a representation of it (e.g., a photograph), or if one merely imagines it. This is what disinterest even in the existence of the object signifies: a focus on the form of its presentation. With this, Kant concludes that "taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest," and "the object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful" (KU, AA 05: 211).

Now, what Kant establishes here—or at least seems to do so—is the radical autonomy of Aesthetics. For, if the term "aesthetic" is now equivalent to "disinterested," this disinterestedness refers to epistemological, moral, political, and religious matters. In stating that something is beautiful, one establishes no knowledge about the object in question, nor does one affirm that it is good or bad in a certain sense, or that it comes imbued with a particular ideology. This is what renders Aesthetics an autonomous discipline: it owes nothing to Epistemology, Ethics, or Theology. To judge an object aesthetically implies merely contemplating it in a completely disinterested manner, without having in view any ulterior purpose. This sort of judgment Kant terms "pure aesthetic judgments" (KU, AA 05: 270). However, whilst on the one hand this resolves the problem of linking judgments of taste to extra-aesthetic elements, on the other hand, one might ask: what can one, in fact, judge aesthetically?

It is not without reason that Kant privileges the beauty of nature (and not artistic beauty) as that which is capable of causing the subject to enter a state of "calm contemplation" (KU, AA 05: 247), from which the feeling of genuinely aesthetic pleasure arises. For, if one says that flowers—e.g., daisies—are beautiful, these are not "related to any end at all"; in contrast, the mere

fact of recognising an object as a work of art "is already enough to require one to admit that one relates their shape to some sort of intention and to a determinate purpose" (KU, AA 05: 236, footnote).

As a matter of fact, Kant asserts that "art is distinguished from nature" (KU, AA 05: 303), for, unlike nature, a work of art necessarily implies a production; that is, to think objectively of a "cause that produced it [and] conceived of an end, which the [work of art] has to thank for its form" (KU, AA 05: 303). As a "work of human beings," a work of art is "a production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in Reason" (KU, AA 05: 303). By virtue of the fact that the artist has in mind a concept of what they intend to produce—i.e., their production is a *poiesis*, a making/producing for a determinate end[6]—their work (*opus*) is, for this very reason, distinct from a mere natural effect (*effectus*) (cf. KU, AA 05: 303). And precisely because of this—that is, because it concerns an *opus* that is produced by means of human Reason—the work of art cannot be viewed as detached from an interest from the perspective of the one who produces it.

4.

Now, it is precisely here that a potential misinterpretation of the notion of the autonomy of art emerges, synthesised in the nineteenth century by the expression *l'art pour l'art*. For art—and modern philosophical Aesthetics—is autonomous in the sense that "it is no longer subject to transcendent rules; the work of art obeys its own criteria, and art submits only to its own ends, outside of religion, metaphysics, and morality" (Jimenez 1997, 126). This does not mean, however, that art is entirely autonomous, for that which is the object of contemplation in art is, so to speak, from the outset, contaminated by the artist's agency. Indeed, if that which distinguishes art from an object of nature is the recognition of a producing cause (which organises the work according to a given perspective)—and this recognition is what implies acknowledging the object as art and no longer as nature—it is not possible to abstract from this "producing cause" that arbitrarily produces the work; for if one does, one no longer recognises the object as *poiesis*, i.e., as art.

[6] Even if this end is merely to stimulate reflection, which in itself has no ulterior purpose.

That being stated, the idea of an autonomous work of art appears as an exaggerated unfolding of the notion of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere championed by Kant. For, whilst it is one thing for Aesthetics not to be subordinated to other philosophical disciplines, it is quite another for a work of art to be, in itself, detachable from the reality in which it is produced—which implies: from the perspective, the viewpoint of its producer. Returning to our initial considerations, if a work of art, as language put into operation by an artist, can be interpreted as an enunciation, the act of producing a work of art—i.e., of enunciating—has its meaning, or rather, "its signification [...] determined by social conditions of its existence" (Guimarães 2002, 66). In other words, a work of art possesses an inseparable historical materiality and is thus never wholly autonomous; rather, "it is always in relation to empirical reality" (Jimenez 1997, 176).

Now, if there is one lesson that Karl Marx imparts concerning art, it is that:

> the artistic activity and aesthetic conceptions of a people are no longer [if indeed they ever were] autonomous but heteronomous. They depend on parameters over which they have no power. They are included in ideology, that is to say, in the representations that a society forges at a given moment in its history, considering the stage of material and economic development it has reached (Jimenez 1997, 256).[7]

[7] I have deliberately chosen to cite Marx indirectly, via Jimenez, because a proper articulation of the ideas of the father of scientific socialism on the constitutive role of material production and social relations in consciousness and artistic forms would, in itself, require more space and time than is available in the present study. Nevertheless, to situate Jimenez's quotation within Marx's conception—that, under the capitalist system, the artist produces something that becomes alien to them, is sold on the market, and over which they lose control, with their very creative activity becoming a means of survival rather than a free and full expression of their human essence—it is worth pointing to, for example, the passage where Marx states that "[the] material, immediately perceptible private property is the material perceptible expression of estranged human life. Its movement—production and consumption—is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realisation or the reality of man. Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law" (ÖPM 1844, MEW 40: 537), and, a few lines below, when he claims that: "the history of industry and the established objective existence of industry are the open book of man's essential powers, the perceptibly existing human psychology. Hitherto this was not conceived in its connection with man's essential being, but only in an external relation of utility, because, moving in the realm of estrangement, people could only think of man's general mode of being—religion or history in its abstract-general character as politics, art, literature, etc.—as the reality of man's essential powers

And, with caveats having been entered regarding the so-called aesthetic theory of Marx—in particular, his justification that the charm which Greek art exerts upon one is due to a feeling of tenderness that one nurtures for the "historical childhood of humanity" (EZKpÖ, MEW 13: 642)—it follows from the foregoing that the influence of the constitutive instance (cf. Orlandi 2007, 47) on the formulation of a work appears, in itself, sufficient to question the autonomy of art—at least in its producer-pole. What should be clear, however, is that such a constitutive instance is not restricted to the "deictics" of a work—the space and time in which it is produced—but pertains also (and principally!) to the context, i.e., the web of "social, historical, and contemporary norms, as well as a corresponding wealth of allusions from the [...] tradition" (Iser 1975b, 268). These factors are, to a greater or lesser degree, and with more or less intensity, incorporated into the production of the work of art. Thus defined, the constitutive context of a work appears to have less to do with the (temporal) situation and more with the (ideological) affiliation of the individual (cf. Orlandi 2007, 76)—i.e., the artist who produces it.

Such an affiliation, one might argue, is independent of the will of the artist-enunciator; it suggests itself, rather, as something that precedes the very formulation of their work. It is something that murmurs a kind of already-said, i.e., a "discourse already held [*discours déjà tenu*]" (Foucault 1971, 51), and which reverberates, consciously or unconsciously, in their production. In other words, it concerns the materiality of the (involuntary) ideological[8]

and man's species-activity. We have before us the objectified essential powers of man in the form of sensuous, alien, useful objects, in the form of estrangement, displayed in ordinary material industry (which can be conceived either as a part of that general movement, or that movement can be conceived as a particular part of industry, since all human activity hitherto has been labour—that is, industry—activity estranged from itself). A psychology for which this book, the part of history existing in the most perceptible and accessible form, remains a closed book, cannot become a genuine, comprehensive and real science. What indeed are we to think of a science which airily abstracts from this large part of human labour and which fails to feel its own incompleteness, while such a wealth of human endeavour, unfolded before it, means nothing more to it than, perhaps, what can be expressed in one word—'need,' 'vulgar need!'?" (ÖPM 1844, MEW 40: 542-543). Such passages, I believe, shed light on what Jimenez's quotation refers to. However, to dwell on Marx in more detail would necessitate a separate study.

[8] Understanding "ideological" or "ideology" as that which "supplies the evidentness with which 'everyone knows' what a soldier is, or a worker, a boss, a factory, a strike, etc., the evidentness that makes a word or an utterance 'mean what it says' and thereby masks in the 'transparency of language' what [one might] call the material character of the mean-

repertoire constituting the artist and, consequently, their work, such that "at the level of formulation [and, indeed, prior to it], the subject already has their [ideological, political] position determined" (Orlandi 2007, 50). However, if, on the one hand, such a determination seems to undermine the autonomy of the work of art at its producer pole—in that which, so to speak, tells a story, thereby enunciating it—on the other hand, what could be said regarding who reads it, i.e., interprets it?

5.

Let us consider that every work of art—that, as such, intends to be experienced and appreciated—necessarily encompasses an interactive relationship between creation and reception. This conception ranges, for example, from Aristotle's classical *Poetics* to Umberto Eco's poetics of the open work. The former posits that, through the construction of a perfect tragedy, the poet is capable of producing feelings of terror and pity in the spectator, thereby achieving the intended cathartic effect (cf. *Poi*, 1449 b 24); the latter, in turn, asserts that, to a greater or lesser extent, every work of art "demands a free and inventive response [...] [and] cannot be truly understood unless the interpreter reinvents it in an act of congeniality with the author themselves" (Eco 1997, 36). Consequently, one might argue that aesthetic communication only functions within a relationship between communicator and receiver; that is, it develops along a sender–message–recipient path.[9]

Take into account, first, works of art produced in such a way that they only succeed in establishing aesthetic communication insofar as "the intended result [by the artist] appears as the product of the recipient [*Rezipienten*]" (Iser 1994, 296). Such is the case with artistic production that relies on pre-established norms and/or serves a determined end. To take but a few examples, it is worth mentioning the Greek tragedies constructed according to the "manual" provided by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, the thesis novels, and other works that present themselves as a "given object," in which the space for the reader's participation—understood here as the interpretation of the object presented to them—is limited; i.e., excessively prescribed.

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ing of words and utterances" (Pêcheux 1983, 111)—i.e., the "institutionalised meanings, accepted by all as 'natural'" (Orlandi 2007, 66, my emphasis).

[9] That is, the artist (sender/communicator), using a code (poetic language), produces a work (statement/message) to be recognized and "decoded" by the public (receiver/percipient) through interpretation and the attribution of value and meaning.

Purporting univocity, such works of art consist of an operational programme that the artist proposes, and which, in a defined and finished form, is offered to the public. Whereby, if the recipient permits the establishment of a relationship with the work offered by the artist,[10] they are led by the latter to "the intended attitude towards the given subject matter [*die ihm zugedachte Einstellung zum vorgegebenen Sachverhalt*]" (Iser 1994, 295). Thus, as a message, a work of art produced in this way appears hermetic: it establishes (or at least seeks to establish) a "practical communication, [...] [which] aims to be understood univocally without possibility of misunderstanding or personal interpretation" (Eco 1997, 168). Consequently, it functions as a recognisable sign from which one can—at least this is its aim—securely apprehend its meaning. These would be, so to speak, "closed" works of art.

However, one might argue, Modernity brought about the dissolution of a conventional universe of interpretations. Whether through the recognition of audience heterogeneity or by virtue of the increasing value accorded to recipients within the production–reception relationship, it became, more accurately, necessary for the artist to conceive of new forms of interaction. Consequently, the attribution of meaning to a work of art no longer remains fixed within the producer's intentions, but becomes open to the diverse interpretations of those who engage with the work.

It is within this context that the concept of the open work emerged during the first half of the 20th century. Such works of art are explicitly open by the creator's design, as a singular (univocal) meaning is no longer imposed. They are, thus, (partially) open to diverse interpretations: open in both semantic terms (concerning their meaning and referent) and pragmatic terms (concerning their use by the spectator as a "user"), which not only permits but necessitates the active participation of the audience in their reception (cf. Eco 1997, 36).

Yet, such participation is not entirely arbitrary. For if a work of art is, as stated, an ambiguous entity—a product both of an intentional process and one that encompasses the idea of audience reception—its inherent openness is consequently a planned attribute. This "certain 'openness'" (Eco 1997, 37) is designated the field of possible interpretations, or simply, the "field of possibilities" (cf. Eco 1997, 47), which is pre-structured by the author.

[10] This constitutes the recipient's participation in a strong sense: the "yes/no decision [*Ja/Nein-Entscheidung*]" (Iser 1994, 296).

Thus, while, on the one hand, the work of art no longer presents a definitive, ready-made meaning—and its potential for signification is thereby never exhausted—on the other hand, the receiver is not permitted any and all interpretations. This constraint arises because their comprehension of the work is conditioned by the indeterminacies contained within the work itself (those pre-established by the author), which "do open up a certain spectrum of realisation [i.e., of interpretation]" (Iser 1994, 45). In other words, "one has only a range of rigidly predetermined and conditioned fruitive outcomes, so that the reader's interpretive reaction never escapes the author's control" (Eco 1997, 37).[11]

The distinguishing feature of the notion of the open work (when compared to a purportedly univocal poetics) lies in its aim to encompass, as far as possible, the plurality of potential actualisations.[12] It is clear that the one who coordinates and regulates the field of possibilities of a work is its author—a function performed during the very elaboration of the work. However, once within this field, the receiver possesses complete freedom. Thus, if, on the one hand, "there are no other possible readings [outside those programmed by the author]," on the other hand, "the interpreter can direct their attention towards one meaning rather than another" (Eco 1997, 38). Consequently, one might argue that there are no erroneous readings within this field of possibilities. Nevertheless, one might equally ask: within this field of possibilities, what does the receiver resort to in their interpretation? What guides their signification in the reading of the story that is recounted to them?

[11] As one of the anonymous reviewers correctly noted—and for which I am very grateful—systems aesthetics and cybernetics reconfigured the concept of autonomy in art following the Second World War, moving it (even further) away from the aforementioned Romantic notion. In this context, language was viewed, arguably more clearly than ever before, as a code, and enunciation (the act of producing the work) as a process residing not only in the artist's subjectivity but also in the rules and feedback of the system. Planned openness, as present in Umberto Eco's semiotics, finds a direct parallel in cybernetic control systems, where the artwork is understood as a field of possibilities governed by a set of instructions or algorithms. Autonomy, then, is no longer total independence—if indeed it ever was, as I intend to argue in the present study—but a technically mediated autonomy; that is, creative freedom is redefined and exercised within the limits and dynamics imposed by technology, such as programming and information. However, this debate concerning post-war systems aesthetics and early digital art—mediated by cybernetics—and the reconfiguration of a supposed aesthetic autonomy of/in art through technology is beyond the scope of the present study.

[12] This ultimately imbues the diverse potential readings with a certain degree of democracy.

It is noteworthy that the so-called poetics of the open work "does not reproduce a presumed objective structure of works, but rather the structure of a fruitive relationship" (Eco 1997, 22). This signifies nothing but that there is no formal model by which one can identify a work as open—nor does it constitute an attribution of value or quality to "open" works and a corresponding disadvantage to "closed" ones. As a matter of fact, even works created according to a traditional poetics can be evaluated as open by virtue of a distancing and re-actualisation of the work by later audiences.

Now, whilst "it is certainly not to be denied that [works of art] have a historical substratum" (Iser 1975a, 230), it is, simultaneously, defensible that "distinct historical materialities invariably determine differences in signification processes" (Orlandi 2007, 17). Furthermore, assuming that no meaning is attributed without interpretation (cf. Orlandi 2007, 21), and that interpretation "always originates from a specific historical and societal vantage point and possesses a direction, which we term political [i.e., ideological]" (Orlandi 2007, 18), it follows that the attribution of meaning occurs as a function of a particular historical materiality (cf. Orlandi 2007, 46). Consequently, even a work presented as closed is received distinctly across different contexts because, in the process of reception, significations are produced by socio-historical interpreters (cf. Iser 1975a, 230).

In light of this, one might ask: if this holds true for "closed" works, why would it not hold for works explicitly declared as "open"? As a matter of fact, when confronted with works that present themselves as "a bolide of meanings" (cf. Orlandi 2007, 14)—i.e., as a field of pre-organised interpretative possibilities—it is the "reader's individual representational world [that] provides the selection criteria for their interpretation" (Iser 1975a, 246). Open works, therefore, appear as manifest cases of heteronomy in aesthetic reception. For, considering that the configuration of a work's meaning is dependent on the reader's contextual operation, i.e.,

> the grouping effect and the configuration brought forth by it are not inherently given within the [work] itself, but are rather an operation elicited by the [work], through which the reader's individual dispositions, their contents of consciousness, their epochal and stratum-specifically conditioned views, as well as their own experiential history, are integrated in a more or less substantial manner with the signs of the [work] to form a meaning-configuration (Iser 1975b, 264).

It then follows that every process of signification is inherently imbued with a socio-historical materiality. This materiality, being external to the subject, consequently conditions the structuring—the attribution of meaning—of what is presented. In light of this, one might argue that the positions of not only the producer but also the receiver of a work of art are historical, social, and ideological, and inseparable from their interpretation.

6.

In this brief paper, I have endeavoured to explore some foundational points upon which a future, more comprehensive investigation into the (purported) notion of the autonomy of art might be developed. This concept—a post-Romantic idea from the nineteenth century—has significantly resonated across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The analysis proceeds from the premise that the distinction between language (code) and speech (language-in-operation) applies not only to words but to all forms of expression, including plastic languages such as painting and sculpture. From this perspective, a work of art can be understood as an enunciation—i.e., as language-in-operation within a specific communicative context.

Now, if it is a matter of language-in-operation, it is put into operation by someone, namely a historical subject (materially signifying) who confers a determined viewpoint even prior to the enunciation—i.e., before the work's formulation. This highlights the ideological repertoire constitutive of the work. Consequently, at the productive pole, the notion of the autonomy of a work of art is already compromised.[13]

However, beyond the productive pole, the autonomy of a work of art can also be questioned at the receptive pole. This is because every act of reception implies an interpretation and, consequently, an ideological affiliation. It is this affiliation that empowers the interpreter to "decide the direction of the meanings [they attribute to the work], thereby deciding upon their

[13] This holds true even for works that claim a supposed neutrality—i.e., a historical-ideological disengagement. Such neutrality would be achieved by virtue of an intentionality that conceived the work as such. However, this intentionality itself implies a stance taken by the creator and, consequently, demonstrates that the work is not free from ideology. As one might argue, "not making a decision is already deciding. Not taking a position in the face of something is already taking a position. Neutrality can never be neutral" (Almazán 2016, 36, my emphasis).

own direction" (Orlandi 2007, 22). If this conclusion holds—as the preceding discussion has sought to demonstrate—the autonomy of an artwork is denied twice: on the one hand, in the attribution of meaning by its producer, and on the other hand, in the signification by its interpreter (who operates from a specific socio-historical position). Irrespective of the story involved in a work of art, it can neither be recounted nor read autonomously—i.e., in a genuinely aesthetic manner.

Significantly, this double denial of a work of art's autonomy, in turn, opens up numerous questions concerning the relationship between the productive and receptive poles.[14] For the time being, I hope—perhaps presumptuously—that this outline will serve to suggest that the conception of a wholly autonomous work of art (i.e., art for art's sake) is, to a large extent, untenable. This is because whatever is produced is created by a subject occupying a socio-historical position, and whatever is interpreted is likewise interpreted from a materially and ideologically determined socio-historical position.

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[14] Among the questions arising from this discussion, one might ask, for example, what remains open to the receiver within the interpretive field established by the author, and how the author regulates (conditions) polysemy without fully determining it, thus leaving room for interpretation. With regard to a bibliography addressing the most relevant debates on autonomy and practical critique in contemporary art, it is worth noting—in full agreement with one of the anonymous reviewers—Roberts (2000, 25ff.), Rebentisch (2012, 271ff.), Lütticken (2016, 1ff.), West (2024, 9ff.), and Wikström (2025, 1ff.), to mention just a few. These authors offer a valuable overview of ongoing problems concerning autonomy in art and aesthetics. A more in-depth discussion of this, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.

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The Dark Side of Storytelling: A Psychological Perspective on the Human Instinct to Tell Stories

Abstract

Storytelling is a fundamental human behavior with significant positive potential, but it can also be weaponized for manipulation, control, and societal division. This essay examines the dark side of storytelling through an extensive narrative literature review, tracing its historical roots—from the rhetorical techniques of ancient sophists to the propaganda of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes—and analyzing its modern manifestations, including fake news. Furthermore, the essay analyzes psychological characteristics of dangerous dark storytellers, individuals who exploit narratives for harmful purposes. Specifically, it explores links between manipulative storytelling and traits such as the Dark Triad (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy), authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, moral blindness, and histrionic personality disorder. Then it proposes a framework for future research to understand the psychological traits associated with "dark storytellers" and advocates for rhetoric education as a countermeasure against overwhelming misinformation across various media.

Keywords

Storytelling, Sophists, Dark Triad, Manipulation, Personality Traits, Propaganda

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> I think all such poetry is likely to corrupt the mind
> of those of its hearers who do not have the knowledge
> of what it is really like as a drug to counteract it.
>
> Plato, trans. 2004, 595b

> When policy dooms you, start telling stories—
> stories so fabulous, so gripping, so spellbinding that the king
> (or, in this case, the American citizen who theoretically
> rules our country) forgets all about a lethal policy.
>
> Karl Rove, George W. Bush's spin doctor

A Story for an Introduction

Artyom Sergeev, Stalin's adopted son, often recounted a story about a confrontation between Stalin and his biological son, Vasily. After discovering that Vasily had used his famous surname to evade punishment for a drunken escapade, Stalin reprimanded him harshly. Vasily retorted, "But I'm Stalin too!" to which Stalin screamed in reply, "No, you're not. You're not Stalin, and I'm not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet Power. Stalin is what he is in the newspapers and the portraits—not you, not even me!" (Montefiore 2010; Plamper 2012, XIII).

This anecdote, drawn from the lore surrounding Stalin, illustrates the overwhelming power of a seductive yet ultimately dark narrative about the so-called "Man of Steel" (Prince 1945), a narrative so powerful that even Stalin himself was aware of the fictional nature of his public persona (Montefiore 2010). The origins of the Stalin cult begin on December 21, 1929, Stalin's fiftieth birthday, when he was glorified, on a broad scale in various media, particularly in central newspapers like *Pravda* [Truth] (sic!) (Plamper 2012), and it continued through a collaborative effort involving storytellers such as writers, painters, Bolsheviks, cultural functionaries, censors, and others who contributed to the production and dissemination of glory of the Generalissimo of the Soviet Union (Plamper 2012). Beyond the Soviet sphere, an international group of prominent writers also defended Stalin's policies as his propagandists, with the Communist Party meaningfully labeling them as *Gangsters of the Pen* (Prown 2024)—or, as Lenin put it earlier and more bluntly, *useful idiots*.

Plamper (2012) subsequently enumerates the "cult products" that propagated this twisted narrative about *The Son of the Nations*, *The Great Liberator*, and *The Ever-Burning Sun of Communism* (Jasiewicz, 2023; Wojtalik,

2013), including portraits, posters, drawings, statues, busts, films, plays, poems, and songs, through which an image of an omnipresent leader was constructed, one whose spiritual presence haunted citizens in dreams, causing ecstatic episodes, fainting, intense weeping, and even heart attacks (Plamper 2012). Examples like these illustrate the immense sway of the Stalin cult over the collective imagination, where Stalin became indistinguishable from his public image and evoke a sense of "mystery, magic, and transcendence," highlighting the mystical effect of the fabricated narrative (Plamper 2012, XIV). Stalin (1932) himself valued storytellers, recognizing their potential, which is best illustrated by his own words in a speech at Maxim Gorky's home: "The production of souls is more important than the production of tanks [...]. And therefore I raise my glass to you, writers, the engineers of the human soul."

In this work, we explore the dark side of narratives and storytellers. While storytelling represents a fundamental human behavior with undeniable evolutionary and cultural significance, it also harbors potential for harm. Stories can unify or divide societies, manipulate emotions, and bypass rational thought, potentially fueling conflict and societal problems (Gottschall 2012; 2016; 2021). Through examining storytelling's dangerous nature and destructive potential across historical and contemporary contexts, we aim to reveal how the darker psychological aspects of storytellers have manifested in—and continue to influence—societies.

Method

In this study we employed a systematic-enhanced narrative review methodology (Demiris *et al.* 2019) to examine a problem of our interest—the selected historical and contemporary manifestations of dangerous storytelling, specific manipulative narrative techniques, and psychological characteristics of dark storytellers. The review intentionally focused on extreme and yet most common (Gottschall 2021) manifestations of negative storytelling—cases where narrative manipulation is purposefully employed to lie outrageously, misinform, or defame to harm. These practices, documented by Gottschall (2021) as enduring from antiquity to contemporary media, demonstrate storytelling's dangerous potential when weaponized. The review process consisted of three flexible but structured phases. First, comprehensive exploratory searches were conducted across six academic databases (EBSCO PsycArticles, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, SAGE,

and Google Scholar) using various Boolean combinations of targeted key terms (e.g., storytelling proficiency, narrative manipulation, dark personality traits, rhetoric, sophists, totalitarian propaganda, fake news, social media disinformation). Second, initial results were filtered through inclusion criteria prioritizing peer-reviewed empirical and theoretical studies and historical primary sources with scholarly commentary, with preference given to psychological research when available. Temporal and thematic boundaries were applied to focus on extreme storytelling manifestations across three eras: antiquity (e.g., sophists), twentieth-century totalitarian regimes (e.g., Stalinist propaganda), and contemporary cases (e.g., entrepreneurial fraud, social media disinformation). Exclusions comprised duplicates, benign fiction without manipulative intent, accidental misinformation lacking deliberate harm, and therapeutic applications (though positive storytelling was acknowledged in the introduction). The final corpus was weighted toward psychological research, historical analyses, and communication studies. In the third phase, using a narrative review approach, we summarized and synthesized the findings (Demiris *et al.* 2019), identifying key areas that align with our research interests as manifested in the paper's structure: evolutionary psychology foundations of storytelling behavior (introduced in the "Adaptive Significance of Storytelling" section); selected historical manifestations of dark storytelling (analyzed in "The Double-Edged Sword of Storytelling: Ancient Roots and the Power of Rhetoric" and its subsections e.g., "The Sophists"); selected dark storytelling techniques (examined in "Defamation Techniques in the Works of Ancient Master Storytellers," which describes specific ancient manipulative methods and briefly connects them to twentieth-century examples e.g., Stalinist courts' eristic tactics); sociopolitical impact of dark narratives (explored through negative anti-democratic narratives in "How Narratives Fuel Conflict and Social Clashes"); Psychological Dimensions of dark storytelling (cognitive mechanisms in "The Neuropsychological Basis of Narrative Persuasion", case studies in "Trying to Understand Dark Storytellers: The Case of Psychohistory", dark storytellers' traits analysis in "Towards a Framework for Examining Dark Storytellers' Personality Traits"). This methodological structure reveals striking continuities—from the sophists' "weaker argument" tactics examined in historical sections to modern disinformation campaigns—while maintaining focus on the psychological underpinnings highlighted throughout the paper.

Adaptive Significance of Storytelling

Storytelling, or simply sharing stories (Lauer 2022), is a universal phenomenon (Smith *et al.* 2017; Bietti *et al.* 2019; Boyd 2009; Gottschall 2012) and has been described as a "unique, widespread, frequent, and essential form of human communication" (Donahue & Green 2016). It represents a specific human ability to narrativize information into stories (Lauer 2022). Across cultures, storytelling takes the form of a "collaborative conversational activity focused on the production of narrative discourse, where a narrator recounts a sequence of events" (Bietti *et al.* 2019), with active and vivid participation from the audience. This engagement facilitates various functions, including learning, the sharing of personal memories, and cultural transmission (Bietti *et al.* 2019; Cappelletti *et al.* 2004).

The power of narratives has been recognized for centuries (Donahue & Green 2016), from ancient tribal societies to modern civilizations (Fog *et al.* 2005). The universal presence of storytelling (Smith *et al.* 2017) since prehistoric times (A. George 2019) and antiquity (Biesele 1986) suggests that it may represent an important human adaptation (Smith *et al.* 2017) with a distinct evolutionary function (Bietti *et al.* 2019; Nakawake et al., 2024a). Across cultures, humans engage in storytelling because of an inherent inclination toward narratives (Boyd, 2009)—they need them to understand and communicate with each other (Fog *et al.* 2005). Several key hypotheses have been proposed to explain the adaptive significance of storytelling. A review by Bietti *et al.* (2019) identified three primary functions of storytelling: (1) the transmission of survival-relevant information, (2) the enhancement of the storyteller's individual fitness and social position, and (3) the facilitation of social cohesion and societal identity.

Moreover research demonstrates a wide range of therapeutic applications for storytelling interventions across various age groups and domains (Abma 2003; Barwasser *et al.* 2021; Catala *et al.* 2023; Czernianin *et al.* 2019; Mazza 2016). In children, storytelling interventions have been used to improve literacy skills (Dawkins & O'Neill 2011; Maureen *et al.* 2022), motor skills (Eyre *et al.* 2020), and emotional development (Catala *et al.* 2023). Storytelling has also been effective in promoting mental health benefits, with studies showing reductions in stress, depression, anxiety, and anger (Goodman & Newman 2014; Ofoegbu *et al.* 2020). The power of storytelling extends to health behavior change as well, with interventions promoting HPV vaccination (Chen *et al.* 2022) and smoking cessation (Kim *et al.* 2020). For caregivers, storytelling workshops have been used to improve emotional

well-being (Phillips *et al.* 2020) and facilitate learning in palliative care (Abma 2003). Finally, storytelling interventions show promise in supporting the well-being of older adults by enhancing memory, reminiscence, and self-confidence (Rios Rincon *et al.* 2022; Stargatt *et al.* 2022).

The Double-Edged Sword of Storytelling: Ancient Roots and the Power of Rhetoric

Storytelling however is a double-edged sword and the power of crafting compelling stories has also a darker side (Paulsen 2021). Concerns about its manipulative potential have a long history. Plato, in his *Republic*, for instance, warned of stories misleading "reasonable people" (X 595b) and even advocated for the exile of unaligned storytellers, qua professional liars, fearing their ability to manipulate audiences with embellished narratives (Gottschall 2021). In another of his dialogues, *Gorgias*, Plato explores the mystical power of storytelling and rhetoric, which, as articulated in Aristotle's seminal work *Rhetoric*, is traditionally regarded as the art of effective persuasion (Aristotle 2007; Bartlett 2019; Carey 2002; Hogan 2013). The dialogue is named after the renowned Sicilian rhetorician Gorgias of Leontini, who claimed to possess a form of "verbal magic"—the art of rhetoric (P. George 2010). In *Gorgias*, art is described as "the incantatory power which, by its witchery, enchants, persuades, and changes the souls of men" (Dodds 1959, 8; P. George 2010). Historical sources attest to the effectiveness of Gorgias's rhetoric, demonstrating that he was widely admired, maintained his popularity throughout his life, and achieved greater wealth and fame than any other sophist of his time (Connors 1986, 46; George 2010).

Gorgias's mastery exemplifies the peak of the development of rhetoric as a competitive art, deeply shaped by ancient societal values, where contests played a crucial role in establishing both individual and communal status, particularly in relation to masculinity (Avinger 2012; Roisman 2007). This "rhetoric of *agon*," winning arguments, reflected a culture driven by competition, framing social interactions as a zero-sum game where one individual's victory necessitated another's defeat (Roisman 2007). Consequently, rhetorical proficiency became closely linked to demonstrations of masculine prowess and the attainment of social status within a competitive hierarchy (Roisman 2007). As Węcowski (2014) noted, these cultural skills were essential for inclusion in elite circles and "served for the natural selection of Greek aristocracy," where narrative ability conferred respect, wealth, and power. It is significant that this drive for competitive masculin-

ity, deeply embedded in ancient values, parallels contemporary psychological research on the relationship between dark personality traits and competitiveness, particularly in sports performance (Vaughan & Madigan 2021). Moreover, Machiavellianism, a core component of the Dark Triad, shares conceptual similarities with hegemonic masculinity, characterized by a willingness to marginalize, dominate, and emotionally manipulate others, as well as a readiness to act aggressively (Donaldson 1993; Waddell *et al.* 2020). Further research suggests that individuals high in Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—may be predisposed to using manipulative narratives, potentially motivated by financial gain (Spurk *et al.* 2016).

The Sophists

Given the intersection of persuasion and personal advantage, it is essential to examine more closely the role of the sophists, who were among the earliest theorists and practitioners of rhetorical manipulation. O'Grady (2008) introduces the Sophists as bold, exciting innovators—"new age" itinerant instructors or coaches who were versatile, multi-talented, and skilled teachers, presenting new ideas to fifth-century BCE Athens (O'Grady, 2008). The Sophists taught young, ambitious Athenians "the [rhetorical] skills they sought in order to become successful, that is, rich and influential, how to argue convincingly and to turn the weaker argument into a winning argument against the stronger" (O'Grady 2008, 9). The Sophists enjoyed both great popularity in Athens and bitter opposition (Schell 1940). The main accusation against them was that they dared to charge high fees for their instruction, which were willingly paid (O'Grady 2008). The Sophists were seen as "storytellers/rhetoricians," craftsmen for hire who were "selling wisdom" (Tell, 2009) and writing speeches for others (Scenters-Zapico 1993). Critics of the Sophists regarded their education as a predominantly evil influence (Schell 1940) and viewed their relationship with the audience as an amoral manipulation (Jarratt 1998).

All means were justified to check the spread of sophism (Schell 1940). Sophists were marginalized and even exiled with their writings allegedly burned, as in Protagoras's case (Bolonyai 2007; Schell 1940, p. 3). However, aesthetic narratives were the final weapons against the Sophists' new education: the works and speeches of Socrates, Plato, Aristophanes, and later, Aristotle (Schell 1940). There was substantial criticism amidst these storytelling disruptions. For example, Plato criticized the Sophists for promoting dan-

gerous ideas that threatened the traditional structure of society (O'Grady 2008). The master comedy writer Aristophanes "made the new culture the butt of his satire and ridicule" (Schell 1940) and even identified the anti-Sophist Socrates as a dark Sophist himself. Although it was only "for the purposes of comedy" (Sidgwick 1872), his caricature of Socrates in *Clouds* (Petrie 1911) may have contributed to the philosopher's ultimate execution (Gottschall 2021).

O'Grady (2008) provides a comprehensive analysis of the Sophists and their use of dark storytelling, stating, "It seems that there was nothing one or other of them could not teach, but perhaps their greatest legacy to Western society was their development of language, which, naturally, also benefited them in their work." However, O'Grady (2008, 3) also questions their intellectual contribution, asking, "Were the Sophists clever, rather than wise?"

Ultimately, the Sophists became more closely associated with rhetoric's darker counterpart, eristics, which involves the manipulation of discourse ethics (Lemanski 2021; Pieniążek 2017; Sidgwick 1872). Eristic argumentation, for the sake of conflict, involves engaging in contentious disputes using disloyal methods, such as sophistical reasoning, described by Sidgwick (1872) as "a part of the charlatan's stock-in-trade." In ancient times, the objective of eristic argumentation was to win disputes by any means necessary, employing both permissible and forbidden tactics, while preserving the appearance of presenting legitimate arguments (Lemanski 2021; Pieniążek 2017).

Defamation Techniques in the Works of Ancient Master Storytellers

This strategic manipulation of discourse aligns with techniques found in ancient writings, where rhetorical tactics were often used to shape public perception (Adshead 1993; Anderson 1976; Chrysanthou 2020; Denson 2022; Hime 1900). The craft of master storytellers, even those not explicitly associated with dark narratives, often incorporates elements of dark storytelling, such as defamation. Since antiquity, scandalous accusations have been employed as a rhetorical strategy to undermine the moral authority of political and public figures (Hime 1900). One of the most extreme yet prevalent tactics in second-century ancient texts involved accusing adversaries of engaging in morally degrading behaviors, such as male prostitution

(Lucian of Samosata 1936). As a powerful persuasive device, these allegations functioned to discredit opponents by appealing to societal norms and moral expectations.

Lucian of Samosata, a prominent ancient satirist, representative of the Second Sophistic, rhetorician, pamphleteer, and master storyteller, frequently used defamation in his critiques of public figures (Anderson 1976; Hime 1900). In *Alexander the False Prophet*, he employs explicit language to attack Alexander of Abonoteichos, a fraudulent cult leader and self-proclaimed prophet who founded the Glycon snake cult in second-century Asia Minor (Kent 2008). As part of his rhetorical strategy, Lucian (1936) portrays Alexander as deceitful and morally corrupt, aiming to undermine his credibility even further through allegations of sexual improprieties. Narrating Alexander's early life, Lucian asserts: "While he was still a mere boy, and a very handsome one, as could be inferred from the sere and yellow leaf of him, and could also be learned by hearsay from those who recounted his story, he trafficked freely in his attractiveness and sold his company to those who sought it" (§ 5).

According to Anderson (1976), in his examination of Lucian's storytelling, Lucian "often uses a story merely to 'prove' a point, in the same way as he would use a proverb or quotation" (46). Hime (1900) further observes that Lucian's "undoubtable storytelling skill" is particularly evident even in his lampoons. However, Hime (1900) also criticizes Lucian's approach in works such as *Alexander* and *Peregrinus*, asserting that he is "seen at his worst" in these pamphlets, where "owing to the nature of the subject, there was little scope […] for his imagination and humour, while there was ample room for his weakest qualities" (89). These weaknesses, according to Hime, include the use of defamation and explicit accusations—dark storytelling techniques that Lucian seemingly employed in what he perceived as a just cause.

Similar narrative techniques are evident in the works of ancient authors such as Suetonius, who critiques Caligula in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (Hurley 1992) and Catullus, who attacks his rivals in his poems (Lateiner 1977; Ross 1969). However, Cassius Dio, a historian and rhetorician, is particularly notable for his use of sexual discourse as a rhetorical tool for an individual's characterization in ethical and historical interpretation (Chrysanthou 2020). Dio's sexual-moral critique creates a compelling narrative on what distinguishes a good ruler from a bad one (Chrysanthou 2020; Osgood 2016). A central theme in his portrayal of bad rulership is sexual deviancy, which serves as a lens for commenting on acceptable versus intol-

erable behaviors. By establishing this moral framework, Dio provides his ancient audience with a basis for evaluating the legitimacy and competence of an emperor (Chrysanthou 2020; Krüger 2024). Sexual misconduct, in this context, becomes a powerful rhetorical device for condemning the "bad reign" (Krüger 2024). As Chrysanthou (2020) observes, "sexual transgressions regularly coalesce with other bad characteristics of a ruler and his overall tyrannical behavior" (598).

A striking example of this technique is Dio's representation of Emperor Elagabalus, widely regarded by both ancient and modern historiographers as one of the worst Roman emperors (Chrysanthou 2020; Prado 2010), though not necessarily as twisted as Dio describes him. Dio's account of Elagabalus is peculiar for its unique narrative technique and content, "including themes and stories that unfold in significantly different and unexpected ways" (Chrysanthou 2020), diverging from conventional historical portrayals (Chrysanthou 2020). In this case, sexual deviancy is not merely "associated with other vices but is used as a significant standalone category in [the] assessment of Elagabalus' character and reign" (Chrysanthou 2020, 598). Dio presents a narrative centered on the most extreme forms of sexual misconduct, both real and imagined, within the framework of Roman morality (Rantala 2020). He highlights effeminacy, sacrilegious sexual deviance, male prostitution—an ever-present trope—and even attempts at gender transformation, portraying these acts with visceral disgust and unequivocal condemnation (Krüger 2024; Rantala 2020). The distinct portrayal of Elagabalus, who was of Syrian descent, situates Dio's account within the "standard tyrannical topoi"—established rhetorical tropes used to legitimize the removal of emperors who failed to meet the expectations of Rome's political elites (Krüger 2024), particularly the anti-Syrian opposition of Dio's time (Kemezis 2016).

A curious example of the storyteller's complex persona—employing both panegyric and defamatory techniques in depicting the same individuals—is Procopius of Caesarea, the most renowned Byzantine historian of the sixth-century CE (Adshead, 1993; Denson, 2022). During Justinian's reign, Procopius outwardly supported the emperor, offering servile praise in *Buildings*, while simultaneously composing the *Secret History*, a scathing critique of Justinian, replete with sensational, often obscene, and unverifiable accounts (Adshead 1993; Burkhardt 2017; Denson 2022). In this work, Justinian—and occasionally his wife, Theodora—are portrayed as demonic figures, with the emperor explicitly labeled the "Lord of the Demons" (Denson 2022). The true motivations behind Procopius' writings remain uncer-

tain, fueling speculation about the psychological duality of the Byzantine rhetorician and sophist, as well as the darker aspects of the storyteller's personality (Adshead 1993; Denson 2022; Enos 2022). Gibbon (1781/1789) proposed that "disappointment might urge the flatterer to secret revenge" with "a venom of his malignity," (Chapter XL: Reign of Justinian, Part I) while Marmontel (1818) pondered the eternal dilemma: "Is it possible to believe that a writer, for the little gratification of traducing his benefactors, would leave behind him a work of defamation? Was he [Procopius] an author of a virulent libel, or a flatterer of the meanest servility?" (4-5).

In modern contexts, one of the most striking examples of evil rhetoric of violence can be observed in the eristic methods employed by Stalinist courts (Pieniążek 2017). These methods represent a form of linguistic violence within judicial discourse and the "bureaucratization of justice" (Solomon 2017), where participants—judges and prosecutors alike—utilized manipulative tactics (Pieniążek 2017), aimed at the total elimination of political opponents (Pieniążek 2017). This eristic misuse of a politicized judiciary is exemplified in the infamous trials during which Polish leaders and World War II combatants were condemned by Stalinist courts, often resulting in imprisonment or life sentences (Pieniążek 2017).

To encapsulate the discussion on rhetoric, it is essential to recognize its dual nature as both an instrument of persuasion and a potential means of manipulation (Gottschall 2012; 2021). This duality echoes Plato's concept of *pharmakon* (Mróz, 2017), where writing—and by extension, rhetoric—"introduces us only into the sphere of appearances, the fake reality, the reality of belief and not of truth" (Kłos-Czerwińska, 2019, 38).

P. George (2010) draws parallels between Gorgias's rhetoric and contemporary political rhetoric, noting that it often functions as the "phantom part of politics" and creates false opinions about what is best without providing a reasoned account for its claims, relying on the persuasive power of pleasure and folly while masking a lack of genuine concern for knowledge. Modern rhetoric, much like Gorgianic rhetoric, is taught and used as a tool to obtain power rather than to seek truth, and often deviates from the principles of noble rhetoric, which is subservient to a true art and grounded in ethical and intellectual integrity (P. George 2010).

How Narratives Fuel Conflict and Social Clashes

As stated, strong narratives can bind groups together, fostering a sense of shared identity and purpose, promoting tribal cohesion (Smith *et al.* 2017; Bietti *et al.* 2019; Boyd 2009). However, these same stories can also fuel conflict. Compelling narratives and texts of persecution often revolve around social clashes, identifying an enemy and employing scapegoating (Girard 1989; Gottschall 2021). Paradoxically, even works regarding story's paradoxes (Gottschall 2021) and warning about the conflict-igniting power of narratives can reveal underlying scholarly disagreements (expressed in an unscholarly manner), especially between reviewers and authors (See: Snyder 2021; Gottschall 2022; Pinker 2022). Gottschall (2021) emphasizes the power of stories to influence behavior, noting that even "good people" can be swayed towards monstrous acts when fueled by a compelling narrative. Limited narrative perspectives in storytelling can lead to biases and misunderstandings, while the emotional pull of stories can cloud critical thinking and repeated exposure to disturbing content may desensitize audiences (Gottschall 2021).

These dangerous and compelling narratives are produced by dark storytellers (Gottschall 2021; Paulsen 2021), master manipulators who ultimately contribute to social division. This diverse group includes not only dangerous demagogues, autocrats, political leaders, and dictators (Haycock 2019; Nai & Toros 2020) but also corporate managers (Rendtorff 2013) and entrepreneurs (Garud *et al.* 2023), journalists (Stos 2024), fake-news creators (Srinivas *et al.* 2022), and religious and spiritual gurus (Abgrall 2000). By manipulating stories, these dark storytellers wield narratives that distort reality and discourage critical thinking, ultimately contributing to societal unrest (Gottschall 2021; Paulsen 2021). According to Gottschall (2016 2021), a wide spectrum of professions is embracing mind-disordering stories as a powerful form of modern "witchery" and engages in the dark arts of storytelling.

This "witchery" of manipulating stories manifests in various contemporary problems. Dark storytellers exploit narratives to undermine trust in democratic processes and promote strongman leadership, contributing to the erosion of democratic institutions and the rise of autocratic leaders (Haycock 2019). Similarly, stories that demonize opposing sides can escalate conflicts and make peaceful resolutions more difficult, fueling modern warfare (Gottschall 2021). This manipulation also extends to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). Dark story-

tellers leverage narratives to create and disseminate fake news, eroding social trust and supporting the rise of undemocratic movements (Srinivas *et al.* 2022).

Paulsen (2021), in his thorough analysis of the dark sides of storytelling, identified several indicators of narratives produced by dark storytellers that warrant vigilance: creating a victim scenario to alienate a group of people; positioning a group, country, or geographical region as the enemy to distract from challenges and problems; altering the perception of historical facts; rallying against someone or something to create support for a hidden agenda; overloading with conspiracy theories to establish a culture of distrust; oversimplifying complex issues into absolute positions; making people feel they play a significant role in a cause bigger than themselves to overpower others; convincing people they have lost something they never had to someone else; convincing people that the ends justify the means (Paulsen 2021). Paulsen's (2021) framework of dark narratives showcases how storytelling can be weaponized to construct and maintain power. Representatives of two totalitarian regimes, Hitler and Stalin, exemplify another narrative that can be included in Paulsen's model: the leader's story (Takala & Auvinen 2016), through which, via routinized charisma, the strongman establishes authority and creates a "cult of personality" (Strong & Killingsworth 2011).

Psychological Dimensions of Dark Storytelling

The Neuropsychological Basis of Narrative Persuasion

The danger of stories lies in the fact that when an audience is engrossed in a compelling narrative, they enter a state of high suggestibility (Gottschall 2021), becoming susceptible to the storyteller's influence. This danger intensifies when audiences prioritize emotional resonance over truth, cultivating habits that blur the line between fiction and reality. This phenomenon is related to the Samuel T. Coleridge's "suspension of disbelief" (Böcking 2008) which signifies the audience's tolerance for fiction. It means that the audience accepts the limitations inherent in the story, sacrificing elements of realism, logic, believability, and even aesthetic quality for the sake of enjoyment (Böcking 2008). This aligns with Leo Tolstoy's (1902/2024) concept of infectious art: a deliberate transmission of emotions from creator to audience. Therefore storytelling becomes a powerful, and potentially dan-

gerous, art form when audiences are subjected to narratives without any control (Gottschall 2021), particularly during a state of narrative immersion (Zak 2015).

Psychological research confirms that and highlights the persuasive power of narratives (Braddock & Dillard 2016; Dal Cin *et al.* 2004; Green & Brock 2000; Slater & Rouner 2002). Compared to informational narratives, stories are more engaging and memorable (Morris *et al.* 2019). This captivating effect is partly due to their ability to trigger the release of cortisol, a hormone associated with attentiveness, and oxytocin, which has been associated with social bonding (Zak *et al.* 2005) (though its effects are complex and context-dependent, see: Sapolsky 2017). This neurochemical response makes audiences more receptive to the messages embedded within the story. For example, readers who experience heightened empathy after reading a sad story may also be more likely to donate to charity (Zak 2013). This heightened empathy can also influence attitudes toward various groups, such as animal welfare (Małecki *et al.* 2016). Further supporting this idea, a recent neuropsychology study by Chang *et al.* (2023) proposes a "herding hypothesis." Their research suggests that spoken stories can synchronize brain activity patterns among listeners. In this model, a successful storyteller acts like a shepherd, guiding the listeners' brains towards similar states to understand the intended message (Chang *et al.* 2023).

Trying to Understand Dark Storytellers: The Case of Psychohistory

Efforts to understand historical figures have found a psychological niche in psychohistory, defined as "the application of psychoanalysis to the study of history" (Erwin 2002). Despite methodological limitations, such as the influence of a researcher's subjective responses on historical interpretation (Eaton 2021), this approach reflects an enduring need to explore the narratives of individuals who have profoundly shaped human history. The focus of such psychological inquiries has often been the minds of dark storytellers, spanning from antiquity to modern times. One such example is Alexander of Abonuteichos, mentioned earlier, whose behaviors, as analyzed by Kent (2008), align with modern psychiatric diagnoses of vengeful, dangerous, malignant, and fraudulent narcissism, akin to contemporary cult leaders (Kent 2008).

The need for and importance of analyzing the personality traits of dark storytellers are, however, most clearly highlighted by the numerous attempts to construct psychobiographies of figures such as Adolf Hitler

and Joseph Stalin. These individuals have been extensively examined using psychodynamic methods. For example, Langer (1972) conducted a wartime psychological analysis of Hitler, originally published in 1943 as *The Mind of Adolf Hitler: The Secret Wartime Report*. Similarly, Prince (1945) undertook a psychological study of Stalin. Subsequent psychohistorical works have sought to interpret biographical data through a Freudian lens, focusing on psychopathology and personality disorders as key factors behind Hitler's and Stalin's actions (Coolidge & Segal 2007; Hyland *et al.* 2011; Pick 2014; Stal 2013). These studies have explored the dark personality traits of both figures, as well as their ability to craft compelling and dangerous leadership narratives (Takala & Auvinen 2016).

In 2025, there are still ongoing attempts to analyze the minds of contemporary dictators and authoritarian leaders, who have captured the hearts of societies by tailoring history to meet their needs. Such analyses are conducted not only by researchers (Ihanus 2022) but also, no doubt, by intelligence service profilers, emphasizing the continued relevance of examining the motives of dark storytellers—demagogues. Nevertheless, while such analyses provide valuable insights, they often rely on speculative interpretations, highlighting the need for rigorous scientific methodologies to validate these claims.

Towards a Framework for Examining Dark Storytellers' Personality Traits

Understanding the psychological profiles of dark storytellers is critical for mitigating the harmful effects of manipulative narratives. In this context, we propose a framework to examine the personality traits potentially associated with the dark side of storytelling.

The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad, composed of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, is a set of subclinical personality traits associated with antagonistic behaviors in interpersonal interactions (Furtner *et al.* 2017). This combination can be a potent tool for manipulative storytelling. Storytellers high in these traits might craft narratives to exploit others' vulnerabilities, control them through emotional manipulation, or simply serve their own self-interest (Paulsen 2021; Jones & Paulhus 2014). Furthermore, manipulative storytellers like Casanovas or lady-killers often exhibit some traits associated

with psychopathy (Hare 1999). This connection between the Dark Triad and manipulative tactics extends to leadership, with research indicating that individuals high in these traits are more likely to be driven towards leadership positions (Guillén *et al.* 2022).

Stories are told mainly in the teller's interests and a compelling story can be a weapon of psychological and emotional manipulation of dark storytellers (Gottschall, 2016). Studies on financial crime suggests relationship between Machiavellian personality trait and fraud intention (Utami *et al.* 2019a, 2019b; Triantoro *et al.* 2020). There are many examples of entrepreneurial storytelling that began with a "good story" and then spiraled into fraud (Garud *et al.* 2023). The greatest fraudsters of all time were powerful storytellers who used narratives to win early-stage support (Garud *et al.* 2023). These include figures like Charles Ponzi, Bernie Madoff (Heydenburg 2015), Ken Lay, the CEO of Enron (Mathews & Wacker 2008; Ferrell & Ferrell 2011) and Elizabeth Holmes, the CEO of Theranos (Gottschall 2016). The stories surrounding these dark storytellers shifted from depicting them as heroes to villains and convicted felons (Mathews & Wacker 2008) ultimately becoming cautionary tales of corporate greed, fraud, and malfeasance (Ferrell & Ferrell 2011). Entrepreneurial storytelling serves as a reminder that "a powerful, emotion-drenched story is at the heart of every con job" (Gottschall 2016).

Research also indicates a correlation between elevated levels of Dark Triad traits and those who post fake news on social networks (Srinivas *et al.* 2022). While this phenomenon of fake news has likely existed throughout human history (Burkhardt 2017), it has gained particular prominence in the post-truth era, where "alternative facts" often replace actual facts, and emotional appeals carry more weight than evidence (McIntyre 2018). Fake news, defined as the deliberate presentation of false or misleading claims as news designed to manipulate the audience's cognitive processes (Gelfert 2018), meets the criteria of a dark narrative. This form of "argumentatively evil storytelling" often relies on false premises or employs formally or informally fallacious reasoning (Plumer 2016).

In the modern context, fake news frequently emerges in short posts on social media, which has been identified as a key dissemination channel for misinformation (Di Domenico *et al.* 2021). As Plumer noted, "as a rule, the shorter the fictional narrative, the greater the potential for argumentative evil" (2016, 615). Short storytelling forms, such as advertisements, jokes, fables, and parables, may appear charming or arresting, but their affective appeal can also make them seductive and potentially misleading,

as they often convey a specific point or message (Plumer 2016). In the context of fake news on social media, the potential for argumentative evil is greatest when the approach is "hit and run" (Plumer 2016). These observations align with findings from linguistic analyses of social media content, which suggest that dark triad personality traits and dark motives can be predicted based on pathological Twitter usage (Haz *et al.* 2022; Marshall *et al.* 2020; Preotiuc-Pietro *et al.* 2016; Sumner *et al.* 2012).

Perhaps the complex nature of dark storytellers may align with the narrative liminal archetype of the trickster, a mixed deity, partly good and partly evil (Babcock-Abrahams 1975; Clinton 2017; Scheub 2012), who wove their mischievous plots often "just for fun." This corresponds with research indicating that individuals with psychopathic traits may engage in harmful actions more for amusement than solely for monetary gain (Lyons & Jonason 2015) and that trolling behaviors are linked to sadistic and Machiavellian tendencies (Buckels *et al.* 2014). On the other hand, tricksters in older myths across cultures (Nakawake *et al.* 2024b) were more often identified with vengeful, malevolent spirits (Babcock-Abrahams 1975), which also aligns with findings that Machiavellianism and psychopathy are positively associated with vengefulness (Giammarco & Vernon 2014). This association between trickery and malevolence may help explain the ancient philosophical mistrust of poetry and art as forms of deception capable of moral harm. These findings suggest that dark storytelling may serve functions beyond mere instrumental gain, potentially reflecting underlying psychopathic, Machiavellian, or sadistic tendencies associated with amusement, manipulation, or vengefulness.

Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation

Authoritarianism is a psychological trait characterized by attitudes of deference to authority, obedience to social norms, and a desire for order and conformity in society (Glas & Taylor 2017). Individuals with authoritarian tendencies often exhibit traits such as submissiveness to authority figures, dominance towards subordinates, and strict adherence to hierarchical structures. Additionally, authoritarianism predicts aggression and political violence (Costello *et al.* 2022).

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is a personality trait that reflects an individual's preference for group-based hierarchies and inequality among social groups (Kleppestø *et al.* 2021; Pratto *et al.* 1994). It is characterized

by a desire for unequal and dominant–subordinate relations among social groups, emphasizing the domination of "inferior" groups by "superior" groups (Sidanius *et al.* 2013; Sidanius J. & Pratto 2001).

Individuals who score high on both right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation scales exhibit exceptionally strong prejudice towards others (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). They are characterized by aggressive leadership aspirations and a Machiavellian approach to exercising power—these are the so-called "double-high" Dominant Authoritarians (Altemeyer 2004; Sibley *et al.* 2019). Dominant Authoritarians expect others to be obedient and submissive to them (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). This small, highly visible percentage of the population, exemplified by leaders of extreme movements, tend to place full responsibility for conflict in their biased narratives on only one side (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). Right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation are associated with conspiracy thinking, as evidenced by climate change deniers and vaccine skepticism (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015). This susceptibility to manipulation extends to popular film narratives activating authoritarian tendencies in audiences (Glas & Taylor 2017).

In analyzing the totalitarian phenomenon, it is crucial to emphasize the power of ideas (Kateb 2002), as exemplified in Hannah Arendt's (1951) seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she argues that stories are central to understanding totalitarianism (Arendt & May 1958; Moskalewicz 2024). A notable quote from *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt 1968) illustrates this point: "No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a narrated story" (21-22). Arendt (1969) further asserts that during dark times, human behavior often gravitates toward the desire to obey and be governed by a strongman who fulfills the expectations of the people, offering a narrative that explains their collective dissatisfaction. However, this story is inherently dangerous, as it fosters conflict (Hudson 2023). Contemporary history demonstrates the continued relevance of Arendt's analysis, particularly in the rise of strongman politics (Martin & Schmidt 2019).

Moral and Ethical Blindness

Moral blindness (Bauman & Donskis 2013) or ethical blindness (Palazzo *et al.* 2012) can be understood as a concept related to the *loss of sensitivity*—the inability or unwillingness of individuals to recognize or adhere to moral principles or ethical standards (Bauman & Donskis 2013). This trait may

manifest as a lack of moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, or character (Schweigert & Schweigert 2016) and individuals exhibiting moral blindness may disregard moral priorities and fail to acknowledge or act upon moral actions, leading to a compromised sense of moral agency (Moberg 2006).

Narratives often present dichotomous hero-villain structures, potentially inducing a "moral blind spot" where empathy aligns with the protagonist while hindering understanding of the antagonist (Gottschall, 2021). This aligns with social media functions that amplify self-serving narratives and demonize opposing viewpoints, which can contribute to increasing political polarization (Decker & Lord 2023). Consequently, audiences may be drawn into narratives that reinforce self-righteousness (Gottschall 2021).

A particularly intriguing and extreme *à rebours* narrative exploring moral blindness is *The Last Ringbearer* by Kirill Yeskov. Published in 1999 (Yeskov 2002), the novel intriguingly relativizes evil and subverts truth by reimagining Tolkien's fantasy world (Lobo 2024). In Yeskov's reinterpretation, Aragorn is depicted as a Machiavellian politician manipulated by Arwen, Gandalf as a warmongering advocate for a "Final Solution to the Mordorian problem," and Sauron VIII as a constitutional monarch promoting universal literacy as society approaches an industrial revolution (Lobo, 2024). Yeskov reframes the orcs' perceived evil as a distortion of "true events" (Lobo 2024). Barad-dûr, Sauron's stronghold, is presented as "an amazing city of alchemists and poets, mechanics and astronomers, philosophers and physicians, the heart of the only civilization in Middle Earth to bet on rational knowledge and bravely pitch its barely adolescent technology against ancient magic" (Yeskov 2002). The Elf-Human coalition, fearing Mordor's growing power, instigates a war through a series of cunning provocations (Yeskov 2002).

Initially written for the author's personal enjoyment and that of his friends, the story unexpectedly gained widespread acclaim in Russian society and won a national literary award (Lobo 2024). The contemporary legacy of Yeskov's work is evident in the reclamation of the derogatory term "orc" by Russian soldiers during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war as a symbol of national pride and cultural identity (Lobo 2024). His novel exemplifies the use of rhetorical strategies in framing and legitimizing conflict as an existential struggle between manipulated notions of good and evil.

This phenomenon of moral or ethical blindness might also contribute to the decline of objective journalism, especially when strong emotions or narratives obscure ethical considerations (Stos 2024). Storytelling journalists can then find themselves caught in the crossfire of overwhelming political

or social narratives (Stos 2024), potentially leading to abolition of the Fairness Doctrine and situations where "journalism is as partisan as the politics it covers" (Stos 2024).

Additionally, research suggests a link between "dark and antisocial" personality traits and moral judgments (Arvan 2011). The concept of moral blindness is also used to analyze risk of "evil management" that is blind to the moral consequences of management decisions in organizations and corporations (Rendtorff 2013).

Histrionic Personality Disorder

Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD) is characterized by attention-seeking behavior, excessive emotions, and seductive or provocative interactions (Perrotta 2021). Attention-seeking individuals with HPD crave constant attention and validation (Novais *et al.* 2015). Storytelling can be a powerful tool for them to capture an audience's focus and build a dramatic persona. HPD is characterized by exaggerated emotions and theatricality (Furnham 2018). Storytellers with these traits might manipulate others through emotional displays (Hughes *et al.* 2020) and use narratives to manage the emotions of their audience (Selting 2010), such as tugging at heartstrings, generating sympathy, or even guilting them into a desired action.

The Dark Side of Storytelling: Summary and Future Research Directions

Despite narratives' ubiquity in human communication, there remains a need for more empirical research that tests theoretical claims about their psychological and social consequences. While theoretical frameworks have provided valuable insights into how narratives may shape cognition, emotion, and social behavior, from a psychological perspective, many of these propositions require systematic empirical validation (Gottschall, 2021; Paulsen, 2021). This gap between theoretical assertion and empirical evidence is particularly pronounced in understanding the mechanisms through which narratives influence attitudes, decision-making, and interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, expanding the empirical foundation of narrative research represents an important direction for the field.

This literature review identifies critical gaps in empirical psychological research concerning the dark side of storytelling, particularly the relationship between dark personality traits and storytelling ability. Future research should therefore examine that 'dark side' by investigating narrative profi-

ciency's potential for manipulation, dissemination of harmful messages, and reinforcement of social divisions (Gottschall, 2021). Specifically, studies should address the following main research question: "Which personality traits are associated with storytelling proficiency?" Additionally, researchers should investigate the specific rhetorical techniques and content employed by skilled storytellers to craft malevolent narratives. It is essential to examine how storytellers' motivations—whether altruistic or self-serving—shape their narratives' construction, delivery, and quality. Further research should also examine the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects of these narratives on audiences, along with a comprehensive assessment of storytelling proficiency. Moreover, mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative analysis of participant-generated narratives could provide valuable insights.

The tendency to use "dark storytelling" techniques, while not inherently malevolent, raises critical questions about the motivations and conditions enabling such behavior. Specifically: Under what interpersonal and intrapersonal circumstances are skilled storytellers most likely to employ these techniques to craft harmful narratives? This distinction requires careful consideration to avoid misinterpretation. While individuals with manipulative tendencies may naturally exploit storytelling as a tool, this should not suggest that all proficient storytellers possess pathological traits.

Moreover, restricting studies to Western populations limits the generalizability of findings, since culture significantly influences various aspects of human behavior—including storytelling (Henrich *et al.* 2010). Future research should address this limitation by examining both the traits of dark storytellers and storytelling's negative aspects across diverse cultures.

According to Henrich et al. (2010), psychological research has relied disproportionately on WEIRD societies (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), which represent only a small fraction of human diversity, and this sampling bias extends to research on narrative and storytelling phenomena. By expanding investigations to include indigenous and non-Western communities, researchers could gain valuable insights into the cross-cultural adaptability of storytelling traits (Henrich *et al.* 2010).

These proposed investigations carry particular urgency given the well-documented consequences of unethical storytelling, which operates through: reinforcing prejudice via narrative framing, eroding critical thinking through emotional manipulation, and escalating social conflict by promoting divisive ideologies. Understanding the psychological architecture of manipulative storytelling—including its rhetorical techniques, persuasive

appeals, and cognitive effects—is fundamental for developing evidence-based interventions. Such interventions must simultaneously achieve two goals: mitigating the harmful societal impacts of malicious narratives while fostering media literacy and critical engagement among audiences (Gottschall 2021; Paulsen 2021).

Limitations

This study's narrative review approach inherently prioritizes holistic synthesis over systematic rigor (Demiris *et al.*, 2019), focuses on a narrow question in a specific context with a prespecified method to synthesize findings (Sukhera, 2022), and introduces the following constraints. First, while we implemented structured search protocols, the methodology remains fundamentally experience-driven and theoretically oriented (Sukhera, 2022). Second, its exclusive focus on extreme manifestations of intentional narrative manipulation limits generalizability to subtler forms of harmful storytelling. Third, reliance on scholarly interpretations of historical primary sources introduces potential hermeneutic biases, especially for ancient materials where contextual understanding is mediated. Finally, the English-language corpus and predominant Western case studies reflect WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) (Henrich *et al.* 2010) sampling limitations, restricting cross-cultural applicability. Future research should address these constraints through systematic reviews following PRISMA guidelines (Rethlefsen *et al.* 2021) and empirical validation of the proposed trait-personality framework.

Conclusion

We have reviewed selected manifestations of storytelling manipulation across historical and contemporary contexts, examining how narrative techniques have been employed for social control, division, and exploitation. By synthesizing evidence from rhetoric, psychology, and political history, this review highlights continuities between ancient sophistic practices and modern disinformation campaigns. We suggest that further empirical research is needed to identify whether individuals who craft harmful narratives exhibit consistent psychological profiles.

A Call for Vigilance

History suggests that narratives wield immense power over human lives. Following Plato's assertion, "those who tell stories rule society"—often with devastating consequences. When storytelling is weaponized, it fuels conflict (Gottschall 2021), echoing the sentiment attributed to Aeschylus that truth is merely the first casualty of war. Drawing on the ancient Greeks' emphasis on critical thinking and the rigor of classical education (Randall & Grady 1998), we must remain vigilant against the enchantment of dark narratives—those crafted by the *Gangsters of the Pen* (Prown 2024), the so-called engineers of the human soul (Stalin 1932), and the ever-present *useful idiots.*

The essence of rhetoric lies in its teaching tradition, which plays a crucial role in developing individuals' capacities (Hauser 2004). In line with Hauser (2004), there is an urgent need, especially today, to recover the value of rhetoric education as central to both civic education and a free society. To express this sentiment concisely, albeit with a deliberate departure from the preceding academic tone, one might state: "Make Rhetoric Great Again."

And the Story Ends... (Or Does It?)

Lucian, the master of satire, teases his readers at the conclusion of his unbelievable imaginary voyage *A True History*, promising in its final line: "What happened in that other world I shall tell you in the succeeding books" (Georgiadou 1998). A Greek scribe's translating marginal note exposes the irony: "The biggest lie of all!" (Georgiadou & Larmour 1998). Unlike Lucian, however, we intend to deliver on our promise. In the next installment, we will present empirical findings on the dark personality traits behind storytelling (Stefanczyk *et al.*, under review)—because, unlike the ancient satirist, we can be trusted. After all, researchers are storytellers too.

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Experiential Meaning of Everyday Design: Narratives In and Beyond Objects

Abstract

Three contemporary aesthetic approaches address design: functional beauty, adherent beauty, and the aesthetics of everyday life. This article engages with them and confronts the "dilemma of everyday aesthetics," proposing that aesthetic valuation plays a key role in choosing everyday objects when their replacement becomes necessary. Through imagination, we evaluate their usability by envisioning fictional scenarios that simulate potential use.

Keywords

Design, Aesthetics, Imagination, Experiential Knowledge

Introduction

Aesthetics is often associated exclusively with philosophical reflection on the arts. Since the 1960s, however, aesthetics has discussed the homogeneity and unity of its concepts. Today, we find aesthetic theories about nature, human beauty, and everyday design objects. This article addresses the latter. The most dominant ontological theses today about design share one aspect: everyday design objects are mute, areferential, or inexpressive (Forsey 2013; Parsons, Carlson 2008). These are the theory of adherent beauty, the theory of functional beauty, and the aesthetics of the everyday.

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For all of these theories, an aesthetic study of everyday design objects focuses on the specificity of everyday experience and the particular nature of aesthetic appreciation of the everyday. While art objects carry, express, or are constituted by meanings we cannot ignore and must attend to and reflect upon to adequately attribute beauty, everyday design objects admit beauty provided that, from a negative viewpoint, they are not judged as presupposing meanings and are judged in their specific everydayness.

It is worth noting that alternative approaches have attempted to resolve the "dilemma of everyday aesthetics" by emphasizing continuities between art and daily life. Yuriko Saito, for example, has drawn on Japanese traditions such as gardens (Saito 2017b), the tea ceremony, and packaging (Saito 1999), and more recently, on practices of care (Saito 2022). These perspectives highlight how ritualized or highly designed experiences can serve as vehicles for aesthetic reflection. Yet, as Carlson observes, such examples, though insightful, tend to rely on artified or ritualized contexts rather than on the unnoticed ordinariness of kitchen utensils, furniture, or clothing (Carlson 2014). Critical design similarly foregrounds provocation and reflective attention, often resembling art projects more than unnoticed everyday life (cf. Norman 2004 on reflective design). While these approaches demonstrate that aesthetic reflection can be drawn out of the everyday, they risk drifting away from the inattention and automatism that define ordinary experience (Saito 2007, 10; 2017a, 13, 25; Kovalčik, Rynnänen 2013, 18; Carlisle 2023, 222).

We will defend here that the dominant theories of design, while considering object uses (and, therefore, their integration into everyday life), restrict the contexts of use in which everydayness is the case. Our argument is that both designers and users are aware of the affordances and limitations of design objects, particularly when these objects, in their everyday use, restrict or hinder certain actions. These contexts, in which objects fail due to wear, damage, etc., generally require a reevaluation of their usability in contrast with (partially) new objects. Here, imagination plays a relevant role in staging possible consequences of using different objects under examination, such that different designs (forms) correspond to different narratives. Each narrative is evaluated, inferring not optimal forms of a design object in general, but of an object in the specific projected circumstances of its use. Through design theories, we maintain that the category of everydayness can be redefined with greater precision: a context in which everydayness admits aesthetic evaluation, which we will call experiential, is not merely that of artification or ritualization of objects, but also that of substituting functional ob-

jects. Partially new, partially known objects are imaginatively evaluated in the projection of their possible uses (usability) in the practices and spaces where we intend to insert them.

The term "everydayness" operates at multiple conceptual levels throughout this discussion. We understand "everydayness" primarily as a mode of experience characterized by automatic engagement with functional objects. This experiential mode typically occurs with everyday objects (those designed for routine use without requiring interpretive attention) in everyday contexts (situations of habitual practice in which objects recede into the background of awareness). However, as we will argue, this experiential mode can admit aesthetic evaluation without losing its everyday character, particularly in contexts of object replacement, where imagination enables evaluation of projected use. When we occasionally employ related terms (such as referring to the "everyday" character of specific objects or contexts), we signal properties or situations that typically support this primary mode of experience.

Critical Design, Ritualization, and the Ordinary

Imagine placing a teapot on a kitchen table beside two others. Our imaginary teapot draws from signifiers, perceivable affordances of existing designs. Individual elements appear as unrecognizable artifacts, but assembled they form something familiar: central container, lid establishing spatial orientation, handle and spout. Yet our imagination produces an anomaly: handle and spout aligned longitudinally. We evaluate its elegance through projected use, filling appears effortless, but serving tea would demand elaborate forearm contortions to avoid burns. What imagination initially rejected as defective becomes, upon investigation, an intentionally paradoxical object whose absurd meaning surpasses our original conception.

This teapot's forms were devised by French designer Jacques Carelman, who named it "Cafetière pour masochiste." This teapot is accompanied by information about the author, about the set of impossible objects resembling it, a book containing designs of those objects, and is even acquired, generally, by those seeking to integrate it into their collections of peculiar objects. With these teapots, we do not serve tea; rather, we produce conversations. Its name, "The masochist's coffee pot," amuses us as much as the paratext we use as evidence of our disposition (or attitude) to understand it as a joke: "We believe the drawing is sufficiently explicit without dwelling on details that could prove painful" (Carelman 1969, 45).

Donald Norman, a collector of such peculiar objects, does not use this teapot in his daily life; he says he rather uses an infuser and a Japanese container to heat water. He does not even use two others of his star teapots: "Nanna," designed by architect Michael Graves, and the "Tilting Teapot," produced by the German firm Ronnefeldt (Norman 2004). What, then, does Norman do with them? Well, he "contemplates" them; by placing them on a table in his kitchen, the researcher amuses himself by seeing them against the light, comparing the luminous effects of some and others, remembering contexts in which he bought them, where he obtained them, stories that made him aware of their existence, and even showing them and engaging in conversation when he has visitors. Again, the practical use has been suspended in favour of a reflective or conversational function, a shift that aligns these objects more with artistic or critical practices than with unnoticed everyday design.

None of the contemporary design theories would recognize, however, that Norman's teapots are everyday design objects. This is because our disposition, if analogous to Norman's, is one of attention and reflection. The challenge of an aesthetics not centered on art is precisely that: capturing the idea of aesthetic appreciation without transferring attitudes that belong to art itself into our everyday life, which seems to be characterized by inattention and automatism. An artistic disposition is essentially, according to these theories, one of the extraordinary, while that of the ordinary is inattention. It is clear that literature frequently describes everyday objects as extraordinary. Here is an example from the Uruguayan writer Circe Maia:

> That things Olympically ignore everything happening around them seems very proper to them and yet children do not see them so […] They feel there are introverted furniture, with all their doors always closed and others expressive, sociable, whose doors close poorly and whose drawers open continuously. As adults we lose these experiences (Maia 2024, 10).

For Circe Maia, it would not occur to anyone to invent a paradise for things; here we respond that the paradise of everyday things is that of art. The furniture pieces she speaks of no longer pass unnoticed; rather, they materialize an ethical meaning (preserving is good) enabled by an aesthetic value (they must be preserved for their aesthetic value), which results from reflective attention that metaphorically transfers human characteristics to things (introverted and expressive). The knot of her story is the irrecoverable breakage of a small coffee cup, but why could it be so valuable? Objects

must be preserved as artworks are, because somehow they materialize those properties we secretly attribute to them as children and then, in adulthood, no longer "see" in the everyday, except when they break. Simple cups or furniture no longer go unnoticed because we judge that some are introverted, others extroverted, others of serious and worn gesture, and so on. This is an extraordinary experience of the ordinary, one that, via literature, artifies the everyday (Carlson 2014).

The dilemma to resolve here is: what is the aesthetic ordinary, if the aesthetic seems to involve ipso facto attention and reflection, that is, an attitude of the extraordinary? Cups, furniture, and teapots—like the teapot for masochists—cease being ordinary and become extraordinary when we play the game of art with them. Attention and reflection are usually followed by care and preservation, which implies a limitation of use, contrary to the "inert indifference" of everyday objects. Also, our attention frames the object of experience in a definite way, which is no longer as diffused as when, like Norman, we go on "autopilot," employing an infuser, a container to boil water, and an ordinary cup. We even amuse ourselves with their different meanings.

Our aesthetic attitude of the extraordinary is then arranged in this way: a reduction of use to contemplation, the defense of preservation, the predominance of sight over touch, and conversation about their transcendent meanings (what these objects can tell us beyond their most evident perceptual complexions). In this respect, both Carelman's designs and Norman's collections resemble the critical or ritualized aesthetics discussed earlier: they deliberately suspend everyday automatism in order to provoke reflection. By contrast, the aim of this paper is to explore how aesthetic evaluation can emerge precisely in the unnoticed contexts of wear, damage, and replacement—without requiring such artification.

The three theories already mentioned share the same common core: everyday objects are mute, inexpressive, or asemantic; they fulfill utilitarian functions; they are generally imbricated in multisensory experiences (not only visual); and, in our autopilot use, they present themselves as diffusely inserted into our actions (the test of this lack of attention is the economy of forgetting details in our daily rituals). They are anonymous objects—not merely because we happen not to know who designed or produced them, but because such knowledge appears incidental to their functioning.

The Limits of Functional and Adherent Beauty

Design aesthetics (as defined by these theories) is not compelled to study the artification of everyday objects, although there have been several attempts to do so within the aesthetics of the everyday (which is not exclusively an aesthetic theory of design). Specific design aesthetics, however, have not undertaken that task, leaving aside the investigation of problematic ways in which large companies, like the Italian Alessi, incorporate art conventions into their objects' design (Lees-Maffei 1997). What we seek here is to concentrate on the central theses of everydayness in design aesthetics: inexpressiveness, lack of transcendence, muteness, and the asemantic character of their objects. Any object that is transcendent, expressive, and contains certain meanings falls outside the scope of contemporary design aesthetics. We question whether these seemingly mute and non-transcendent objects are truly so.

It is clear that the attitude we have toward a high-design object will not be the same as with an everyday object. Alessi objects, for example, come accompanied by art conventions—whether because the stores where they are sold resemble museums, because they are constituted by visual communication that informs us about their designers and intentions (branding strategies that invite us to experience them as artworks), or even because discourse has been produced on the meaning of these objects (Alessi 1998). The question, again, is whether we should infer the asemantic and inexpressive character from the absence of all these devices of ontological constitution in everyday design objects, assuming that no everyday object has a normative framework similar to art's—one that guides us, more or less explicitly, toward searches for meaning, peculiar mental states, experiences of a specific kind, etc. Here again, we see that the interpretive richness of critical design or ritual design traditions (for instance, Japanese gardens or the Zen sensibility Saito has analyzed) depends precisely on conventions that suspend everyday automatism. Our focus, however, is on whether unnoticed everyday objects, those that lack such explicit frames, are truly devoid of meaning, as is often assumed.

From two of these philosophical theories, we are told that our attitude toward everyday objects is not to assume those objects possess any type of content. Jane Forsey states that "we do not generally approach our toothbrushes or coffee-pots or hammers as having a content that is the result of the singular vision of their designers" (Forsey 2013, 65-66). The distinc-

tion drawn here is familiar to what Arthur Danto proposed throughout his philosophical work on art, namely, that everyday and artistic objects are not distinguished by virtue of perceptual properties, but by virtue of an interpretability enabled (or not) by an art world (Danto 1992, 5), which, as suggested, we could not identify for design (Parsons 2015, Ch. 6). That is, there would be no "design world." The absence of that framework—which could enable us to attribute properties and regulate that attribution—prevents us from playing the game of aestheticizing design objects. Only when objects are aestheticized for artistic purposes, as in Circe Maia's Destructions, are we enabled to interpret everyday objects in that artistic way. In this respect, critical design objects function as if they temporarily build their own "design world," precisely in order to be read interpretively. But this is not the ordinary situation of use and wear that interests us here.

Thus, once everyday design objects are understood as all those that do not "represent our feelings" (Forsey 2013, 63), the challenge, according to Forsey, is to conceive an aesthetics for objects that do not invite us to adopt an interpretive attitude, objects that do not transcend their perceptual limits into symbolic regions. There is no representational, symbolic, or expressive content, except perhaps in non-ornamental but decorative properties of objects, which do little for the function those objects could fulfill beyond being merely decorative.

A similar argument is presented by Glen Parsons and Allen Carlson, who point out Francis E. Sparshott's paradox (Carlson 2012). If the aesthetic attitude consists in an attentive gaze, like that of a search, then environmental aesthetics seems destined to fail; insofar as by environment we understand "background aspects," attention proper to sight and hearing "loses part of its privilege" (Sparshott 1972, 21). To this attitudinal element is added another, which those authors attribute to Roger Scruton's views on architecture: only advocates "of semiotics may object to this claim, holding that even the most quotidian everyday objects are full of meaning […] But this view stretches the concept of 'a language' beyond all recognition" (Parsons, Carlson 2008, 172). The peculiarity of this second argument is that, from denying the linguistic nature, in a strict sense, of everyday design objects, it would follow that these objects are plainly asemantic. We will dwell on this argument.

The difficulties of assuming Scruton's arguments within his own approach leave a commitment that is difficult to sustain, but relevant, if reformulated. That is, Scruton's denial of architectural semiotics does not require us to deny, as Scruton does, what we might call an expressive language of architecture. Moreover, the fact that a style is not a language does not imply

that styles lack sufficient communicative potential to place us, as Anna Ichino and Gregory Currie (2017, 65) have suggested, in others' place, that is, to provide experiential knowledge.

One does not expect that understanding a style gives us propositional knowledge of the world that designed, built, and inhabited a church. But we can expect to grasp something that, only when experienced, communicates to us a way of living—such that, in its experience, we actualize the "mental state" (Scruton 1980/2013) materialized in its physical constitution. Assuming Scruton's theses, we are required to evaluate his theory in case it is, by hypothesis, somewhat more hospitable to defending a narrative, representational, or expressive capacity of everyday design objects. This problem, however, is not addressed by Parsons and Carlson's functional aesthetics. Therefore, until a direct response to these problems of design ontology is offered, we will not succeed in providing solid elements for a design aesthetics.

Wear, Replacement, and the Experiential Turn

The problems we have identified stem from a fundamental oversight: existing theories treat all contexts of everyday object use as equivalent. However, if we examine more carefully the phenomenology of everyday experience, we find that there are specific moments when objects do command our aesthetic attention without losing their everyday character. These occur precisely when objects fail, wear out, or require replacement—contexts that force us to evaluate alternatives while remaining embedded in practical concerns.

The thesis we summarily present here introduces a distinction between everyday design objects already employed or in use, on one hand, and objects we could potentially access and subject to economic evaluation (for lack of a better term, experiential). Prototypically, these latter objects form part of acquisition possibilities in everyday purchases, but not exclusively.

Thus, for example, it is expectable that "everyday" be attributable to a glass if its signifiers are understood as intuitive use instructions, and if those signifiers easily adjust to our anatomy. Another way to put it, from design theory, is that if our attitudes and mental states of the everyday are inattention, automatism in use, and, eventually, lack of care, that is only possible insofar as interaction between objects and user activity adjusts by vir-

tue of: 1) signifiers adequate to user knowledge, and 2) expectations about object use satisfied by previously accumulated knowledge. Everydayness, and particularly our disposition to autopilot among objects, is not possible if objects become extraordinary (through artification, ritualization, etc.). While this is generally accepted in everyday aesthetic theory, it breaks down when objects' signifiers create an experience of anti-affordances, unintentionally sabotaging intended employment. Some terminological clarifications become necessary at this point.

The term "affordances" was imported into design theory by Donald Norman to designate (and thereby unify) a set of coordinated actions between graphic designers and product designers, particularly concerning what elements of products orient use and how they do so (Norman 2013, 13). Affordance is precisely the term that, according to Norman, designates what designers do. However, Norman himself recognized that employing the term distorted his initial intentions (Norman 2010, 89–90). A series of buttons on an electronic device—say, a cell phone—are not exactly affordances of the phone; that is, they are not the set of possible actions the device allows. Rather, they are use orientators of the device: "Affordances determine what actions are possible. Signifiers communicate where the action should take place. We need both" (Norman 2013, 14). Thus, signifiers are those relational properties with instructive character that, when coded as expected, make it possible for the user to understand the purpose, structure, and operation of a design object (Norman 2010, 89).

One particular aspect is relevant about the concept of signifiers Norman has proposed. One of the characteristic problems of the aesthetics of the everyday is the apparent absence of a normative framework that could orient experiences, mental states, judgments, property attributions, attitudes, etc., just as an "art world" does in the case of the arts, or art categories do with object classification and the adequate orientation of our judicative relation with those objects. The concept of signifiers accounts for the fact that the sphere of everyday life presupposes a guide to our behavior with everyday objects. These use signals are sustained either by explicit regulations within a general regulatory framework, by traditions, or by both. We classify signifiers as relational properties because they are not purely intrinsic elements of a design object. Signal codification as such must be sustained within a shared framework that configures a triangle between designers (of product and graphics, for example), objects put into use, and users.

The insistence of debates on the absence of a common framework in the aesthetics and ontology of everyday life would render incomprehensible the ease with which, in our daily lives, we typically operate with surrounding objects, despite frequent failures in use and the adjustments that become necessary when learning to employ new objects in old practices or new practices with new objects. Clearly, our familiarity with traffic signals typically precedes any formal driving education. Practical knowledge, operating within a logic of rewards and penalties, is what endows each of our behaviors in public space with meaning, later automated through repetition.

Of course, this indication of a common cognitive framework between designers and users has not, in principle, told us anything about its aesthetic potential. Only in a very general sense would an aesthetic cognitivist give certain approval to this proposal, once convinced that there is indeed a cognitive framework behind various forms of everydayness, a thesis on which there seems to be broad agreement (Carlson 2014). However, this is not sufficient. Even if one insists that everydayness is defined precisely by a mental state of inattention, then it matters little whether the framework is shared or not, because we could even say that these frameworks are sufficiently tacit at certain moments in our lives (and obvious in the context of life in society) that they pass completely unnoticed. It is as if traffic signals were sufficiently obvious to us, and we did not need to keep in mind their communal character or the socialization process we underwent before they became natural to us. This seems insurmountable, and the dilemma of everyday life aesthetics appears not to be a starting point for aesthetic investigation, but rather the limit of a discussion that makes visible our different dispositions toward objects, either everydayness or aesthetic, but not both. Some objects will fulfill their functions with a certain degree of artification, like traffic signals intervened by Clet Abraham; others will pass completely unnoticed in their daily use, like traffic signals after years of having been placed. In contrast, forms of critical design deliberately suspend this autopilot condition by staging defamiliarizing contexts (e.g., critical food design). But precisely because they do so, they fall closer to the field of artistic or ritualized experience than to unnoticed everyday aesthetics.

A peculiar context of the everyday, however, must be specified. As Carlson and Parsons (2008, 171) point out, a characteristic ontological property of everyday objects is their material manipulation—even when we consider electronic devices with digital functions. The artification of objects of this type is at least counterproductive for their use, because one of the tacit commitments implied in an artistic disposition toward certain objects is,

as already noted, that of care. Conservation of objects to which we impute artistic (and aesthetic, more generally) properties is part of a tacit contract when we access art exhibition spaces, such as museums and galleries. Beyond regulatory impediments to any intervention on those art objects (e.g., throwing tomato sauce at a Van Gogh painting in the National Gallery), museum spaces also commit resources to preserving their works. Except in rare cases like those narrated by Circe Maia, everyday actions produce wear on objects and, eventually, lead to their failure and disposal. This is a prototypical instance of evaluating the affordances and signifiers of objects within our reach—one in which substituting an object in a specific practice places us in a situation of imaginatively projecting our interaction with new objects. This, by analogy with categories from literary cognitivism, we will call "experiential knowledge."

The concept of experiential knowledge is commonly employed in discussions about the epistemic powers of fictions in general, and literary fictions in particular. The usual classification of possible knowledge derived from fictional literature distinguishes between propositional knowledge, practical knowledge (knowledge-how), and what has been called "experiential knowledge of what-it-is-like" (García-Carpintero 2015, 144). For example, literature is often understood as "putting us in others' shoes"—that is, cooperating with our empathy through fictional scenarios—and typically plays a relevant role in belief changes about social phenomena. Literary fictions mostly impact belief change regarding other people's mental states, such that changes in beliefs about what it is like to be in others' shoes are often accompanied by changes in the ways we empathize with others (Ichino & Currie 2017, 66).

Here, we do not propose that everyday objects serve as vehicles of empathy toward others, although it is also relevant to consider how they can provide information about unfamiliar everyday contexts, allowing us to imagine what it is like to live in those different social environments. It is reasonable to think that what is commonly referred to as "user experience" in design theory involves empathy as a normative notion for designers. Our focus, however, is on the context in which it becomes necessary to substitute worn or damaged objects. In such cases, the reevaluation of objects' affordances and signifiers calls for an imaginative process of comparison between what we are accustomed to using and forms not yet employed. Acquiring a cell phone, a lamp, a cup—in short, any everyday object—involves not only an economic valuation (biased or not), but also an experiential evaluation. This means posing the question: What would it be like to incorporate this object into my daily life?

Eastern traditions, such as Japanese gardening (Saito 2017b) or Zen-related rituals of care (Saito 1999), illustrate a different orientation, one in which everydayness is aestheticized through ritual and attentiveness rather than unnoticed autopilot. However, it is important to distinguish between Saito's analysis of highly ritualized practices and her broader theory of everyday aesthetics, particularly her recent work on the aesthetics of care (Saito 2022). While Saito's analysis of care practices demonstrates how aesthetic attention can emerge within routine activities through accumulated familiarity rather than distanced contemplation, our focus on replacement contexts reveals another avenue where aesthetic evaluation occurs within genuinely everyday experience. Experiential evaluation, as we describe it, also operates through embodied knowledge and sustained engagement rather than momentary aesthetic arrest, but it locates aesthetic judgment specifically in moments of projected use rather than ongoing maintenance. For that reason, while Saito's analysis of care provides an important theoretical precedent for understanding how aesthetic value can emerge from routine engagement, it also serves as a useful contrast—by locating aesthetic attention in ongoing maintenance rather than in the imaginative projection involved in replacement.

The cognitive mechanism underlying aesthetic evaluation during object replacement operates through a sequence of imaginative processes. When confronted with the failure or inadequacy of an everyday object, users experience a disruption that triggers heightened attention to replacement alternatives. This disruption activates embodied simulation processes, wherein users mentally rehearse potential interactions with candidate objects, constructing detailed scenarios of use that integrate:

1. Kinaesthetic imagination: how the object will feel when touched by hand,
2. Temporal projection: how it will function across repeated use contexts, and
3. Affective anticipation: what qualities of satisfaction or frustration the interaction might yield.

Crucially, this imaginative projection generates aesthetic evaluation not merely by assessing functional success (i.e., whether the object will accomplish its intended task), but by attending to the qualitative dimension of the projected experience: the felt elegance of interaction, the anticipated pleasure of use, and the embodied harmony between user and object.

Beauty, in this context, emerges as the aesthetic evaluation of projected usability, where the formal properties of the design object are appreciated not as abstract visual qualities, but as affordances for satisfying embodied experience.

This mechanism becomes evident when examining concrete replacement scenarios. Consider the experience of evaluating a new coffee mug after breaking a favored one. The disruption of routine triggers imaginative activation: I mentally rehearse lifting the potential replacement during my morning routine, attending to how its handle will feel in my still-drowsy grip, whether its rim will provide comfortable contact with my lips, and how its weight will balance as I move from counter to table. This embodied simulation extends temporally. I project not just a single use, but the accumulated experience of daily repetition, imagining how the mug will feel after weeks of handling, whether its proportions will continue to satisfy, and whether its material will age gracefully. Throughout this projection, aesthetic evaluation emerges naturally: I find myself drawn not simply to the mug that will function adequately, but to the one that promises the most satisfying embodied experience. The mug's beauty manifests not as a property independent of use, but as the aesthetic dimension of projected interaction, its visual proportions appreciated as promises of balanced weight, its color evaluated for how it might affect the morning mood, its surface texture anticipated for tactile pleasure. Aesthetic judgment thus emerges from within the imaginative simulation of everyday use, locating beauty within, rather than beyond, practical engagement.

Just as literature prompts us to project imaginative scenarios, our imagination also serves as a vehicle for experiential evaluation of design objects, whether an application interface, a teapot, a residential building, or even an entire city. The results of this imaginative projection, regulated by empathy, make object evaluation possible, insofar as imagined scenarios isolate conditions we perceive as adequate or inadequate to our usability. Of course, when faced with unfamiliar artifacts, as Norman (2013, 117) points out, we may need to ask the seller questions—who, in some cases, may not be a frequent user of the item. Even so, while additional information is often necessary (sometimes obtained through user reviews), it is not uncommon for our imagination to construct scenarios in which we project ourselves as users of these new objects, especially when they present elements that are partially familiar, alongside others that are entirely new (Hekkert *et al.* 2003). These productive modes of imagination are analogous to narrative elaboration—instances of storytelling. In that sense, users not only produce

something like a fictional story in which they project themselves manipulating design objects; designers also engage in imaginative elaboration of different scenarios in which objects' interfaces will be manipulated by users. In fact, within design theory, this shift marks the transition from a traditionally "problem-solving" perspective to one that is sensitive to users' possible experiences, conceiving design as storytelling (Lupton 2017, 9).

Conclusions

The traditional understanding of everydayness—as marked by inattentiveness, lack of reflection, and minimal care—can be articulated within design theory, particularly through the concept of usability. With this term, we refer to the "ease with which the user of the product can understand how it works and how to get it to perform" (Norman 2004, 37). Despite biases and cognitive dissonance, one context that typically captures our attention without intuitively behaving as everydayness is the wear or damage of objects in our immediate environment. These malfunction contexts usually force us to focus our attention and make decisions about repairs or even substitutions of damaged objects with new ones.

Aesthetics fulfills its role insofar as we typically insert objects into the narratives of our lives through imagination. The use of narrative in evaluating objects is relevant to decision-making, even when we lack complete information and our projections may turn out to be inaccurate. In this sense, if beauty in everyday design aesthetics is understood as relative to usability, then beauty is fundamentally linked to that usability.

Everyday objects, by definition, tend to go unnoticed. However, there are contexts in which such objects are aesthetically evaluated in comparative terms, such as when one object is substituted for another, without this necessarily involving a reflexive process of artification or ritualization, as has often been emphasized in non-Western traditions, particularly in Japanese aesthetics. Cases such as critical design remind us that design can also provoke reflection by suspending ordinary usability and inviting us into more art-like experiences. Yet the central concern of everyday aesthetics lies precisely at the opposite pole: how unnoticed objects return to our awareness through wear, failure, and replacement, and how those experiences, however mundane, nonetheless shape our aesthetic relation to design.

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Delayed Recognition in Paint: Prolepsis and Anagnorisis in Rembrandt's *Denial of St Peter*

Abstract

The study attempts to read Rembrandt's 1660 history painting from a curious aesthetic perspective: as a drama in the Aristotelian sense. To show the moment of anagnorisis in a picture is not enough to place the particular attributes of the events preceding and following the chosen moment, as in most history pieces. Rembrandt subordinates the configuration of the scene, the figures' body language, facial expressions, and spatial arrangement to a preliminary dramaturgical understanding of what is about to happen in and between the characters at the particular moment chosen to be depicted.

Keywords

Rembrandt, History Painting, Aristotle, Drama, Painted Stage

This article is one of several case studies in which I attempt to reinterpret Rembrandt's so-called history paintings as dramas in the strict Aristotelian sense of the word. It is well known that in the *Poetics*, Aristotle defined drama in contrast to narrative: the epic narrator, an omniscient outsider, tells a story from beginning to end, while in drama, successive interactions between living characters take place on the stage, in front of the public. That is why Aristotle says,

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> it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity […] Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion will speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity [...] (Aristotle, 51a39-51b8).

Most painters view the subjects of their paintings as simple narratives and strive to incorporate all the important elements and motifs of the plot into the work in such a way that the story could easily be retold while viewing the painting. Rembrandt, on the other hand—and this is the fundamental thesis of my work—treats every story as something that could have happened or ended differently from what iconographic conventions intended. He is interested mainly in open situations where the *dramatis personae* face alternatives, and their actions and reactions depend on their ambitions, interests, strengths, or weaknesses—qualities the viewer must somehow sense.

In my understanding, Rembrandt proved himself to be a genius not only as a painter, draughtsman, and etcher, but also as a dramatist: with an incredible sense of the stage, he recognized many human dramas hidden in traditional biblical and mythological stories. Therefore, an in-depth dramaturgical analysis of the given plot cannot be omitted from any of my interpretations; moreover, it should serve as the starting point. Beyond that, I also analyze all the artistic measures—that is, the specific syntax of both the diegetic and scopic figures—that Rembrandt uses to expand the Lessingian "pregnant moment" of the story vividly and diversely, enabling the viewer to identify with the protagonists and to understand their alternative courses of action, dilemmas, and constraints.

*

Rembrandt's late masterpiece of considerable size (154 × 169 cm), *The Denial of St. Peter*, dated 1660 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Fig. 1), has never been a major puzzle for Rembrandt scholarship.[1] Although we know nothing for certain about the patron,[2] the authenticity of the painting has not been

[1] I know of only one serious attempt to dispute Rembrandt's authorship on stylistic grounds: that of Benjamin Binstock, who—like Joshua Bruyn in the case of *The Polish Rider*—attributes *The Denial of St. Peter* to Rembrandt's otherwise very talented pupil, Willem Drost, in a rather dubious way (Binstock 1999, 154).

[2] Gary Schwartz considers Jacob Trip and his wife to be the most likely patrons, who must have appreciated Rembrandt's late style if they commissioned his representative portraits with a similar painterly conception. (Schwartz 1992, 326*). Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings* (p. 326). Penguin Books, London

disputed, nor is its dating problematic. Its subject matter is one of the most frequently depicted biblical narratives, which became very fashionable from the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards; and as the work fits in quite well with the motif and compositional conventions of the story, it has not been seen as an interpretative challenge by scholars either. They were mostly concerned with the direct and indirect patterns and sources of imagery available to the painter. Most of the praise was for the picture's magical light and painterly richness; as storytelling, however, Rembrandt's *The Denial of St. Peter* has elicited little substantive comment.[3]

Fig. 1. Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *The Denial of St .Peter*, 1660, oil on canvas, 154 x 169 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

Yet, from a narrative point of view, it is a conceptual, genuinely dramatic work, which encourages the viewer to "act out" the events within themselves. It is based on a story that is centred on a real twist of fate—the pro-

[3] Arthur K. Wheelock's concise summary of the story (in the catalogue of the 1980 exhibition on Dutch history painting) can be seen as a typical treatment of the subject matter by most art historians: "As in Rembrandt's other representations of apostles and evangelists, one senses the internal struggle felt by Peter as he attempts to reconcile his faith with human doubt and incomprehension [...] not only does Peter's face express the initial bewilderment he must have felt when first questioned by the maiden, but also the presence of Christ in the painting symbolizes the finality of the denial" (cf. Blankert 1980, 152).

tagonist, the apostle, unwittingly becomes the subject of an Aristotelian anagnorisis that will have a decisive impact on the rest of his life. It is another question why Peter's "bitter weeping" following his threefold denial of Jesus is not usually dramatized as the consequence of such a tragic insight in the commentaries.[4] This is a profound problem, despite the fact that, according to the literary historian Erich Auerbach, who in his seminal work *Mimesis* devotes a lengthy analysis to the story (Auerbach 1953, 42-50), Peter, the most dedicated disciple of Jesus, is not comparable to the sublime heroes of the ancient tragedies: he lacks the noble exceptionalism of Oedipus, Agamemnon, or Antigone, the exemplary moral bearing of adversity, the corresponding elegance of self-expression, and similar "ancient" virtues. He is an ordinary man of low status, whose behaviour and reactions are best described as pedestrian. In Auerbach's view, such a character would have appeared on the stage of ancient tragedy at most as a comic figure in minor realist supporting scenes. But the conclusion of the analysis is that Peter is a tragic figure: "a hero of such weakness, who yet derives the highest force from his very weakness" (Auerbach 1953, 42).

In his story, we discover the fundamental problem of the life of the newly born Christian: as a simple fisherman from Capernaum—like the other characters in the Gospels, the tax collector, the prostitute, and the Samaritan woman—Peter, in fact, encounters Jesus by chance, and cannot help but respond in whatever way he can (according to his own constitution, life experience, and self-knowledge) to the challenge of following Jesus' confession of love. Both his faithfulness and his "betrayal" are, above all, the story of the personal stance of a private person: the turning point of which is not a public one, taking place in the interior of his soul and being his personal experience alone. It is therefore not so very different from those ordinary trials, weaknesses, and failures that the others have to face: the two sons of Zebedee who fall asleep with him in the Garden of Gethsemane, the two who run away after their arrest, the disciples at Emmaus, the doubting Thomas, and the rest.[5]

[4] Jan Białostocki, who discusses the theme of "the sinner as tragic hero," also mentions Peter's case but does not discuss it in any substantial way. However, he could find an opportunity to do so, for example, when he quotes the commentary in the *Statenbijbel*, which contrasts Peter's repentance as "sincere" with Judas' repentance as sinful (Białostocki 1973, 148).

[5] Of course, when Judas, the perpetrator of the most serious crime, understands that the sin he committed cannot be undone, he is left to draw the most far-reaching personal conclusion: he commits suicide.

In these New Testament "dramas," there is no "chorus": there is no collective "publicity" of the polis community which would put the fate of the individual in its place. It is only in the face of one's own conscience that one can—and must—give an account of sins and omissions. The only thing that makes Peter's story more exemplary than the others is that, in addition to the guilt of betrayal and the shaking of his self-confidence, he must also grow up to the grandiose task of founding the Church.[6]

In my new, "dramatological" interpretation of Rembrandt's work, I draw on this radical analysis of Auerbach, which goes back to the historical cradle of Christianity, to the roots of Jesus' conception of man, based on the freedom of personal action. In my view, Rembrandt is also interested in the personal drama of Peter: the lonely moment of the decision to join Jesus, which, although still unfurled, we already know will fail. Is it possible to depict, and if so, how can the event of the Passion and the subsequent shock be depicted as anticipation, as *prolepsis*?

The Question of Textual Reference

Auerbach, in the relevant chapter of *Mimesis*, while discussing the realism of Petronius and Tacitus, contrasts the aristocratic view of reality in first century Roman prose literature with the understated, spontaneous realism of the contemporaneous early Christian gospels. The literary-historical comparison of language use and stylistic layers, although seemingly far removed from the questioning of the art historian interested in the mapping of Western visual culture in the seventeenth century, has a stylistic aspect that is

[6] "He has left his home and his work; he has followed his master to Jerusalem; he has been the first to recognize him as the Messiah; when the catastrophe came, he was more courageous than the others; not only was he among those who tried to resist, but even when the miracle which he had doubtless expected failed to occur, he once again attempted to follow Jesus as he had followed him before. It is but an attempt, half-hearted and timid, motivated perhaps by a confused hope that the miracle by which the Messiah would crush his enemies might still take place. But since his attempt to follow Jesus is a half-hearted, doubt-ridden venture, furtive and full of fear, he falls deeper than all the others, who at least had no occasion to deny Jesus explicitly. Because his faith was deep, but not deep enough, the worst happened to him that can happen to one whom faith had inspired but a short time before: he trembles for his miserable life. And it is entirely credible that this terrifying inner experience should have brought about another swing of the pendulum—this time in the opposite direction and far stronger. Despair and remorse following his desperate failure prepared him for the visions which contributed decisively to the constitution of Christianity. It is only through this experience that the significance of Christ's coming and Passion is revealed to him" (Auerbach 1953, 47-48).

highly instructive for Rembrandt's dramatology, in addition to the cultural and socio-historical findings indicated. Auerbach recognises the novelty of the language of the New Testament in the fact that the evangelist does not portray the characters of these stories as "directly addressed to everyone" in the manner of the ancient literati (as if "looking down from above," possessing firm moral standards and differentiated stylistic formulas); rather, he tries to capture it "from the midst of things taking shape," in a kind of unreflective close-up view without insight:

> The visual and sensory as it appears here is no conscious imitation and hence are rarely completely realized. It appears because it is attached to the events which are to be related, because it is revealed in the demeanour and speech of profoundly stirred individuals and no effort need be devoted to the task of elaborating it. […] The author of the Gospel according to Saint Mark has no viewpoint which would permit him to present a factual, objective portrait of, let us say, the character of Peter. He is at the core of what goes on; he observes and relates only what matters in relation to Christ's presence and mission; and in the present case it does not even occur to him to tell us how the incident ended, that is, how Peter got away (Auerbach 1953, 47-48).

The author has little knowledge of the formal traditions of storytelling and of the techniques of ancient literary language: "Without any effort on his part, as it were, and purely through the inner movement of what he relates, the story becomes visually concrete. And the story speaks to everybody…" This is why the evangelist is attracted to the use of direct discourse: in the short direct dialogues between a few, far from the stylized stychomythia of ancient tragedies, "the dramatic tension of the moment when the actors stand face to face has been given a salience…" (Auerbach 1953, 46).

Auerbach is clearly seeking to find in Mark's text an inscrutable formal principle for recording spontaneously occurring events, which will also serve as the basis for Rembrandt's theatrical play more than a millennium and a half later. If my ambition is to recognize Peter in the Rembrandt painting as the tragic hero of a real drama, I must read together the direct discourse of the New Testament dialogues with the "dialogues" of Rembrandt—as they spontaneously take place in the gestures and words of men guided from within. Of course, while Auerbach argues that the power of the Gospel text derives precisely from its lack of artifice, Rembrandt has to produce the same immediacy—that is, the natural liveliness of the actors' inner movement—artificially, by means of painterly and draughtsman devices. We must consider what, on stage, makes the evangelists' dialogues tangible to the spectators.

It is known that the episode of Peter's betrayal occurs only in the Synoptic Gospels, and in all three of them it is composed of two parts—the prophecy on the one hand and the three denials on the other—played out in a very similar way. Auerbach chooses Mark's text (Mark 14, 66-72) because it is the most concise: he leaves almost everything to the short dialogues. Matthew's (Matt 26, 69-76) is also closer to him in its use of words: both portray the events as a very public and rather heated exchange. In terms of imagery, however, Luke's (Lk 22, 54-62) is by far the most informative—and it does not take much to see that, if Rembrandt needed to re-read either of the Gospel versions at all, this is the one he was most likely to consult.[7]

Luke's narrative on the subject[8] differs markedly from Mark and Matthew's in three respects, all of which seem to have left their mark on Rembrandt's painting.

1. His precise treatment of the setting in the square: Luke is not content with merely indicating that Peter was sitting outside but carefully delineates the setting and places Peter and the dialogues in it. "Then took they him, and led him, and brought him into the high priest's house. And Peter followed afar off. When they lit a fire in the hall and sat down, Peter joined them." The other two synoptics make no distinction between the inner and outer rooms of the high priest's house, and neither emphasizes that Peter follows Jesus at a distance. Whereas in the other two authors Peter restlessly wanders in and out of the hall, in Luke's depiction he remains around the fire all the time, suggesting that.

[7] Let me remind the reader of the old juxtaposition of Bauch's "Bible reader" and Tümpel's "illustration collector" Rembrandt. The simultaneous use of the two types of sources by the artist cannot be excluded. Amy Golahny may be right that, while creating, Rembrandt, like his contemporaries, read texts to gather information about the settings of a story, the characters, and the circumstances of the events (Golahny 2003, 35).

[8] Luke 22, 54-62 in the King James Version: "Then took they him, and led him, and brought him into the high priest's house. And Peter followed afar off. And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the hall, and were set down together, Peter sat down among them. But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, 'This man was also with him.' And he denied him, saying, 'Woman, I know him not.' And after a little while another saw him, and said, 'Thou art also of them.' And Peter said, 'Man, I am not.' And about the space of one hour after another confidently affirmed, saying, 'Of a truth this fellow also was with him: for he is a Galilaean.' And Peter said, 'Man, I know not what thou sayest.' And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, 'Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.' And Peter went out, and wept bitterly."

2. None of the suspicions are widely publicized, without the loud shouting and spectacular rejection found both in Mark ("he went outside […] And after a little while, again the ones standing near were saying to Peter, 'Truly you are one of them, for you also are a Galilean.' He began to swear and curse and to swear-with-an-oath that 'I do not know this man Whom you are saying'") and in Matthew ("After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.' Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!'"). In Luke's version, the accuser twice points to Peter in the third person ("This was also with him") and once speaks to him directly, but Peter's answers are always given ad hominem to the one who had made the accusation ("Woman, I know him not"; and "another saw him, and said, 'Thou art also of them.' And Peter said, 'Man, I am not'; 'Man, I do not know what you are saying…'"). There is nothing to suggest a wide audience or collective suspicion: despite being repeated three times in the same place, the brief exchanges do not provoke overt anger, and the tension does not accumulate spectacularly. The whole sequence of events seems to go essentially unnoticed by those present; it can therefore be more plausible that Peter leaves the scene without consequences.
3. The only mention Luke makes is that after the rooster crowed, "the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter." This moment, which remains rather unmarked in both the exegetical and the representational tradition, as we shall see, will play a key role in Rembrandt's dramaturgy as a *prolepsis*.

In what follows, I will divide the closer examination of the work into two parts. First, I will analyse the denial scene from a micro-dramaturgical perspective, treating it as a tribunal-like interaction between the accuser and the accused in front of the "judges": the soldiers, who are about to decide whether to give credit to the accusation or accept the apostle's denial. In the second section, I will show how Rembrandt is able to anticipate Peter's inner twist of conscience hidden behind the explicit conflict on the stage. In both respects, it is worth taking advantage of the fact that the painter was able to draw on a rich pictorial tradition: I will therefore make comparisons with earlier and contemporary depictions to show the pity of Rembrandt's dramatic invention as vividly as possible.

Accusations and Deflections: Unweighting the Open Conflict

The dialogue in "direct discourse" is a suitable point of departure. If the painter is curious about what happens during Peter's questioning, it is trivial (i.e., easy to narrate), but it also raises a series of dramaturgical questions that the "stage director" of the painted stage cannot leave unanswered.

Luke's version of the text is particularly instructive from this point of view. The servant suspects that she has already seen the stranger in the companion of Jesus, who has just sat down to warm himself among the soldiers: she looks closely at him and says, "This man was with him" (56). Her words are obviously addressed to those around her, who have just arrested and accompanied Jesus to the high priest's house. Peter denies the very statement because he takes the girl's words as a call to the soldiers to act as representatives of the public authority; for example, to arrest him and bring him, like Jesus, before the high priest.

Fig. 2. Jan Pynas (1583–1631), *The Denial of St. Peter*, 1629,
brown ink, sepia, paper, 205 x 325 mm, Amsterdam, Collection P. and N. de Boer
Source: The Rembrandt Database

In the pen-and-ink drawing (Fig. 2) of 1629 by Jan Pynas (1582–1631), a minor master closely associated with Caravaggio's followers,[9] identified by J.R. Judson as a direct source of Rembrandt (Judson 1964, 141 passim, although not in the sense I am discussing here), the servant points with her right arm at Peter, but her words are addressed not to the apostle, but to the young soldier in armour, turning sideways: behind the sharply shaded *repoussoir* figure holding the torch, his profile closes the group from the left. Responding to the indirect invitation in the deixis ("this"), the soldier, with wide-open eyes and slightly open mouth, gives the balding, grey-bearded apostle a calm, objective look. Peter's reaction to this is one to an attack, as Pynas shows the apostle leaning in the opposite direction from the servant: with his eyes rounded, his lips parted, and his hands pressed to his chest, he responds directly to the soldier with all the suggestiveness of a gesture.

Fig. 3. Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Denial of St. Peter*, 1609–1610, oil, canvas, 94 x 125 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Source: Wikimedia Commons

[9] Jan Symonsz. Pynas (1582–1631) visited Italy twice, around 1605 and 1615, where he was certainly in contact with several of Caravaggio's Dutch followers, in addition to Lastman and Elsheimer. Rembrandt, aged only 19, also studied with his brother Jacob during his few months' study trip to Amsterdam in 1625.

This dramaturgy of the indirectness of the accusation comes from Caravaggio himself, who, in his late close-up painted around 1609–1610 (Fig. 3) (see Hibbard 1983, 341 No. 192), reduces the narrative to the interaction of the three constitutive characters of the "trial."[10] The young girl's face is drawn unusually close in space to that of the armoured soldier: the gaze, heightened by the proximity of the body to an almost overpowering intensity, is intended to emphasise the gesture of the girl's barely visible hand (accentuated only by wash lights) pointing at the apostle. This mediation is possible only because the soldier's shadowy profile, kept in the dark, and her hesitantly raised right arm are aimed directly at Peter: the impression is thus created that the woman is directly pressuring the soldier to confront Peter by leaning in.

In his version of the subject (Fig. 4), the so-called "Master of the Torchlight" uses the same device: although the woman here appeals to the authority with a somewhat languid look, the soldier responds with an assertive lean forward and an aggressive glance at Peter. In Dirk van Baburen's case (Fig. 5), too, the young officer's affective reaction is motivated by the maid's excited leaning forward; he also grabs the left arm of the desperate Peter.[11] Generally speaking, the Baroque preference in the representation of the subject is determined by this tendency toward the dramatization of a "tribunal" situation.

[10] Judson also assumes the existence of a lost Caravaggio original, which might have reached Pynas through Honthorst (cf. Judson 1964, 144).

[11] Interestingly enough, Caravaggio's followers did not tread this reductive path: they were content to place the scene in a tavern setting and supplement it with the company of drinking soldiers and gamblers. Apparently, this direct allegory of the apostle's falsehood (which spread from Ribera and Manfredi's Roman circles throughout Europe to Tournier and Georges de la Tour; see Judowitz 2018, 37 passim) did not interest Rembrandt; he was rather keen on finding new ways to focus on the inner drama of the protagonist. It is also typical that the group of those who suspect Peter, and the apostle, mostly appear in a candle- or torch-lit night scene, as a half- or three-quarter-length close-up.

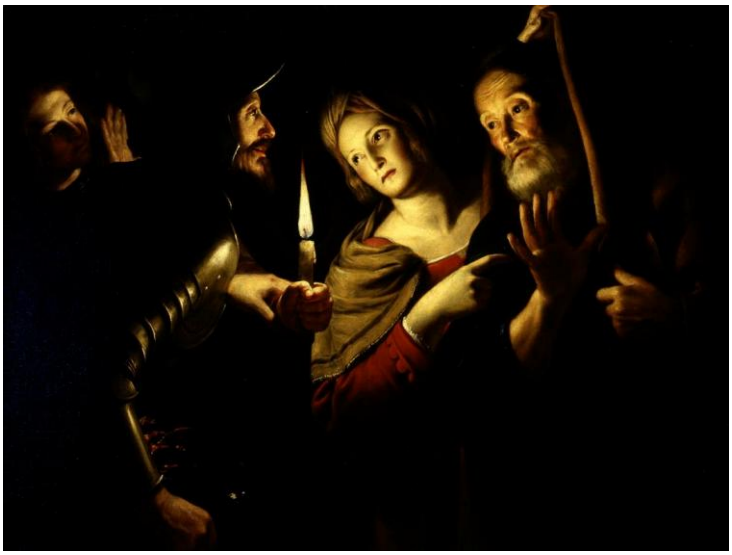

Fig. 4. The Master of the Torchlight (Master Jacomo), *Denial of St. Peter*, 1630's, oil, canvas, 95,5 x 127 cm, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, Palmer Museum of Art, Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 5. Dirck van Baburen (1595–1624), *Denial of St. Peter*, 1624, oil, canvas, 87 x 105 cm, Cracow, Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 6. Nicolas Tournier (1590–1639): *Denial of St. Peter, detail*, 1625–1626, oil, canvas, 172 x 252 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado
Source: Wikimedia Commons

In contrast, Rembrandt is seemingly out to diminish the sharpness of the conflict between "accuser" and "defendant." The girl turns directly to the apostle, raising the light of the candle she holds in her left hand very close to Peter's face so that she can get a better look at him; and although the linguistic deixis ("this was with him too…") is addressed to the soldiers behind her,[12] her gesture does not point explicitly to Peter or "mark" him

[12] A special case is Carlo Saraceni's Caravaggesque composition, painted twice between 1615 and 1620 (Fig. 9), in which the duo of Peter and the maid is meant to revive the narrative of Peter's betrayal: by foregoing the representation of any soldier, Saraceni limits his own dramaturgical scope and leaves everything to a balanced play of the gestures and facial expressions of the two. Unlike in Rembrandt's early Anna and Tobit

as a target.[13] The young girl's animated being stance seems more curious than suspicious: unlike, for example, the malevolent woman of Caravaggio's follower Tournier (Fig. 6), her upwardly extended right index finger rather allows Rembrandt intimate painterly illusion in depicting candlelight so intense that it makes the body almost translucent.

The apostle also responds in a proportionate manner: the indecisive gesture of his left hand seems more one of incomprehension than of firm rejection. Just as he does not press his right hand to his bosom in an oath, he rather clutches the heavy white blanket enveloping his body to his chest, as if he is cold. He does not, therefore, lose his balance: he maintains his massive, almost princely posture. The conflict here is virtually reduced to a look of curiosity and a cautious glance.

Rembrandt also makes sure that neither Peter's words nor his body language are directed immediately at the soldiers, who, unlike in Honthorst's composition in Rennes (Fig. 7) or Gerard Seghers' in Raleigh (Fig. 8), are not even allowed to come close to Peter: they cannot put their hands on his shoulders or grab his garb. The soldier in the background on the far left is no more than a dark, faceless profile. Rembrandt concentrates on the one sitting in the foreground, who, with his head uncovered and slightly bowed, is listening intently but dispassionately to the conversation before him as he empties his cup: he has already taken off his heavy armour and sword, apparently going "off duty," as confirmed by his slightly balding hair, his short tunic, and his blotchy profile. He does not seem to take the injunction implied in her words personally and has no intention to intervene.

(Fig. 10), another accusation scene in which nobody is present to make judgment, and which follows the logic of the narrative, in Saraceni's case the scene makes no dramatic sense without any kind of publicity of the accusation.

[13] Although Rembrandt could hardly have been familiar with it, we see a similarly restrained solution of the maid/Peter duo in the left margin of Georges de la Tour's painting of Nantes (Fig. 11).

Fig. 7. Gerrit van Honthorst (1592–1656), *Denial of St. Peter*, 1612–1620, oil, canvas, 150 x 197 cm, Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 8. Gerard Seghers (1591–1651), *Denial of St. Peter*, 1620–1625, oil, canvas, 172,7 x 277, cm, Raleigh, North Crolina Museum of Art
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 9. Carlo Saraceni (1579–1620), *The Denial of S. Peter*, around 1615, Rome, Pinacoteca Vaticana, source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 10. Rembrandt, *Tobit and Anna with the kid*, 1626, oil on panel, 40,1 x 29,9 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Source: Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 11. Georges de la Tour (1593–1652), *The Denial of S. Peter*, 1650, oil on canvas, 120 x 161 cm, Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Source: Wikimedia Commons

But why is it so important for Rembrandt to reduce the intensity of the open conflict, to keep the situation at such a low temperature? Henkel had already noted in 1934 that Peter's gesture of denial was much less energetic than that of Gerard Seghers,[14] but his explanation is, in my judgment, too brief. "At the moment when he said the words: 'I do not know the man,' he became conscious of having turned traitor to his Master and immediately began to repent. This makes him such a tragic figure, full of majesty and mystery. Only Rembrandt could express this dualism in the character of St. Peter, because he had acquired that profound knowledge of the human mind which enabled him to understand such problematical figures as Saul, Lucretia, Haman and the many others, painted by him in the last decade of his life, who all seemed to be victims of an inevitable fate" (Henkel 1934, 154).

[14] Gerard Seghers painted several versions of the theme. Rembrandt may have learned of these either directly or indirectly, e.g., through the etchings of Schelte a Bolswert (1586–1659) and Andries Pauli (Giovan Antonio de Paoli, 1600–1639) (cf. Henkel 1934, 153 passim). Gerard Seghers may also have encountered the pictorial motif of the obscuring of the candlelight, a favourite in the early Baroque period, in other Caravaggesque *notturnos*.

And although Henkel does not fail to mention the other scene in the background and calls Jesus' turning to Peter an "ingenious idea," he does not go into a closer dramaturgical analysis of the portrayal of the two events as simultaneous. The same organic flaw is found in Duncan Bull's interpretation, who sees the complexity of the message expressed "principally in the play of gestures," but does not address the dynamics of the interactions.[15]

Let us note that Rembrandt is again interested in the openness of the event, where spontaneous interactions between autonomous subjects can lead to any outcome: Peter may confess, or the soldiers might arrest him. Is it possible that there is some conscious dramaturgical reason on Rembrandts part behind the reduction in intensity of both the prosecution and the defence, that the conflict be as quiet, casual, and *inconspicuous* as possible? After all, according to the narrative, Peter escapes the repeated and actually justified (!) suspicions: if the painter wants to give credence to what is happening, he must also make it clear that the soldiers *here and now* really see no reason to intervene, either because the girl is not motivated enough to expose him, or because the apostle's minimum of insincere gesticulation is enough to disarm her. In any case, the painter is doing everything in his power to create a temperate balance between "prosecution" and "defence," in which neither side can become dominant. He suggests, as if in this closed "trial situation," that beyond a weightless exchange of words, nothing really happened. Rembrandt understands perfectly well that it is the turn of events in Peter's interior that makes the story a drama, not the events that take place publicly.

How is it possible to depict Peter's external dishonesty and his honest inner twist—in one and the same still picture, simultaneously? This problem did not exist for Caravaggio. In his New York version, he merges the scene of denial with Peter's despair in a simple visual parataxis. His Peter is no longer directly defensive: he seems to have nothing to do with either the girl or the soldier anymore. The desperate expression on his face, and the suggestive signs of his introspection and self-mortification, show that he has already been overcome by the guilt and despair of his betrayal. Dramaturgical questions such as why the soldier remains passive, or whether Peter's shaking his head is convincing enough *here and now*, simply do not emerge in Caravaggio's and in most similar representations, mainly because they would be irrelevant for the narrative. However condensed Caravaggio's composition is it obscures the dramatic moment of transition from self-

[15] Cf. Duncan Bull's catalogue entry in *Rembrandt–Caravaggio* (Bull 2006, 84-85).

deceptive denial to recognition. Although Caravaggio's juxtaposing the accusation with the apostle's remorse makes the story easier to tell, it cuts the drama, in the Aristotelian sense of the word, short.

Rembrandt's closest link with Caravaggio is that he, too, is concerned with Peter's turn of conscience and not with the events around the fire. But for him it is also clear that the two moments cannot be combined in a single scene—not because of academic chronological fidelity, but because of the nature of the dramatic turn of events: the recognition cannot take place *here and now*. The tragic event in Peter's life is not, by definition, induced in the field of tension between the characters in the scene, as most conventional depictions, including Caravaggio's, seem to suggest. What is presented to us as an explicit event in such a picture is not a consequence but merely a pretext and momentary frame for the actual drama. The evangelist is well aware of this when, at the end of the narrative, he emphatically indicates that Peter's self-mortifying realization does not take place in the courtyard of the high priest, i.e., *not in public space*: after the rooster's crow, a sign which he alone among those present must have understood, he "went *outside* and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62, my emphasis).

We are at the key to the drama. We may ask: what realization (*anagnorisis*) does the rooster's crow prompt, leading to the apostle's shock and bitter tears that only he witnesses? What does Peter understand, what does he discover in the solitude of the porch?

Let us consider: Peter, who, out of sincere affection for his Master, ventures to the high priest's house, is convinced, right up to the rooster's crow, that he has escaped the trap into which his recklessness has led him. He knows he lied to his accusers. He feels that his actions were just a harmless lie, the kind we all tell in difficult situations without much regret. He is simply acting out of fear, almost instinctively. But although he is lying *here and now*, this lie is *not* a sham; it is not a deception. He is saving his own skin, but he is not betraying Jesus in the emphatic sense of the word: that would require a determined and purposeful action, such as that of Judas. But in his case, there is no such thing—not even a betrayal, for Peter could not, in the circumstances, help the Master with even his most sincere profession of faith. No: Peter does not betray or abandon Jesus, but in his horror, he simply *forgets* him. He rarely considers the future consequences.

For this reason, and no other, the rooster's crow is decisive: it reminds the relieved apostle of the reason for his coming, namely, Jesus and his fate. At the Last Supper, Jesus told Simon: "'I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.' Simon replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and

to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me'" (Luke 22:31-34). Peter suddenly realizes that what Jesus had predicted had happened—but he begins to weep only because he also realizes that his "little lies" are indeed aggravated by his own earlier hubris into a sin: the sin of conceit, which the Master himself had warned him about at the Last Supper. If he had not then and there so proudly and haughtily proclaimed that he would go with Jesus "to death," he would not now have to pay with heavy guilt for a common human weakness. It must be clear: this recognition is tragic in its nature, even if Peter does not commit any substantive sin against Jesus. Moreover, it is tragic even if the prophecy already contained the certainty that, if he realizes his personal failing, he will be able to strengthen his brothers. Jesus' prophecy also expresses the confidence that Peter, building on his personal experience, would be able to rise to the grandiose task of building the Church of Christianity.

In The Denial of St. Peter, Rembrandt must therefore simultaneously accomplish two tasks: on the one hand, he must make it credible that Peter will succeed in misleading his accusers here and now; but he must also show that this is not a moment of truth. To present the moment of truth, he must find the dramaturgical equivalent of the rooster's crow: in other words, he must alienate and frame the moment of successful lying.

We can now see why, in *The Denial of St. Peter*, the painter reduces the dynamics of the argument to a minimum. Rembrandt nevertheless operates with close-ups of large, three-quarter figures and with a highly precise coordination of fine motor movements: he does his best and utmost to authenticate the situational behaviours of the protagonists in a bodily way. He must make us feel that Peter is not only lying plausibly, but also authentically: that he is so frightened, that he denies the suspicion so unthinkingly, that everything else—above all, of course, Jesus—ceases to exist for him. This kind of self-deceptive control of the situation is ended by the rooster's crow to remind the apostle again of the purpose of his coming.

In one aspect, Rembrandt follows Caravaggio: he also ignores using the didactic iconography of the rooster motif. But he has a different motivation to do so, since, as a genuine dramatist, he is preoccupied with exactly the momentum of the turning point. As a man of the theatre at heart, he does not leave the representation of dramatic time to simple iconographic signifiers—he knows full well that, even on the painted stage, he can only narrate through dramaturgical distinctions.

Thus, Rembrandt's problem of form can be formulated this way: how to forecast the subsequent moment of the protagonist's self-recognition? In a still picture, what sort of event, happening *here and now*, can effectively adumbrate the subsequent twist, at least for the beholder?

Now the stage-friendly moment, that Luke alone mentions and which, at first sight, seems incidental, is opportune: according to the gospel, after the rooster's crow had been heard, "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter" (Luke 22:61). It is clear that this silent event means the same thing as the rooster's noise: it functions as a reminder of the prophetical words Jesus had spoken to him at the Last Supper. However, for the time being, this signal must remain unrecognized by the apostle. And that is an important point: Peter is still busy saving his own skin outside and obviously does not even notice the Master's voiceless, warning glance behind him. What Rembrandt dramatizes on the painted stage here is precisely the conflict between the different ways the Lord and his disciple experience the same moment. For Jesus already knows what Peter does not yet know, and what the rooster's crow will soon remind him of. Jesus' glance from behind thus frames the scene of Peter's lying; that is to say, it proleptically replaces the signal of the rooster and its consequences.

Drama in a Causative Structure: Spaces of Delay

The Gospel of Luke makes no mention of whether Peter notices or returns Jesus' glance aimed specifically at him after the rooster's crow. In principle, it would be possible, and in a sense logical, for Peter *to look back at* Jesus at this moment of truth, for the moment of recognition and confession to take place in a silent look at the Lord. Rembrandt knows, however, that such a solution would cut short the dramatic moment: it would create too early a *parousia* of mutual understanding between Master and disciple, before Peter could fully realize and understand what he has done. Peter, even if he were looking back at Jesus in repentance, would have to leave the high priest's house in haste; he could not answer the Master in public. Only when he is alone, by understanding his irreversible denial, can he burst into tears. Therefore, in his *Denial of St. Peter*, Rembrandt had to find a way to delay the moment of truth. In my understanding, his most effective means of doing so was to divide the scenic space.

In order to do this, Rembrandt turns to an older iconographic type of the subject, in which the scene of denial is combined with the interrogation of Jesus before Caiaphas. Jan Pynas (Fig. 2) combines two characteristics

that provided Rembrandt fruitful patterns to follow: first, he divides the stage into two parts; and second, he positions the chamber drama of the half-length figures close to the picture plane. Pynas sets the near and far scenes in an architecturally incomprehensible but, precisely because of its abstractness, theatrically effective split of the space. It is also worth considering Rembrandt's two drawings, which can also be seen as precursors of the Amsterdam picture: in both, he experimented with locating and positioning the dramatic encounter of the protagonists in space.

Fig. 12. Rembrandt, *Denial of St. Peter*, 1655,
pen with bister, white, paper, 180 x 255 mm, Paris, École des Beaux-Arts
Source: Wikimedia Commons

The Amsterdam oil painting was preceded by about five years by a pen-and-ink drawing, now in the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris (Fig. 12, see Slive 1965, Vol. I, 141, no. 146; not in Benesch), which was first brought to our attention by Frederik Schmidt-Degener in 1933 (Henkel 1934, 154) and which, although it can only be described with strong limitations as a preparatory work for the painting, clearly indicates Rembrandt's aim to find the right spatial arrangement for the scene. Indeed, the differences are more striking than the similarities: in contrast to the highly condensed

composition of the Amsterdam picture, the Paris drawing is characterised by a broad perspective, epic breadth, and a sense of detail. The intricate spatial structure of stairs, pillars, and balustrades not only separates the foreground scene of the soldiers, the servant, and Peter from the midstage crowd scene with Jesus and Caiaphas, but also gives a glimpse into the far depths of the vast church space.

The division of space is reminiscent of the 1648 *Medea* etching (B.112): the spacious composition, with at least twenty full-length figures, is divided into separate scenes, but it lacks the dramatic tension between "outside" and "inside," the "here" and "there," which makes *Medea* a tragic masterpiece. Rembrandt, by using dark repoussoir figures, indicates a fire pit in the left corner, around which the figures gather, with Peter in the middle. Holding his hands over the warmth, he only turns his bald head towards the bare-shouldered servant girl leaning forward from behind him. Their dialogue—just like in the painting—is devoid of any excited gesticulation, exaggerated pointing, or parrying: the soldiers, too, are quietly and calmly watching, with only the helmeted soldier in front of them, who is drinking from a wine jug, turning to the side and raising his eyes curiously to Peter. (The dramaturgical core of the main foreground group of the 1665 painting is thus already formed here.)

The interrogation scene in the background, which we see partially through the pillars from behind the witnesses standing with their backs to the pillars, is completely separate from this—there is no figure or motif to mediate between them. Rembrandt does not even use schematic contrasts or patterns to suggest any intrinsic connection between the two events. Overall, this pictorial version does not open up the story in such a way that Peter's drama can unfold directly before the viewer's eyes.[16]

[16] A recently discovered drawing (now in the Goethe Museum in Weimar, Fig. 13), certainly associated with Rembrandt's school, most probably depicts Peter's betrayal: in addition to the accentuated rooster motif, this is evidenced by Jesus standing on the right, hands tied behind his back, and looking behind him at the foreground group of Peter and the maid. The iconography of the drawing is peculiar in two respects: on the one hand, it lacks Annas and/or Caiaphas, who are represented only by the place of their thrones; and on the other, the artist has drawn the two scenes together in the same antique colonnade without making any marked distinction between the two locations.

Fig. 13. A pupil by Rembrandt, *Denial of St. Peter*,
pen, red ink, white, paper, 76x 116 mm,
Weimar, Goethe Nationalmuseum

Fig. 14. Rembrandt, *Denial of St. Peter*, 1660,
pen, paper, 84 x 111 mm, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional
Source: Wikimedia Commons

We are brought closer to the Amsterdam solution by another brush drawing, now in the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid (Fig. 14), which Judson sees as a link between the Pynas drawing and Rembrandt's invention. Its novelty is that Rembrandt places the grouping of Jesus and Caiaphas, on the right edge of the Pynas, in the center and, without any architectural framing, positions them explicitly *behind* Peter, while leaving the format unchanged. For this reason—perhaps only to avoid the *horror vacui*—three further and iconographically redundant figures are placed to the right of Peter. The arrangement is still weak, partly due to the filler figures and partly due to the lack of elaboration of the dramaturgy (the page is, after all, not much more than a rough mass sketch), but the intention to produce a contrast in depth between the foreground and background groups is already apparent.

It is noteworthy, however, that recent studies of the Amsterdam painting suggest that it may originally have been much wider, with proportions in its horizontal format roughly corresponding to those of the Pynas sketch and the Madrid drawing.[17] It is possible that Rembrandt decided to modify the wide format during execution—in the precise elaboration of the subject relationships—to increase the plasticity of the drama by narrowing the virtual field of view. In any case, the narrowing, and thus the sharpening of the depth dimension, contributes powerfully to the dramatization of the communication gap between Peter and Jesus. The painter positions Jesus in such a way that his gaze, coming from a certain distance, reaches the considerable figure of the apostle *from behind*. Through this setting, orientation, and scale, Rembrandt makes it clear that, for the moment, Peter is still unaware of being reminded of his own words from the past.

Framing the *Here and Now*: Acting Out the Loneliness of Guilt

Notably, from a dramatic point of view, Jesus' gaze is a distinctly *transitive* action: it is directed specifically at Peter. However blurred his features in the background may be, we are not left in doubt for a moment as to

[17] Rembrandt later painted on the strip of the canvas, cut from the right edge, a small (56.5 × 75 cm) *Circumcision* (now in Washington, The National Gallery of Art). For details, see *Corpus* VI 2015, no. 284 and no. 286. For a schematic diagram of the relative positions of the two paintings, see *Corpus* V 2011, no. 647–648. According to Ernst van de Wetering, it is likely that Rembrandt cut the canvas of *The Denial of St. Peter* while the work was still unfinished.

the purposefulness and force of his turn.[18] His gazing *herein* pulls the two interrogation scenes together: the visual isomorphism of the two groups is a sharp reminder that Jesus and Peter are in a similar situation, both the objects of suspicion, both having to defend themselves in a hostile environment. Rembrandt brilliantly captures their shared destiny: the monumental silhouette of Jesus, with his hands tied behind his back in the background, harmonizes with the grave, almost priestly figure of Peter—or vice versa. Both are lit from the left, and both are surrounded by subordinate figures.

But even if their positions are analogous, their attitudes are not: while Peter in the foreground is completely dissolved in his own defensive *reaction*, Rembrandt's Jesus is clearly in action. Although already a prisoner, he looks out of his own miserable situation and suspends his participation in his own trial in order to turn towards the Other. It is important to note that this action by Jesus is not a spontaneous response to the words of Peter, whose muttered deflections—the spatial configuration makes this likely—are hardly audible to him. But he does not need to hear them: as an expert judge of human nature, Jesus intuitively already knew at the Last Supper that Peter would fail the test; that is why he warned him in advance.

In order to make the drama performable, Rembrandt now exploits the fact that reminding is a *causative* type of action. Jesus wants to make Peter *himself* remember his own words and become aware of his hubris. For we have seen that the actual dramatic conflict is not induced in the clash between him and the servant or the soldiers, nor even between Peter and Jesus, but *in* Peter's *inner self*: the warning is therefore only an indirect action, which must trigger a self-critical reflection on his own.

The basic rule of Rembrandt's painted stage is that everything crucial that is happening within the interior of the soul of the dramatic person must become external—that is to say, recognizable as a visually traceable interre-

[18] In his groundbreaking study *Action and Expression in Western Art* (which I see as crucial for my understanding of dramatic actions on the painted stage), Ernst H. Gombrich also goes into detail about Rembrandt's *Denial of St. Peter* and emphasizes especially the mysterious ambiguity of Peter's movement—in contrast to the overflow of all-too-clear theatrical gesture formulas (affect-expressions) that overwhelmed most of the Baroque representations of affects (see Gombrich 1982, 98–100). But precisely because his reasoning lacks the analysis of subject–object relations, he, although involuntarily realizing the dramatic force of Jesus' highly purposeful glance, does not refer to the dramaturgical difference that separates the object-precision of the Lord's glance from Peter's ambivalent gesticulation and facial expression.

lation. Without this, the drama in its concreteness and complexity cannot be evoked by the spectator. This is why Rembrandt insinuates such dramatic force into the gaze of Jesus, because his dramaturgical sense is that Jesus must leave Peter alone with his lie *here and now*. With its pitch-perfect artistic deixis, Jesus' gaze *frames* Peter's actual falsehood in a double sense. It is the beholder whom Rembrandt makes aware that Jesus can only *remind* Peter, but that the recognition is up to the apostle's conscience. In this way, he places this happening *here and now* in the temporal perspective of the words already spoken at the Last Supper and the *still-to-come* moment of the personal collapse.

Another visual element that contributes to the chronotopic framing of Peter is the low parapet, a similar motif used by Pynas to separate the inner space of the picture from the viewer. But this architectural divider, extended to the edge of the picture, takes on an important function in Rembrandt's dramatic technique. On the one hand, it blocks Peter's escape from the trap; it inevitably becomes a visual metonymy of the protagonist's confinement. On the other hand, the front of the parapet is given a separate, explicitly proscenium-like illumination, which makes the lower edge of the image considerably brighter than the segment of space behind it. In my view, this distinction is dictated not only by the abstract visual rhythm of pictorial variety but also by the theatrical chronotope employed here: although the generous painting style—pastose, broad brushwork, and reddish-orange–brownish tones of the late Rembrandt—pervades the entire surface and creates an unparalleled unity of the picture, the painterly differentiation of virtual space takes precedence in terms of the drama played out.

Before clarifying the dramaturgical function of this segmentation, it is worth observing how conceptually Rembrandt divides the theatrical space of the picture stage into three places—functional for the play of the drama: (1) the group of Jesus and Caiaphas, (2) the space of Peter and his accuser, and (3) the foreground of the picture, where the "judges" (the two soldiers) are seated. Note that he assigns each of them its own light source while systematically hiding them.

In the dimly lit scene of the background depth (1), the turbaned Caiaphas and his soldiers are illuminated from the left, perhaps by the light of a torch hidden (?) behind a curtain. Jesus, with his hands tied behind his back, who would have faced his interrogators with his back to the events in the courtyard and thus to the viewer, now turns around unexpectedly; he is almost completely in shadow, the interior lights of the interrogation room barely brushing the right side of his face and the right edge of his silhouette. A few

loosely articulated contours—calibrated to the sparse lighting—are enough for Rembrandt to give Jesus' figure the effect of corporeal presence and a sense of depth, even if the figure himself is seen as a shadow looming in front of the dim background light.

(2) By contrast, the grouping of the handmaid and Peter is dominated by a realistic, sensuously pulsating pictoriality of alternating lights and backlights, cast shadows and modelling body shadows, translucent bodies, and matte surfaces.[19] Rembrandt probably borrowed the motif of the sharp but obscured candlelight from Gerard Seghers, but no other Baroque painter could harness the warm, nervous flicker of candlelight—the dynamics of *chiaroscuro*—to such an effect as he did, to convey a sense of latent tension. The mutual gleam of the eyes glancing at each other, the flickering of the peak lights on the servant's nose and lips, or on Peter's knitted brows, suggests an almost intimate closeness between them. The proximity of the light source certainly contributes to the sense of their silent dialogue as a mutually objective, closed relationship ignoring both Jesus and the soldiers.

But this accentuated light centre does not explain (3) the painterly glitter of the soldier's armour, his helmet, and sword hilt, sitting on the foreground's parapet. The reddish-yellowish light that glints brokenly on the metal surface cannot come from the obscured candle—it is a true Baroque idea that we see the light of the fire reflected on the side of the wine jug and the armour around which the attendants gather, and which cannot be positioned anywhere else than in the virtual space *in front of* the picture plane. This third, independent source of light is responsible for the isolation of the foreground: the reflections on the objects visually mark the presence of the invisible fireplace, much like the presence of Perseus is only known to us by the objective accuracy of Andromeda's attention in Rembrandts's dramatic *Andromeda* in the Hague.

This light, invisible but reflected on the metallic surfaces of objects, is now nothing other than *an index of the spectator's presence*. For it is not only the bare-headed soldier, but, more importantly, the *implicit viewer* who sees the scene from here. The play of the image positions the viewer *virtually* among the witnesses gathered around the fire: our eye level is roughly the same as that of the soldier sitting nearby. The low viewpoint also makes the figure of Peter—and, to some extent, that of the servant—feel monumen-

[19] The painterly challenge of depicting candlelight or torchlight was already noted by Van Mander (1604, fol. 31v/fol. 32r, VII.34; see *Corpus VI* 2015, 666-667).

tal. Our status as viewers of the picture is also exceptional: it is precisely because we see the situation from the *outside* and from the *front* that we alone are allowed to perceive Jesus' outward gaze, perpendicular to the plane of the picture. *Here and now*, only the implicit spectator can understand Jesus' gesture, which is about to make the apostle remember his hubris. Jesus' educative action must inevitably be perceived by the beholder before it is perceived by the apostle himself, who at this moment still does not know that he will have to give an account of this moment. As spectators, we are therefore active participants in the chronotopic framing play: *we see* that the warning has been given, but whether it will actually reach its goal (whether Peter will—figuratively speaking—hear the rooster's crow) remains an open question for us *here and now*. In any case, Jesus' glance marks the path to Peter's *anagnorisis* of failure, even though it can only happen later, "outside the trial," in the unseen, personal space of his conscience.

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Musical Storytelling: *Technē Rhētorikē*, and the Redefinition of Beauty in Music

Abstract

This article examines how the criteria of clarity, brevity, credibility, and appropriateness, which are rooted in classical rhetoric, can manifest in musical works. It explores the analogy between the arts of music and storytelling, focusing on non-textual aspects of narration, such as topics or fabula. Additionally, based on Anthony Savile's definition of beauty, a new perspective on this value is introduced in the context of musical works.

Keywords

Beauty of Music, Musical Aesthetics, Philosophy of Music, Music and Rhetoric, Storytelling

1. Seeking Beauty in Storytelling

Storytelling is an intrinsic cultural practice. Far beyond mere communication, it proves indispensable for forging connections, constructing meaning, and establishing values and behavioral norms. As cognitive tools, narratives enable deeper comprehension of complex issues and facilitate the derivation of ethical insights. By capturing attention, stimulating imagination, and eliciting emotional engagement, storytelling—as an interactive practice—cultivates meaningful bonds between narrators and audiences (Gupta, Jha 2022, 606). Narratives contain plots, which do not have to be a matter of facts and do not necessarily serve the truth (Bal 2012, 228).

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Due to its advantages, storytelling is employed in numerous fields of human activity, including healthcare (Gray 2009), religious communication (Yassif 2016), brand identity development, political and ideological discourse (Salmon 2010), and education (Suzuki *et al.* 2018). Storytelling is frequently framed as an artistic practice, evoking immediate associations with the ancient *technē rhētorikē*. A comparison of the two concepts—the art of storytelling and *technē rhētorikē*—reveals that the latter is more systematic and encompasses a broader range of techniques than mere storytelling, which constitutes just one component of the art of persuasion (Podbielski 2013, 300).

Examining storytelling for components that might constitute an experience of beauty first requires careful consideration of the concept itself—one that does not appear to be storytelling's primary aim. As previously noted, narrative typically operates within a broader contextual framework it is meant to serve. Consequently, storytelling functions rather as an instrument of persuasion than as an object of contemplation (Hamelin *et al.* 2020). What, then, is the relationship between experiencing beauty or persuasion? Do they share any common ground?

The philosophical tradition has articulated two distinct conceptualizations of beauty since antiquity. The classical Greek understanding of *kalon* extended beyond aesthetically perceptible qualities to encompass characteristics of persons and actions—such as noble thoughts, virtuous characters, or laws (Plato 1958, 69-147)—effectively equating the beautiful with the good. In contrast, Sophists and Stoics adopted a narrower definition, reducing beauty to "proper proportion and pleasing coloration" or that which is "delightful to sight and hearing" (Cicero 1480, IV.13.30). The specific terms used were *symmetria* (dimensional proportionality) for visual beauty and *harmonia* (concordant arrangement) for auditory beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1976, 137).

According to the Great Theory initiated by the Pythagoreans, beauty consists of proper proportion and harmonious arrangement of parts, which in music manifests through temporal relationships between sounds—such beauty could be expressed mathematically. For the Greeks, the quest for perfect proportion represented not just an attainable ideal, but a bounded intellectual project—one that yielded definitive *nomoi* (laws) and *kanon* (measures), which they considered the highest aesthetic standards (Tatarkiewicz 1976, 142).

Plotinus expanded classical theory by acknowledging the beauty of simple, noncomposite entities—such as stars or light. Moreover, he located beauty's origin in the "illuminating" soul (Tatarkiewicz 1976, 143). This

conceptual framework persisted through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, with *claritas* joining proportion in definitions of beauty. Simultaneously, the enduring Great Theory rejected *claritas*, maintaining instead that beauty consisted solely of "moderation, form, and order" (Tatarkiewicz 1976, 145).

Theoretical developments in subsequent centuries elaborated or reconfigured these foundational approaches to beauty (as perfection, expression, etc.) until the concept reached a state of crisis—or more accurately, until scholarly attention shifted decisively toward theories of art and aesthetic experience. By the twentieth century, beauty's centrality in art had significantly eroded, supplanted by shock as the dominant aesthetic category—an effect achievable even through deliberate deployments of ugliness (Tatarkiewicz 1976, 167).

Kant's subjectivist approach to beauty, while historically influential, appears limited in its capacity to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding this value. In seeking objective foundations of beauty, one cannot limit the inquiry to individual experiences and the majority judgments derived from them. The justification of beauty should be grounded both in its definition and in the object deemed beautiful. A precise yet cautious definition that allows for further exploration of beauty is the one proposed by Anthony Savile, who defines beauty as "a harmony between the way art shapes a sensory representation, in accordance with the requirements of a higher purpose, within the aesthetic constraints it adopts" (Savile 1983, 207). This perspective extends Kant's understanding of pleasure in beauty as a harmony between subject and object by incorporating Wittgenstein's emphasis on the feeling that something is "successful"—that is, as it ought to be (Savile 1983, 205).

In the context of the issue discussed in this article, an immediate question arises: how can this understanding of beauty help identify what is beautiful in both storytelling and music? In light of Savile's definition, a beautiful story could be understood as one that, by shaping a quasi-sensory (imaginative) representation, fulfills the requirements of its overarching purpose within its adopted aesthetic (formal) constraints. Returning to the earlier question of whether beauty and persuasion share common ground, within the framework of the definition given by Savile, one could argue that beauty may enhance the persuasive effect of a story, making it more successful. This leads to yet another question: what must be done to make a story successful?

2. Storytelling as an Equivalent of *Technē Rhētorikē*

Narratives have accompanied humankind since prehistory. Oral traditions gave rise to written mythologies and sacred texts; stories created and transmitted across generations reside in consciousness and shape collective memory, simultaneously unifying groups and defining cultural boundaries. Some narratives serve didactic purposes, others construct identity and belonging, while still others provide entertainment and pleasure. Storytelling familiarizes humans with the world and with fundamental human experiences, such as birth, love, and death (Pawlak 2000, 127-138).

In the context of storytelling, narratives serve as a tool for sharing and accumulating human knowledge and experience, while also functioning to achieve persuasive objectives, such as convincing someone to adopt a particular political stance or choose a specific shampoo brand (Boldosova 2020, 122-134). This defined framework of storytelling directly corresponds to what *technē rhētorikē* was, as its texts provide information that can serve as guidelines for crafting effective narratives.

According to Theon of Alexandria, a narrative—unlike a fable—must concern itself exclusively with facts or probable events. Its key elements include: the person, the action, the time, the place, the manner, and the cause of events (Theon of Alexandria 2013, 75).

The person refers to the protagonist of the narrative, defined by their background, social status, age, stage of life, distinctive physical and temperamental traits, personal values, and specific motivations for their actions. The action may be "great or small, dangerous or safe, possible or impossible, easy or difficult, necessary or unnecessary, beneficial or harmful, just or unjust, honorable or disgraceful" (Theon of Alexandria 2013, 79). The narrative should be situated in time, with reference to other events (e.g., causes) beyond those directly recounted. While good practice involves highlighting significant moments and their chronological sequence, the structure itself may vary in how it arranges the beginning, middle, and end of events. The place should also be described—whether through geographic, social, or environmental features—depending on which elements are necessary for clarity and persuasive effect. The manner pertains to how the action was carried out: whether it was voluntary, deliberate, necessary, and overt—or conversely, coerced, unintentional, unnecessary, and concealed. Finally, the cause of events encompasses the reasons and motivations behind the actions taken, influenced by specific circumstances and psychological states—such as strong emotions, anger, an impulse of compassion, and the like.

It is worth supplementing ancient knowledge about narrative structure with contemporary narratological reflection, which places plot at its center. Here, plot is understood as the configuration of interrelated events that together form a coherent whole. Its function is examined both in relation to other events and within the broader narrative. Crucially, plot is not the text itself but rather a meaningful structure that precedes it (Rosner 1999, 7-15). Phenomenological approaches similarly emphasize that narrative consists of pre-linguistic meaningful structures that precede both text and discourse. Narrative serves as a framework for organizing human temporal experience (Carr 1986, 31). Moreover, this structure is not limited to fables or literary works but—perhaps most importantly—constitutes a temporal sequence of events that provides a meaningful framework for human experience and action (Bruner 2002). It is "the medium through which the process of understanding unfolds" (Rosner 2002, 130), even outside the context of storytelling's acts. In everyday life, narrative plays a crucial role in establishing coherence in human actions and identity, as well as in shaping both selfhood and the world (Grzegorek 2003, 209). Within this framework, a successful narrative is one that is complete, coherent, capable of constructing both a protagonist and a world—where the previously outlined storytelling elements undoubtedly prove essential.

Clarity refers to the intelligibility of the subject matter. Its foundations lie in both the object of representation and the narrative style, which—as narratology has established—must align with human modes of experience and action. This means depicting not only what happens but also how it occurs and why. The object of representation should be cognitively accessible—that is, it must "not deviate from common awareness of the subject" (Theon of Alexandria 2013, 81). When multiple elements require exposition, they should be presented sequentially and comprehensively to avoid the need for later revisitation. Clarity also demands judicious use of digressions, which should be temporally limited and serve as respites for the audience rather than misleading distractions from the core subject. Additionally, it necessitates avoiding obscure or ambiguous expressions—such as neologisms, archaisms, or amphibologies (i.e., syntactically ambiguous phrases)—as they undermine comprehension (Theon of Alexandria 2013, 82-83).

Brevity can be achieved by including only essential facts while omitting all unnecessary elements, both in narrative style and content. One should avoid clichés, pleonasms, and elaborate phrases where a single word would suffice. However, excessive conciseness must be avoided, as it risks appearing crude or simplistic. Importantly, conciseness should never come at the expense of clarity (Theon of Alexandria 2013, 85).

Credibility is achieved through the use of linguistic forms appropriate to specific characters, descriptions free from excessive extraordinariness, and the emphasis on cause-and-effect relationships. A credible narrative should also explain the causes of events and address any issues that may raise doubts.

The above principles should be adjusted to one another to best align with the subject matter, the speaker's intent, the context of the statement, and the audience's characteristics. Adhering to these considerations follows the principle of appropriateness (*aptum*), which takes precedence over all other principles and determines the ways in which they are implemented.

Since storytelling is a form of narration embedded in the context of persuasion, it is essential to consider its persuasive elements, which can be traced back to Aristotle's three modes of appeal: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* encompasses the speaker's credibility and reputation beyond the immediate act of narration. *Pathos* refers to the emotional appeal—everything that contributes to eliciting a specific emotional response from the audience. *Logos* pertains to the logical content of the argument, focusing on the subject matter of the discourse itself (Aristotle 1988, 1365a). Additionally, Theon of Alexandria identifies further rhetorical devices that contribute to the effectiveness of a narrative, including moral resonance (*epiphonein*), *topos*, *ekphrasis*, *prosopopoeia*, characterization, and anecdote.

The above recommendations pertain to the process of crafting a narrative intended for oral delivery. In oratory performance, prosody and vocal emphasis play a crucial role, as does the real-time management of the audience's attention and emotions. Contemporary storytelling experts advise:

> Speak directly to the listeners, break eye contact with the audience only when you want them to focus on what you are looking at, gently encourage them to engage with the story rather than pressuring or demanding their attention, take your time, speak with diaphragmatic support, maintain natural gestures and posture, and use words to create vivid mental imagery (Negro, Burns 2010, 98).

3. Narrative Elements in Musical Composition

While narrativity is conventionally understood as a fundamental attribute of storytelling, its potential applicability to musical composition warrants critical examination. Traditional narratological frameworks define narrative as a temporally organized sequence of events progressing toward resolution or *telos*. Elements of storytelling can be woven into music through dynamics, formal structure, and emotional expression.

Music has a temporal organization and directional movement, much like literary narration. Heinrich Schenker pointed out that, like life, music consists of movement toward a particular direction—there is tension and resolution, acceleration and deceleration, changes in direction, and unexpected twists. The sonata form, with its exposition, development, and recapitulation, can serve as an example of a narrative structure in which the musical theme is introduced, developed, and ultimately returns in a transformed form (Cook 2007, 63-88).

According to Mieczysław Tomaszewski (2017, 200-213), music can be categorized into autotelic narration, where the music expresses itself and all its meanings refer to the internal structure of the compositions, or topoidal narration, which is meaningful, through sound expresses something beyond music. Four basic types of topoidal musical narration can be identified: explicit, implicit, confidential, and secret.

1. Explicit narration—understanding the message does not require additional knowledge. It occurs in two variants: colloquial, obvious in its delivery of general content, or specific, characterized by grandeur and emphasis.
2. Implicit narration—understanding the message is possible through knowledge of a broader historical and cultural context. It comes in four variations. Metonymic implicit narration refers to the substitution of a literal element with something objectively related in meaning (e.g., instead of singing a song, the melody itself is introduced). Metaphorical narrative is one where the structure resembles something external to the music. Allegorical narrative requires the listener to be familiar with obvious cultural conventions and sensory details that illustrate abstract concepts. The final variation of implicit narration is symbolic, which demands not only knowledge of conventions but also the use of imagination. Its meanings are generally vague and ambiguous.
3. Confidential narration—has an elitist character in the sense that understanding its meanings is only possible for a limited group. It appears in the form of diary or confessional narration. The first one is a record of personal experiences and impressions, often autobiographical in nature. The second has a similar character but is directed toward someone, such as a loved one.
4. Secret narration—can take the form of either concealed or enigmatic narration. Concealed narration employs some form of cipher, such as numerological references, while enigmatic narration appears to have some "program" that, however, is not revealed by the composer (Tomaszewski 2017, 200-213).

It has already been explained how narrativity, a typical feature of storytelling, is introduced in music. However, what about the presence of characteristic elements of narration?

According to Edward Cone, music involves a "virtual person" or a "virtual agent" (Cone 2020, 2-5). The narrator is the persona of the composer, who may or may not also be the protagonist of the narrative, and the style of narration is always dramatic, potentially complemented by a particular performance (Cone 2020, 2-5). As Cone points out, this relationship is most easily observed in vocal music, where the protagonist is often the lyrical subject, which could be embodied by a vocalist.

Anthony Newcomb notes that while listening to music, one can recognize action, tension, and dynamics similar to those found in storytelling. He points to the existence of archetypes of plot—various configurations of actions and intentions; these archetypes are conceptual rather than verbal. They are more temporal than spatial and inform us about transformations and sequences in musical work. Understanding this structure is a cultural competence (Newcomb 1992, 119), and the work of music theorists throughout the centuries has been the search for these constant components within particular musical formal structures, such as ritornello or sonata (Newcomb 1987, 165).

Jean-Jacques Nattiez critically comments on this approach to music, arguing that the art of sounds is incapable of using the past tense and lacks a subject (Nattiez 1990, 240-257). The first objection can be countered by asserting that music, during its progression, in some sense creates a past. For example, sonata form consists of exposition, development, and recapitulation, with the latter two being strongly connected to the preceding sections in a way that builds upon what has come before: certain parts of works have precursors that significantly determine the shape of what follows. Meanwhile, the absence of a subject appears debatable from the perspective of the concept of immersion, which, if accepted, suggests that the persona is the listener, with their own world of experiences, completing the narrative during the act of listening.

In addition to the person and action, a narrative also involves time and place. In the case of music, time is not only the medium in which the piece exists, but also a way of organizing sonic events. Similar to literary storytelling, music involves tension between moments of silence and sound, between the introduction of a theme and its development and climax. Space in music, on the other hand, can be created through texture, dynamics, and instrumentation. In symphonic works, the sound layer creates the illu-

sion of spatiality—for example, through contrasts between sections of the orchestra, reverberations, and stereophonic effects. Causality in music is based on the relationship between tension and resolution, which arise from harmonic and rhythmic dependencies (López 2017).

4. The Beauty of the Art of Sound: A Redefinition Based on the Characteristics of a Successful Story

Various types of significant narratives in music have been identified, such as topoidal narratives: explicit, implicit, confidential, and hidden, along with their subtypes, including colloquial and specific, metonymic, metaphoric, allegorical, and symbolic, as well as the diary and confession narrative forms, and hidden or enigmatic narratives. Analogies between storytelling and musical works have also been drawn. Additionally, it was possible to identify the characteristics and components of storytelling that determine whether the artwork as a whole is beautiful (in the sense defined in the first part of this article). These include clarity, brevity, credibility, appropriateness, the content of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, as well as a set of recommendations related to the performative aspect of storytelling, such as posture, gestures, and audience attention management. The next step is to answer the question of whether some or all of these criteria and components of beauty can also be identified in musical works.

1. Clarity, in the context of the theory of beauty, is understood differently than when referring to storytelling. This criterion, understood as the comprehensibility and organization of the message, can most closely apply to explicit narration and certain types of implicit narration, such as metonymic and allegorical narratives, which do not require significant effort or initiative from the recipient.
2. Brevity, which means that every element of the narrative serves a function and its presence is justified for some reason, can also be expressed in music through restraint in ornamentation and the avoidance of incidental and trivial musical turns.
3. Credibility in music is built upon its ability to evoke specific emotions in listeners, which can be guaranteed through established and conventionalized motifs (Meyer 1974, 323), fitting into the criteria of allegorical narration, or through individual, specific musical expressions (Guczalski 2002, 218), which align with the characteristics of a diary narrative. Credibility is a value that can be present both in the musical idea itself, as written in the score, and in its realization in performance. Interpreta-

tion, whether of a vocal or instrumental piece, may fail to evoke the intended emotions, or may evoke unintended emotions. A case in point for a lack of credibility is Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, particularly the oddly joyful "Quae moerebat et dolebat," whose text reads: "How she suffered and grieved, the Loving Mother, when she saw her child in the throes of death."

4. Appropriateness (*aptum*), understood as the mutual adjustment of all components of a work, can manifest in music in two primary ways: first, as internal consistency or alignment with the composer's intent; and second, as compliance with the requirements of musical form or the historical context of music (e.g., when reconstructing works originally written for historical instruments). It is easy to imagine both positive and negative realizations of these conditions—for instance, in funeral songs. However, the principle of appropriateness may be violated in one sense while upheld in another. This is exemplified in Chopin's *Scherzo in B minor*, where, despite the scherzo form traditionally being light and joyful, the composer referred to his work as an "infernal banquet" and composed it in that infernal style, thereby maintaining internal consistency. Moreover, by exploring, bending, and transforming established principles, artists can create something new. Such innovation often breaks with appropriateness in relation to form and, as a result, may be met with misunderstanding or rejection by the audience.
5. *Ethos*, in the context of storytelling, refers to the credibility of the speaker that extends beyond the immediate speech. In music, this concept may be extended to the image of the composer and the extra-musical values their art is intended to convey. A vivid example is Richard Wagner, whose artistic legacy is inseparable from his anti-Semitic ideology (Stelmaszyk 2016, 127-137). In light of the criteria of beauty discussed in this text, one must consider whether the creator's life renders their artistic message trustworthy—whether their values, judgments, and emotions align with the work. Following this reasoning, one might argue that the author of a beautiful work should also be ethically credible.
6. *Pathos* encompasses all means employed to elicit a specific emotional response from the listener. Considering pathos as a component of artistic beauty is compelling for two reasons: first, it links emotions with values; second, it shifts the perspective on music from the dichotomy of "absolute" versus "referential" (Przybysz 2013, 329). It introduces the idea that certain formal elements are designed to evoke emotions, which, according to Hanslick, constitute the highest aesthetic value in music—namely, beauty (Hanslick 1903, 17-18).

7. *Logos* applies not only to topoidal, meaning-making narration but also—perhaps more importantly—to autotelic narration. If *logos* represents the logical and rational dimension of a work, it can be identified in the musical idea itself, its structure, and its function within the whole. An illustrative example is Tarasti's semiotics, where musical discourse is a logical process shaped by musical time and space. These dimensions are influenced by modalities such as intention, experience, judgment, and attitudes toward expression. These modalities are then assigned to musical events—for instance, the will "to be" should be expressed through movement directed toward a specific point in musical space, such as the tonic (Tarasti 1985, 97-115).

5. Searching for the Musical Beauty through Seven Components

Seven factors have thus been identified, whose interaction and mutual alignment enable the formulation of an objective, argument-supported thesis regarding the beauty of a musical work. These factors—claritas, brevitas, credibility, appropriateness, *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—serve as analytical tools. It is worthwhile to demonstrate how identifying these elements can assist in determining whether the value of beauty, as specifically defined in this text, has or has not been realized in a given musical composition.

Table 1. Criteria for Evaluating the Beauty of a Musical Work

Criterion	**Description**	**Guiding Questions**
Claritas (Clarity)	Clear and comprehensible musical ideas and structure. Clarity may be considered in terms of overall form, melody, harmony, and texture.	Is the main musical motif easily perceptible? Does the musical narrative allow the listener to follow its progression without confusion? Does the texture contribute to or hinder the clarity of the listening experience? In what ways does the musical texture enhance or obscure clarity? Is the narrative explicit or implicit (metonymic, metaphorical, allegorical, symbolic)?

		If implicit, what devices are used to ensure comprehensibility?
Brevitas (Conciseness)	Avoidance of unnecessary elaboration; justification for each element's presence. Avoidance of trivial or redundant musical gestures	Can any superfluous elements be identified—those whose presence is not justified? Are there digressions? If so, are they warranted, and do they disrupt the coherence of the work? Is the conciseness pushed too far, thereby simplifying or distorting the intended message?
Credibilitas (Credibility)	The ability of a composition and/or performance to elicit specific responses in the listener through conventional motifs or distinct expressive means.	Does the music sound convincing and sincere? Are there elements that undermine its credibility (e.g., excessive virtuosity inappropriate to the context)? Does the music seem inconsistent with its intended meaning? Is there a mismatch between musical expression and text (in vocal or vocal-instrumental works)? Does the work respect its broader context (e.g., tone appropriate to function)? Is the sequence of musical events justified?
Aptum (Appropriateness)	Alignment between form and content (internal appropriateness), as well as suitability to broader contexts: occasion, genre, cultural setting, chosen convention, and the stance toward it.	Are instrumentation, tempo, dynamics, and style suitable for the intended purpose? Does the piece conform to or creatively transform genre conventions? Is there coherence between form and content?

Ethos (The ethos of the composer/performer)	The image of the creator and/or performer extending beyond the immediate context of the composition or performance.	Does the personality or reputation of the composer (or performer) positively influence the listener's perception (e.g., through widely recognized esteem)? Does any aspect of the creator's or performer's biography or character seem at odds with the message of the piece? Does the lyrical or musical message (e.g., via quotation) raise ethical concerns?
Pathos (Emotion)	The capacity of music to evoke feelings, emotions, and internal experiences in the listener.	What emotional or imaginative responses does the piece evoke? Are these responses cohesive and engaging? How are emotional dynamics realized in the work? How does the piece handle the build-up and resolution of tension? What is the final emotional impact (what is the listener left with)? What is the tone of the musical thought (elevated, humorous, etc.)?
Logos (Logic, Thought)	Logical organization and internal coherence of the musical work.	Are the individual sections interconnected and causally related? Is thematic development convincing? Is the musical narrative coherent? Does the progression of the work follow a logical path? Is there a clear direction and resolution? How is musical space structured (e.g., harmony, texture)?

Conclusion

In reconsidering the question of musical beauty through the lens of storytelling and rhetorical tradition, this paper has argued for a redefinition of aesthetic value that is both structurally grounded and philosophically nuanced. Drawing on classical concepts such as *claritas*, *brevitas*, *credibilitas*, and *aptum*, as well as Aristotelian appeals—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—the analysis has demonstrated that musical compositions, like narratives, may be assessed not merely in formal or emotional terms, but through their capacity to fulfill a higher aesthetic purpose. By adopting Anthony Savile's definition of beauty as the successful harmonization of sensory form and purposive structure, it becomes possible to trace meaningful parallels between storytelling and music, even in non-verbal or abstract contexts.

This approach enables an evaluative framework that balances objective analysis with subjective resonance, allowing for a discussion of beauty that avoids reduction to personal taste or cultural convention. Ultimately, the beauty of music—like that of narrative—lies not only in its form or content, but in its capacity to shape meaning, evoke experience, and fulfill the aesthetic constraints it embraces. It is in this interplay of structure, intent, and expression that music tells its most compelling stories—and reveals its deepest beauty.

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Rhythms of the Sublime: Artistic Arrhythmia and the Narrative Geometry of Beauty in Esiaba Irobi's Dramaturgy

Abstract

This article theorises artistic arrhythmia as a collapse of rhythm between form and social commitment in African drama. Using the critical discourse analysis of Irobi's *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Nwokedi*, and drawing on the aesthetics of the sublime and committed art, this argues that beauty arises when ethical urgency and artistic craft pulse together, offering a new lens for postcolonial theatre.

Keywords

Artistic Arrhythmia, Beauty, Narrative Rhythm, Commitment, The Sublime

Introductory Discourse

For centuries, beauty held a privileged place in the philosophical triad of truth, goodness, and beauty, a value conferred upon art for its capacity to elevate, harmonise, and delight. Yet in the aftermath of modernism and the political urgencies of the twentieth century, beauty has become both marginal and contested. In its place, originality, provocation, rupture, and political relevance have risen as dominant aesthetic currencies. Particularly in the domain of drama, debates persist around whether the playwright should prioritise artistic fidelity or yield form to social function. The result is a contemporary theatrical landscape marked by tension between aesthetic autonomy and ideological urgency: a dynamic that Dalia Saleh Farah (2025)

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identifies within decolonial performance practices in MENA, and that Kennedy C. Chinyowa (2024) explores through the aesthetics of play in African theatre for development. This article reopens the debate through the lens of artistic arrhythmia, a term coined here to describe the disruption or imbalance of aesthetic rhythm that arises when a dramatic work loses sync between its formal elegance and its ethical or social commitment. Like the human heartbeat from which the term draws inspiration, narrative form too depends on rhythm: not simply structural balance, but coherence between artistic expression and moral intent. When this rhythm collapses, when a play becomes didactic at the cost of craftsmanship or becomes hollow in the name of spectacle, it succumbs to what this study terms artistic arrhythmia.

This concept is explored through the dramaturgy of Esiaba Irobi, a Nigerian dramatist whose body of work engages aesthetic complexity and ideological resonance in equal measure. Irobi believes in the power of the theatre to inspire positive change in society. His plays are vessels for revolutionary sentiment or nationalist critique. Beyond that, his plays are highly wrought constructions where language becomes lyrical, form becomes polemical, and storytelling approaches the sublime. His dramaturgy grapples with what Adorno once described as the urgency of committed art and the risk of reducing art to propaganda (Adorno 1990). In resisting that reduction, Irobi seeks a rhythm: a balance between content and form, between sociological urgency and aesthetic elevation. Through his innovative narrative structures, poetic language, and integration of ethical and aesthetic concerns, Irobi has significantly contributed to contemporary African drama. His work demonstrates that theatre can achieve both artistic sophistication and social resonance, exemplifying the balance between form and ideological engagement.

Careful readings of *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Nwokedi* allow this article to chart the geometry of beauty in Irobi's work. It argues that each play dramatises, sometimes literally, the question of whether beauty in storytelling can be preserved amid ideological force. In *The Other Side of the Mask*, the question is staged as a polemic: a debate among characters over what constitutes the artistic standard. In *Nwokedi*, the narrative becomes elegiac, infusing its revolutionary content with emotional clarity and poetic rhythm. The analysis is grounded in aesthetic theories of the sublime (Longinus, Burke, Hugo), the ethics of commitment (Ghemawat, Agbasiere, Sartre), and African perspectives on narrative beauty and moral function.

The concept of the sublime, whether as rhetorical elevation, terror and awe, or emotional intimacy, offers a philosophical matrix through which beauty is seen and felt. It is through this felt rhythm, this alignment of ethical and artistic frequencies, that storytelling attains its highest aesthetic achievement. The article argues that storytelling, especially in postcolonial African drama, retains the power to be beautiful, not in spite of its political charge but because of its rhythmical and ethical precision. To this end, artistic arrhythmia is proposed as a critical tool for diagnosing an imbalance and reclaiming beauty as an aesthetic value grounded in equilibrium.

The primary research methodology adopted in this study is critical discourse analysis, which is qualitative in nature. In qualitative research, critical discourse analysis is essential for describing, interpreting, critiquing, and analysing social life as reflected in texts (McGregor 2010). Written texts like the plays of Irobi convey deeper meanings if we analyse the underlying meanings of the words therein. The analysis of underlying meanings is often helpful in interpreting issues, conditions, and events in such texts (Mogashoa 2014). Bearing in mind that this study is qualitative in nature and focuses on the latent contents of Esiaba Irobi's dramaturgy, critical discourse analysis was adopted to enable a detailed examination of both the manifest and underlying discourse, as well as events in the world of the selected plays. The data for this study is derived from primary and secondary sources. While the primary sources are the selected plays of Esiaba Irobi, the secondary sources are other published materials.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of beauty in storytelling demands reconsideration as a fluid rhythm between form and meaning. Central to this article's inquiry is the proposition that beauty can be understood as a narrative rhythm, a geometric alignment between artistic structure and moral or emotional resonance. This is not new to classical aesthetics. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, in his seminal meditations on beauty, insisted that beauty could manifest through "shapes, colors, and sounds" and also through "beautiful thoughts and customs" (1972, 165). By foregrounding thought, Tatarkiewicz opens up aesthetic value to ethical content and conceptual depth. Recent theorists extend this insight, emphasising beauty not as a static property but as a dynamic, relational, and affective force (Nehamas 2007; Ngai 2020). In African contexts, this resonates with work on *Ubuntu aesthetics*, which frames beauty as a communal rhythm rooted in relational values and shared ethical practice (Sidogi & Ndou 2021).

The sublime offers a productive lens through which to understand this rhythm. In *On the Sublime*, Longinus positioned sublimity as an elevation of language capable of transporting audiences beyond mere persuasion into awe (Longinus 1974). Later theorists like Edmund Burke expanded this view, arguing that the sublime often evokes fear, terror, or pain, yet ultimately it yields a pleasure derived from distance (as cited in Skorin-Kapov 2016, 3). The tension between discomfort and elevation, violence and form, aligns with the dramaturgy of Irobi. In his plays, the sublime is not a lofty transcendence, but an embodied intensity; narratives that unsettle, provoke, and disturb, yet retain coherence and power. This embodied dimension of the sublime has also been recognised in recent performance theory, which highlights its affective excess and political charge in postcolonial theatre (Shaw 2017; Banerjee 2020).

Alongside the sublime stands the idea of "commitment," an aesthetic stance especially potent in postcolonial African contexts. Sartre's call for committed literature, where art must serve social consciousness, echoes in the ideological expectations placed upon African writers. Ghemawat (1991) defines commitment thus:

Commitment stands for the basic cast of mind, the genuine devotion of the writer to a cause and his convictions. It denotes a pledge, an involvement of the nature of a binding promise, implying a clear stand in a specific problem arising out of a deep consciousness of the various dimensions of the issues concerned. Similarly, Rabkin (1964, 14) summarises commitment as a term that refers to "the conscious involvement of the artist in the social and political issues of his age (in contrast to deliberate detachment or political noninvolvement), and the specific political obligations which the artist assumes in consequence of this involvement." For Agbasiere (2000), commitment requires writers to "contribute to the realization of the society's aspirations and to the solution of society's problem" (71). In "African Literature and Social Commitment," Agbasiere (2000, 71) asserts that "social commitment means that the writers get involved in the efforts to make society a better place to live in." In his foreword to Ojo Rasaki Bakere's *Once Upon a Tower*, Bamikunle emphasizes that the artist or writer "though he is dealing with experiences we see, hear of or read about every day, he has to present them in artistically significant way" (Bakare 2000, iv). From the foregoing, commitment in the playwright's art can be said to be of two kinds: social (or sociological) and artistic. While social commitment involves a writer's willingness to engage in structured attempts to address societal injustices—

as both citizen and a public figure who engages with the resources of their craft—artistic commitment refers to a writer's efforts to maintain artistic fidelity while carrying out their social responsibility.

Recent scholarship complicates this binary, showing how African dramatists navigate global aesthetic circuits and local responsibilities simultaneously (Adesokan 2011; Mbembe 2020). Moreover, *Beautiful Justice* (Pather 2025) demonstrates how aesthetic beauty itself can serve as a form of ethical restoration and transcendent connection, emphasising that moral responsibility and formal craft are not antagonistic but mutually sustaining.

It is this balance between form and force, style and stance, that constitutes the rhythm this paper seeks to map. What emerges, then, is a new reading of beauty: not harmony for its own sake, but a tension-laced rhythm between the ethical, the political, and the aesthetic. As recent analyses of community theatre aesthetics in post-apartheid South Africa suggest, aesthetic form is often mobilised to engage collective identities and justice-oriented struggles (Solanke & Bernard 2025). In this framework, artistic arrhythmia becomes a critical tool to diagnose when a narrative falls out of sync with its own potential.

Form as Polemic: Aesthetic Discord in *The Other Side of the Mask*

The Other Side of the Mask tells the story of Jamike, a gifted sculptor and university lecturer who grows increasingly disillusioned after his works are repeatedly dismissed in national competitions. Convinced that his art is misunderstood and undervalued, he becomes frustrated with the art establishment, and this tension ultimately culminates in violence when he murders a prominent critic, Dr. Animalu, as an extreme act of protest. The play probes the fraught relationship between personal artistic integrity and societal expectations, while also exposing the moral and social consequences of resisting established norms. Perhaps more than any other of Irobi's works, it constitutes a direct meditation on artistic standards, staging a polemic on what it means for theatre to be at once beautiful and socially committed. At its centre stands Jamike, whose aesthetic convictions are persistently challenged by the social imperatives articulated by Animalu and Njemanze. In this way, the drama becomes a battleground of competing artistic philosophies.

The take-off point of this exploration is in what Jamike calls the "artlessness of art" (Irobi 1999, 45). The implication of this is that when a work of art does not show an "artist's sensitivity to society and reality," that work of art is artless (Irobi 1999, 46). Being artless also means being without a regular rhythm. In other words, an artist through his work must show sensitivity to social and artistic realities. The work has to be relevant socially and artistically qualified to be called a work of art. Another angle to this all-important discourse is raised by Animalu who says "when there is too much art in a work of art, it becomes artificial" (Irobi 1999, 45). This means that a work of art could be artless or artificial. To make it pellucid, a work of art is "artless" when there is a total absence of commitment or as Animalu puts it when there is "no symptom of commitment" in the work (Irobi 1999, 40). Then, a work of art is "artificial" when commitment is one-sided or excessive. Having an excess of art in a work of art, as Animalu puts it, can be likened to a human heart beating too fast during an arrhythmia. This raises a pertinent question: can there ever be too much art in a work of art, or can commitment become excessive within a single artistic creation? To answer that, let us consider acting, which is an aspect of performative art. An actor is said to be overacting when, for example, they shout instead of speaking calmly, or laugh loudly when a subtle smile would suffice. Overacting is a widely recognized flaw in performance, and it illustrates how too much art in a work can disrupt its balance and effectiveness.

Repetition, for instance, is a valid artistic technique, but when overused in a literary or artistic work, it becomes problematic. Furthermore, when a work of art, in its attempt to be socially committed, seeks to address all the ills of society within a single piece—especially when these are incorporated into an overly broad thematic spectrum—it inevitably risks suffering from excessive social commitment. Such an overextension often depletes, or even completely undermines, its artistic integrity. This is because the attempt to treat too many themes simultaneously poses significant challenges to the artistic integration and effective communication of those themes. Animalu comments further on this when he contends that "Art is control; control is art" (Irobi 1999, 45). In other words, commitment in a work of art should be controlled and balanced; it should neither be one-sided nor excessive. A lack of such control produces an arrhythmia in the work. This problem of control leads directly to the question of artistic rules, of which the principle of control may be regarded as one. Artistic commitment—understood as the writer's effort to preserve artistic integrity while

fulfilling social responsibility—necessarily entails adherence to certain standards, rules, or methods. To claim that there are no rules, or that there ought to be none, is untenable. As Prof. Njemanze puts it, "No one man can pass judgement on another person's work of art" (Irobi 1999, 69). The implication of this position is that no one would be able to sit in judgment over another's work of art, whether like the judges in the *National Award in Sculpture* within the play, or in real-world contexts. It would further imply that examiners, even in academic settings, would lack any legitimate grounds to assess a student's literary or artistic work. Likewise, reviewers and editors would be deprived of the authority to critique or reject research manuscripts in the arts. Clearly, the creative enterprise cannot function effectively without certain rules and accepted standards. This is precisely the position of Animalu, who insists that despite the liberty an artist enjoys in the creative process, mastery of control remains essential: art is control, and control is art (Irobi 1999, 45).

Irobi addresses the problem of artistic arrhythmia in his plays by presenting artists as central characters. This explains why each of the two selected plays features an artist. In *Nwokedi*, the figure is Habiba, a painter, while in *The Other Side of the Mask*, it is Jamike, a fine artist—specifically, a sculptor. In the latter play, however, there are three artist-figures: Animalu, Jamike, and Njemanze. Of these, Jamike is portrayed as a practicing artist, whereas Animalu and Njemanze appear primarily as scholars. Irobi's reflections on artistic arrhythmia and the attendant question of commitment are dramatized through the debates between Jamike and Animalu on one hand, and Jamike and Njemanze on the other. For Animalu, proper artistic rhythm requires that every work of art must embody a measure of commitment and display "relevance to the struggle" (Irobi 1999, 40). He insists that for a work to achieve both artistic and social relevance, the artist must be actively engaged in society, remaining fully conscious of both artistic and social realities. As he argues: "the collective conscious chooses its symbols according to a certain pattern of awareness and consciousness impinged on it by the artist's sensitivity to society and reality" (Irobi 1999, 46). In other words, an artist who is inattentive to the realities of his society and to the artistic currents of his time cannot produce enduring work. Such an artist, in Animalu's words, "cannot but select redundant symbols, vaporous metaphors, misanthropic similes and impotent images" (Irobi 1999, 46). It is precisely this charge that Animalu levels against Jamike:

> […] an artist like you, whose mind has been hibernating like a mudskipper's, whose consciousness is sealed up like a snail in a shell, cannot but select redundant symbols, vaporous metaphors, misanthropic similes and impotent images. Images that neither stab the mind nor stir it into action. And I don't see why such a decadent artist should complain when he is neglected or refused laurels (Irobi 1999, 46).

Animalu further accuses Jamike of reducing his art to a mask, hiding behind it in a way that distances him from both societal and artistic realities. For Animalu, Jamike's work is non-committal, nebulous, and of vaporous quality. He likens it to Picasso's, whom he criticizes for lacking commitment to any populist cause (Irobi 1999, 43). Accordingly, he categorizes Jamike's productions as prime examples of artistic arrhythmia, or what he terms "decadent art" (Irobi 1999, 42). He even associates Franz Kafka with this tendency, arguing that Kafka "lived a frozen life" and "suffered from perpetual ennui and timidity" (Irobi 1999, 42). Animalu's critique aligns with Sule Egya's view that artistic arrhythmia stems from an artist's failure to "match craft with social commitment" (2007, 4). Jamike, however, rejects this charge, insisting that his works are not decadent or symptomatic of artistic arrhythmia but rather "milestones of greatness" (Irobi 1999, 41). He disputes the assumption that artistic rhythm should be equated with social commitment, maintaining instead that arrhythmia arises from the absence of artistic commitment. For Jamike, art possesses an ethereal ambience, a numinous essence that is both transcendental and sublime (Irobi 1999, 46). Consequently, he resists the notion that artists must always operate in strict reference to social or artistic realities. Rather, he contends, "the best an artist can do is to freeze a phase of history on the canvas of the mind of mankind" (Irobi 1999, 43). The task of interpretation, he insists, belongs to society: it is the world that must "identify and interpret that reality, exhume its beauty or ugliness, and if they can, change it" (Irobi 1999, 43). Jamike thus concludes that true artistic commitment is not fidelity to external standards, whether social or aesthetic, but fidelity to the standards artists set for themselves. Each artist, he argues, must remain true to their own vision, chiseling the essence of their soul into their work (Irobi 1999, 47). This perspective resonates with Egya's assertion that every dramatist "must adopt a personal trope, an engaging craft" (2007, 3). Yet, while Egya's comment is directed specifically at dramatists, Irobi (through Jamike) extends the principle to all artists.

What Irobi achieves here is brilliant: he constructs the debate as drama itself. Rather than merely narrating an argument, he stages it, employing characterisation as a mode of conceptual positioning. The result is at once

rhythmic and dissonant. Jamike's speeches, rich in rhetorical flourish and literary allusion, echo Longinus' vision of the sublime. By contrast, Animalu's lines are clipped, direct, and at times didactic. The play oscillates between these registers, never resolving their tension. Yet this irresolution is not a flaw but a feature: it constitutes a deliberate arrhythmia, compelling the audience to confront competing modes of representation. In this sense, the "other side of the mask" operates metaphorically, exposing the fracture lines between aesthetics and ideology. The brilliance of the play lies in its ability to dramatise this fracture without collapsing into either pole. It becomes neither propaganda nor pure formalism; rather, it wavers, sways, and pulses with discursive energy.

Elegy and Balance: Moral Rhythm in *Nwokedi*

> FINGESI: What are you painting?
> HABIBA: A beach...
> FINGESI: And the sea?
> HABIBA: The deep blue Sea.
> FINGESI: The waves are high. Is there a storm?
> HABIBA: There are always storms at sea.
> FINGESI: And the beach? Why is it painted red?
> HABIBA: Your guess is as good as mine.
> FINGESI: And these? Stakes?
> HABIBA: Yes. Stakes.
> FINGESI: Why stakes.
> HABIBA: Your guess is as good as mine.
> FINGESI: The white waves are washing the red shore.
> HABIBA: Like a tiger's tongues lapping a zebra's blood.
> FINGESI: Your paintings are always macabre. Why?
> HABIBA: What I paint are the terrains of my mind.
> FINGESI: The terrains of your mind?
> HABIBA: Which are the terrains of the land.
> FINGESI: And the Sea? You are always painting the Sea.
> HABIBA: The Sea is Life...
> FINGESI: How is the Sea Life?
> HABIBA: The Sea is made of water. Water is primal to man. The sea in all its moods reflects the Life of man. One moment it is calm, serene, blue and peaceful. And the other? Violent, furious, murderous, savage and foaming at the corners of his mouth [...]
>
> (Irobi 1991, 35)

The dialogue above lies at the heart of the discourse on artistic arrhythmia in the play *Nwokedi*. The play follows Nwokedi Junior, a young man returning from National Youth Service, whose rebellious nature foreshadows his unwillingness to conform. On arriving home, he discovers that his twin sister and her children have been murdered in a ritual orchestrated by her husband, Senator Arikpo, in pursuit of political power. While his father obsesses over reclaiming political influence and his mother deceives him with claims of support, Nwokedi plots revenge. During the sacred Ekpe festival, when tasked with performing the traditional sacrifice, he substitutes Arikpo for the ritual ram. In the climactic act, Nwokedi also kills his father, who attempts to protect Arikpo, before completing the sacrifice. The play ends in a dramatic convergence of violence, justice, and ritual symbolism.

The dialogue that opens this section is between two corps members serving and lodging with Nwokedi. Habiba is the artist in this world—that is, the world of the play. She is a painter, and like Jamike, the sculptor in *The Other Side of the Mask*, she demonstrates an identifiable attitude toward art. In the dialogue, Fingesi's observation about Habiba's paintings is captured in the line: "Your paintings are always macabre" (Irobi 1991, 35). This tells us much about Habiba's art. When Fingesi asks why her paintings are always macabre, she replies that what she paints are the terrains of her mind. Fingesi's observation can also be understood as his evaluation of Habiba's work. Given the meaning of the word *macabre*—denoting something disturbing or depressing and connoting something extremely unpleasant—his remark may be interpreted as a negative judgment. It also suggests that her art lacks any trace of social commitment. Habiba therefore defends her work, establishing both its relevance and the nature of the social responsibility it embodies.

She first confirms that she is always painting the sea and explains that she does so because the sea is life. She elaborates further that the sea, in all its moods, reflects the life of man: moments of calmness, serenity, and peace that may, at any moment, be overtaken by violence, fury, and savagery. With this explanation, Habiba makes it clear that her art mirrors reality, presenting life as it truly is. Her association of the sea with water, and of water as primal to humanity, conveys the essence of her art. For Habiba, presenting the reality of life to society is one way of being socially responsible as an artist. She asserts her commitment as an artist and condemns Fingesi with the following words: "the tragedy of your life is that in your youth you are committed to nothing. Nothing! Except perhaps food, sex and alcohol" (Irobi 1991, 49-50).

With the character of Habiba, Irobi explores the relationship between artistic commitment and social responsibility, as well as the connection between commitment and sublimity. Habiba's painting conveys to society the fundamental truths about life's ups and downs, reflecting her social commitment. However, she does not communicate these truths in a straightforward or artless manner. Instead, she follows the long-established principle that artists should veil their social messages in artistic form, employing a personal trope. It is then the responsibility of the audience or interpreter to discern the meanings embedded in this artistic garb. Consequently, Irobi argues that an artist must not sacrifice the sublimity of art for a passive or inattentive audience under the pretext of social commitment. Doing so risks creating an artistic disharmony that can ultimately lead to the "death" of art.

Irobi's discourse on commitment, sublimity, and artistic arrhythmia in the play operates on three levels: the perspective of painting or the fine arts, which has already been discussed above; the perspective of music, which is examined here; and the perspective of the traditional mask, which is linked to traditional African theatre. The second perspective, that of music, is illustrated in a dialogue between Habiba and Fingesi. Habiba does not consider Fingesi's song worthy of attention. Consequently, she returns to her painting, which she had paused in her enthusiasm to listen to a song by a supposedly 'talented' music graduate. This return occurs after she accidentally spills some paint on Fingesi, who, in the course of singing, bumps his waist against hers. Both the spilling of paint and her resumption of painting signal her disapproval of the song, the accompanying music, and the style of dance or performance that accompanies it.

Another issue raised by Irobi through the dialogue between Habiba and Fingesi is also connected to Fingesi's song and musical performance. Here, the focus is on both the lyrics and the accompanying actions. Through these lyrics, Irobi interrogates contemporary hip-hop music, which is highly celebrated by today's youth. The lyrics of Fingesi's song in the play can be compared to those in popular Nigerian hip-hop tracks, such as Iyanya's "Your Waist," which repeatedly emphasizes the line: "all I want is your waist, your waist, your waist…" They can also be likened to some songs by the popular Nigerian musician Flavour, which include lines such as: "ukwu salambala na-adi m mma n'obi m o" ("a broad waist is what I desire in my heart") and "kpughee kpuchie" ("open then close," referring to a girl's private part). Similarly, the lyrics of a 2019 song by a rising artist in the industry state: "afulu m gi kenyie... ihe ibu n'ukwu dey make me to want to laa laa laa." This

lyric can be interpreted as a personification of the male sexual organ, in which the male organ speaks to the waist of a young girl, saying: "afulu m gi kenyie" ("I saw you and became erect").

Now, these are musical tracks or songs in the public domain, widely listened to and danced to by many young people in Nigeria. Beyond the songs themselves and their lyrics, the accompanying music videos often feature explicit dancing and erotic displays. This is reflected in Fingesi's song and performance in the play. His song is sexually suggestive, expressing a desire to engage with Habiba and portraying the virility of his manhood as capable of impregnating her with a single touch. Through this portrayal, Irobi interrogates the relevance of such music, highlighting its lack of social commitment and its minimal value to society. The critique aligns with broader discussions on African artistic aesthetics, such as those noted by Ravengai (2024), which emphasize the dismantling of colonial influences, the replacement of Western aesthetics with Afrocentric ones, and the promotion of moral values as integral to African art. This is part of what Irobi uses Fingesi to reflect.

Irobi uses Habiba's reaction to the song and performance to critique music that lacks meaningful social commitment and embodies nothing beyond the ordinariness of artless expression. This suggests that the art of music in Nigeria suffers from significant artistic arrhythmia, reflecting broader cultural decadence. Nigerian youths are, in turn, affected by this disharmony in the music industry. Consequently, young people like the character Fingesi experience the tragedy of being committed to nothing "except perhaps food, sex and alcohol" (Irobi 1991, 49).

The third issue raised in the dialogue between Habiba and Fingesi occurs in the second part of their exchange. Continuing the discourse on artistic arrhythmia from the perspective of music, Irobi, through Habiba, expresses a preference for classical music. While Habiba favors classical music, Fingesi prefers disco. This contrast highlights that individuals have unique preferences and tastes in art—and in life more generally. It underscores the subjectivity of beauty and the variation in what people consider good or admirable. However, Irobi emphasizes that one should not simply hold preferences or judge certain artworks as beautiful without reason or the ability to defend that judgment. This point is illustrated when Fingesi asks Habiba why she prefers classical music. In her response, Habiba provides a cogent rationale for her preference. Her answer goes beyond explaining her taste, extending to a reflection on what makes music great and sublime.

The last angle of the discourse on artistic arrhythmia in the play emerges from the perspective of the traditional mask and festival, which are linked to traditional African theatre. Here, Nwokedi and his attitude toward the Ekpe Masquerade reflect Irobi's discourse on the concept of artistic arrhythmia. The Ekpe Masquerade and festival, as presented in the play, are structured by Irobi to retain the rituals and cult status of the traditional Igbo masquerade and festival, rather than reflecting the transition from cult to theatre that has influenced masquerade performances since the advent of European missionaries and colonizers. However, some theatrical elements in Nwokedi's actions establish the connection to the discourse on artistic arrhythmia. For instance, before the festival, Nwokedi circles around Arikpo, making cannibalistic grimaces and pointing his matchet at him. When Somadina asks what he is doing, Nwokedi responds that he is "rehearsing someone else's tragedy" (Irobi 1991, 75). Nwokedi's approach to the festival and masquerade draws attention not only to the sacred dimensions of the event but also to the commitment required in traditional African drama and theatre. He rehearses as though preparing for a theatrical performance, ensuring that he delivers his best in the performance.

The idea of rehearsal is closely linked to the concept of artistic commitment. Similarly, the act of exchanging the sacrificial ram with Arikpo, to rid the community of the evil represented by him and his generation, reflects the notion of social commitment. Through Nwokedi's preparations and his use of the mask within the festival to address the socio-political problems of his people, Irobi emphasizes the need to combat artistic arrhythmia even within traditional African theatre, highlighting the importance of balancing social and artistic commitment.

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi achieves what *The Other Side of the Mask* only debates: he realizes an artistic rhythm that fuses form with moral force. The character of Habiba, in particular, embodies this equilibrium. As a woman entangled in both private grief and revolutionary violence, her presence infuses the narrative with emotional clarity and aesthetic grace. The narrative rhythm of *Nwokedi* is elegiac. In this play, Irobi demonstrates the kind of beauty that emerges from narrative geometry. Each scene builds upon the last with architectural precision, and the dialogue carries both thematic weight and lyrical texture. The revolutionary violence does not overshadow the characters' emotional lives; rather, it deepens them. Here, there is rhythm. Here, there is beauty in the precision of moral and artistic coherence.

Conclusion

Is there still a place for beauty in contemporary storytelling? This article contends that the answer is a qualified yes, but only if beauty is redefined. It can no longer be understood merely as symmetry or surface polish. In the world of postcolonial African theatre, beauty must emerge from rhythm—a rhythm of integrity in which artistic form and ideological substance move in concert. This is the heartbeat of the sublime. This is the rhythm of the ethical imagination. The dramaturgy of Esiaba Irobi offers a compelling case for this redefinition. Across his plays, we observe the consequences of balance and imbalance, of sync and arrhythmia. In *The Other Side of the Mask*, beauty is debated; in *Nwokedi*, it is achieved. These outcomes are not merely narrative effects but aesthetic arguments enacted through drama. The concept of artistic arrhythmia provides a critical vocabulary for understanding when and why beauty fails. It shifts the aesthetic question from "Is this play beautiful?" to "Does this play pulse with an ethical-artistic rhythm?" In doing so, it invites us to reclaim beauty as a radical alignment of structure, soul, and society. Irobi's work demonstrates that storytelling—especially when rooted in cultural memory, political urgency, and poetic vision—need not choose between commitment and form. It can, and must, find its beat. When theatre moves in rhythm with both art and world, it entertains and endures. This study thus contributes to aesthetic theory by proposing "artistic arrhythmia" as a diagnostic tool for balancing ethics and form, while extending debates on beauty in postcolonial dramaturgy beyond Eurocentric frameworks.

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Woman versus Automaton: Beauty and Choreostorytelling in *Coppélia*, a Dance Adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman"[1]

Abstract

Coppélia is a ballet about beauty, mostly in the way it is danced and in the choreolanguage it uses, namely the ballet technique. It is about the automaton Coppélia and the self-confident Swanilda, who rescues her fiancé Franz from magician Coppelius by revealing, among other things, that Coppélia is indeed an automaton and not a real woman. The ballet is loosely based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale "The Sandman." The methodology employed is composite and includes dance and adaptation studies.

Keywords

Ballet, Adaptation, Beauty, Choreostorytelling

Introduction

The two female protagonists in the 1870 ballet *Coppélia ou la fille aux yeux d'émail* (from now on *Coppélia*) are Swanilda, a woman from a village in Galicia, and Coppélia, an automaton believed to be toymaker and magician Coppelius's daughter.[2] They are introduced at the beginning of the ballet

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[1] An earlier version of this essay, in which beauty is not considered, was published on my dance history blog under the title *"From Gothic to Comic: Coppélia, a Glittering Dance Adaptation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'"*, www.adancehistory.blogspot.com/2016/02/from-gothic-to-comic-coppelia.html [accessed: 17 October 2025].

[2] In the libretto, Coppelius is called "old Coppelius," while in many subsequent versions he is called "Dr. Coppelius."

in a relational mode, in the sense that they are presented together, with Swanilda trying in vain to capture Coppélia's attention. At this stage of the choreostory, Swanilda thinks Coppélia to be Coppelius's daughter, who sits at a balcony in the act of reading a book, a clever *escamotage* to have her sit still. Swanilda "dances, she looks at her" (Nuitter 1870, 16), but in vain. Coppélia does not respond.

This scene also introduces one of the main themes in the ballet, that is, the question of ideal, artificial versus real beauty. Coppélia is admired especially by Frantz, Swanilda's fiancé, and this transforms her, to Swanilda's eyes, into her rival. The choreostorytelling through which the plot develops is particularly interesting, and it includes the choreography and, most of all, the ballet technique, which, as we shall see, has its own significant ties with the question of beauty.

Coppélia is a classical ballet famous for its comic tone and happy ending. It signposted the end of the Second Empire in France and, with that, an inevitable decline of ballet, which had started even before that (Guest 1974, 3). It was the result of the work of three affirmed figures: Arthur Saint-Léon, who created the choreography; Léo Delibes, who composed the music; and Charles Nuitter, who wrote the libretto. The premiere was given on 25 May 1870, with a seventeen-year-old *étoile*, Giuseppina Bozzacchi, who was at her debut. *Coppélia*, unlike many other nineteenth-century ballets, has a particularly self-confident protagonist, Swanilda. After discovering that Coppélia is an automaton, she rescues her fiancé Franz from the dark powers of Coppelius and finally marries him with the blessing of the whole community.

Coppélia is a dance adaptation of an 1816 Gothic tale, E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," where the protagonist is male and the outcome is tragic. Beauty is a fundamental part of this tale too, but it is paired with horror.

In this essay, I intend to analyse the question of beauty and choreostorytelling in *Coppélia*. As adaptation studies are often characterised by a comparative approach between texts (Hutcheon 2006, 6), I will first explore the notion of storytelling and beauty in "The Sandman"; then, I will move to specifying which *Coppélia* I am referring to when analysing the ballet, as this is not a simple question. After that, I will investigate the ballet's choreostorytelling and its ties with the concept of beauty.

The methodological tools I will employ are layered and mainly consist of dance, literary and adaptation studies, aesthetics, and cultural history.

Romantic Beauty in E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman"

As above mentioned, "The Sandman" is a tale of beauty and horror. It tells the story of Nathanael, a young man with a poetic soul, and of his obsession with the Sandman, who has haunted his mind since he was a child. Being unable to reconcile his obsession with everyday reality, he goes mad and commits suicide (Röder 2003, 23). It is a tale where the Gothic elements become internalised, as happened with the Romantic transformations of the genre: "in the period dominated by Romanticism, gothic writing began to move inside, disturbing conventional social limits and notions of interiority and individuality" (Botting 2014, 83). Beauty, as we shall see, has a lot to do with this shift.

However, beauty can also be found in the composite structure of the tale, which, as John M. Ellis has argued (1981, 1-18), is fundamental to understanding the plot. "The Sandman" opens with three letters in the first-person narrative. The first and third are by Nathanael, and the second is by his fiancée, Clara. Via this device, the reader is directly involved in the story.

In the first letter, Nathanael explains his obsession with the figure of the Sandman through a flashback. The Sandman is a bogeyman who populates night nursery rhymes and who "comes through the window and throws sand in wakeful children's eyes" (Warner 2000, 31). Nathanael's obsession begins during his childhood, when he came to associate the Sandman with the lawyer Coppelius, who, together with his father, used to make mysterious experiments. During one of these experiments, his father died, and Coppelius disappeared. Nathanael explains that Coppelius has reappeared under the name of Coppola, and he is again terrified and worried.

In the second letter, we find out that Nathanael has mistakenly sent his letter to Clara and not to Lothario, Clara's brother, as he had intended to do. We have a shift in perspective that also alerts the reader to the potential unfolding of the story. Clara answers the letter, trying to find a logic in Nathanael's dark visions by confining them to his own mind: "all the ghastly and terrible things you spoke of took place only within you" (Hoffmann 2004, 95), she asserts. Significantly, Nathanael calls her "dear angel" (Hoffmann 2004, 85), while she chooses to be his "guardian spirit" (Hoffmann 2004, 97), thus implying a different way of seeing things, where reason and common sense have principal roles. Nathanael seems to be affected by Clara's discourse, and in the third letter, again to Lothario, he is quieter. He also recounts his encounter with Professor Spalanzani's daughter, Olympia, who does not make a particular impression on him.

The interplay of different perspectives takes a metafictional turn when the narrator's voice is introduced, along with a discourse on how to begin stories. We have a third-person narrative, and the reader is directly addressed as "indulgent" (Hoffmann 2004, 99). The effect is that of waking the reader up to the artificiality of fiction, with the purpose of creating a critical distance between the reader and the text they are reading. It therefore pushes them to think and formulate their own ideas about the text in question. If, then, with the first-person narrative of the three letters, the reader is highly involved in the story and almost sympathising with the protagonist, with the introduction of the narrator's third-person narrative and of his digression on the problems inherent in the beginning of that same story, the reader is completely alienated and made aware of the dynamics underlying the act of writing itself. This effect seems to create a caesura within the story because, after the narrator's digression, we have a third-person narrative with dialogues and descriptions and, chronologically speaking, a more linear structure. Nathanael forgets his 'angel' Clara and falls in love with Olympia, who, in her empty passivity, embodies his ideal of beauty. When he discovers that she is an automaton, madness and death constitute his only alternatives.

The interplay between first- and third-person narratives combines the device of the epistolary novel with that of a supposedly omniscient narrator and brings the reader to pose significant questions such as "is it a fantastic tale? Is it serious or comic? Is it about a real world and real people?" (Ellis 1981, 4). When Nathanael speaks in his letters, we can only guess what is going on; we might think he is delusional. But when the narrator states some facts, like Nathanael's house burning down (Hoffmann 2004, 108), we can begin to see that there is some reality in Nathanael's writings. As John M. Ellis has pointed out, "Nathanael is not a delusional madman, as the first part of the story seems to allow […]: he is simply a human being, but never allowed to be one" (1981, 15).

Where does beauty come in in structural terms? It does come in through the composite structure, which has been defined as an "arabesque structure" (Scullion 2009, 2) in that it combines "apparently disparate narrative components" (Scullion 2009, 2). As Val Scullion has specified, "'arabesque,' in this context, means an apparent digression, the centrality of which is often revealed through a retrospective understanding of the whole text" (2009, note 12, 2). In this sense, beauty recalls Romantic beauty, as it "precisely consists in the lack of regularity" (Tatarkiewicz 2020, 148). We are not faced with proportion and measure, as was the case with the Great Theory of Beauty (Tatarkiewicz 2020, 134-139), but with inhomogeneity and asymmetry.

In this interplay between different perspectives, the readers may feel confused, but they are also implicitly invited to take an active role (Röder 2003, 20). Moreover, this is particularly the case if we consider the ambivalence of the characters' personalities. They are not constructed according to a binary structure, but rather merge into each other, blurring traditional boundaries between male and female, ideal and real, good and bad, and so on. This is particularly true of the two female protagonists, Clara and Olympia, woman and automaton, whose distinction is recurrently questioned.

Clara is presented through a patchwork of "points of view" (Kofman 1991, 135), where architects, painters, poets, and musicians praise her figure (Hoffmann 2004, 101-102). She is the object of artists' contemplation and, at the same time, is also quite self-assertive, especially when she refuses to listen to Nathanael's "mystical fancies" (Hoffmann 2004, 103). On the one hand, she appears to be the perfect example of domestic bliss; on the other, she is not willing to accept her role as future wife without expressing her point of view. To Nathanael, she is an angel, even though she calls herself his 'guardian spirit,' adding an almost masculine shade to the notion of woman as angel of the house. Furthermore, Nathanael calls her "lifeless accursed automaton!" (Hoffmann 2004, 106) when he cannot face her refusal to listen to his poems. That same automaton, in the guise of Olympia, will give him his narcissistic happiness.

In a reverse process, Nathanael literally infuses life into Olympia, who, to his eyes, becomes a real woman. When he first sees her, she does not make a striking impression on him; her eyes "had in general something fixed and staring about them" (Hoffmann 2004, 99). Once the weird Coppola, who so much resembles the evil Coppelius, sells him a pocket-telescope, his vision of things acquires a new dimension. Olympia becomes an attractive woman and the exclusive object of his desire. Through Coppola's pocket-telescope, he can see her in a different light, and he can fulfil his Pygmalionan wish of shaping her as his own ideal beauty. Her figure at the window hypnotises him; now he is "lost in contemplation of Olympia's heavenly beauty" (Hoffmann 2004, 110).

At the ball organised in her honour, Nathanael dances with her, he talks to her, he courts her, and in subsequent visits he even reads her many of his compositions, barely noticing that her only answer is the syllabic "Ah! Ah!" (Hoffmann 2004, 115). Olympia is then a real automaton who is transformed into a woman by Nathanael. At the same time, the narrator presents another way of perceiving her: that of the other participants at the ball. In spite of Olympia's perfect execution of a piano concert, of her impeccable pace

in dancing and singing, a consistent suspicion of her artificial nature is perceived by most of the people, who laugh at Nathanael's blind love (Hoffmann 2004, 114). This perspective is enhanced later on, when Siegmund, Nathanael's friend, attempts in vain to bring him to reason. Olympia is his real love, and Clara is completely forgotten.

Beauty informs the description of these two characters in an ambivalent manner. Nathanael, in his second letter, the one rightly sent to Lothario, says that Olympia is "perfectly proportioned" (Hoffmann 2004, 99). At this stage, she has not attracted his attention as much as she will in the subsequent pages. This element recalls the Great Theory of Beauty, "formulated during the Antiquity," according to which "beauty consists in the proportions of the parts" (Tatarkiewicz 2020, 134). Nathanael does not say she is beautiful, but mentions a crucial aspect of this theory. In this sense, we could implicitly say Olympia is beautiful.

The narrator, on his part, talks about Clara through the "perfect proportions of her figure" (Hoffmann 2004, 101-102), among other things. This would lead us to think she is beautiful too, but the narrator opens his remarks on Clara by stating that she "could not possibly be called beautiful" (Hoffmann 2004, 101), thus de facto questioning the Great Theory of Beauty. If, however, beauty is linked to what pleases, as Roger Scruton has argued on the platitudes regarding beauty (Scruton 2011, 5), Olympia becomes beautiful to Nathanael's eyes in the course of the tale. This other notion refers to Romantic Beauty, as "beauty is only a subjective impression" (Tatarkiewicz 2020, 148).[3]

Beauty in "The Sandman" is mainly treated through the Romantic idea of the concept, both in terms of structure and prose and plot and characters. We will find mostly elements of contrast in *Coppélia*.

Which *Coppélia*?

Gianandrea Poesio has pointed out that "the ballet by Arthur Saint-Léon was totally lost" (1993, 891) and that the "one version which has somehow become international standard reference […] was choreographed and produced by Nichlas Sergueyev, for the Vic-Wells ballet in 1933, being derived from the 1894 staging of the ballet in St. Petersburg, with choreography by

[3] The tale is quite complex, and its main theme is that of the eye, which has also been analysed by Sigmund Freud in his famous essay "The Uncanny" (1919). However, for reasons of space, and because the two female characters are more important in terms of the subsequent dance adaptation, I will not focus on this aspect.

Enrico Cecchetti" (Poesio 1993, 891). We have the 1870 libretto and Delibes's score, but not the 1870 choreography. We know from the libretto that it was a comedy in the form of ballet; we know the main structure, but not the steps and precise choreography.

Therefore, when we set out to analyse it, we need to take into consideration different sources from different periods of time and remember this aspect. For my analysis, I have consulted the 1870 libretto together with contemporary choreographic renditions, such as the 2019 Royal Ballet version, which credits Ninette de Valois as the producer and choreographer, after Lev Ivanov and Enrico Cecchetti. According to Poesio, Ivanov was never really "involved in the 1894 production of *Coppélia*," but he adds, "one would wonder if Cecchetti [...] was not acting under the artistic influence of Ivanov" (Poesio 1993, 892). This 2019 DVD features Marianela Nuñez as Swanilda, Vadim Muntagirov as Franz, and Gary Avis as Coppelius, and it is this version I refer to for my analysis. The director for the screen is Ross MacGibbon, and he alternates close-ups with long shots as the choreostorytelling develops. This DVD was also produced by the Royal Opera House.

Swanilda, *Coppélia*, the Ballet Technique and the Great Theory of Beauty

As a dance adaptation of a literary work, *Coppélia* highlights the shift between what Linda Hutecheon terms the telling and the showing mode (2006, 22-27), "the telling mode [...] immerses us through imagination in a fictional world" (2006, 22), while "the showing mode [...] immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual" (2006, 22). A fragment from Hoffmann's tale is quoted in the libretto (Nuitter 1870, 14) as a way to officially declare the ballet a dance adaptation of the tale itself.

When compared to "The Sandman", *Coppélia* emerges for the comic tone as well as for the self-assertive character of the protagonist. Sally Banes, comparing it to earlier Romantic ballets, attributes this shift to the historical and social changes which occurred in France throughout the nineteenth century. The Romantic age was a period of uncertainties while "the late 1860s were a time of prosperity, confidence, and expansion" (1998, 36). *Coppélia* is, then, to be seen in the light of a larger cultural context where the French middle-class is the ruling force and where theatre is given the principal function of entertainment. Along with ballet, operetta, "which satyrised and souffléd the tragic love plots of grand opera" (Banes 1998, 36),

fullfilled this function. At the same time, Banes adds, the institution of marriage was perceived differently, thus allowing the creation of more active female characters on stage (1998, 36).

Coppélia is a ballet divided into three parts, whether it is the two acts and three scenes of the 1870 version or the three acts of the 2019 DVD. It develops according to the "forward march" approach (Lamb 2008, 53), as it moves "forward in time in a linear fashion" (Lamb, 2008: 53). According to the synopsis of the DVD (Anonymous 2019), it starts on a day and ends the following evening. Here is a table with the main actions in the DVD (MacGibbon 2019):

Table 1. *Coppélia*'s Choreostorytelling

Sections	Main Actions
I The square of a little town	Swanilda looks at Coppélia—she waves at her and takes small bows to attract her attention; she also dances, but in vain. Franz looks at Coppélia—he takes bigger bows and throws a kiss at her; Coppélia replies with a mechanical kiss back. Swanilda watches the scene and gets angry at her boyfriend. Butterfly scene—Swanilda chases a butterfly; Franz captures it and kills it only to put it on his chest. Swanilda is disappointed. Mazurka—the peasants dance in a group of eight couples plus one leading couple, to which another couple is added towards the end. The Burgomaster announces a celebration for the donation of a bell to the town by the Duke, and that all betrothed couples will receive dowries. He asks Swanilda whether she will take part, but she says no with her arms stretched to the front and moved apart. Ballad of the ear of corn—Swanilda tests Franz's love with an ear of corn; if it rustles, Franz loves her, but the corn is silent. During this dance, she performs an arabesque penchée on pointe twice. Swanilda's six friends dance at the back. Swanilda's friends dance, and she joins in. Czárdás—the peasants dance in a group of ten couples; Franz starts the dance with another ballerina and then dances with them. Swanilda reconciles with Franz; they hug each other three times. It is now night time. Coppelius loses his house key—he is teased by six boys and drops his house key.

	Swanilda and friends enter Coppelius's house—one friend finds the key, and with Swanilda and the other girls they decide to enter. Coppelius returns home, realises he has lost his key, and finds the door open. Franz enters Coppelius's house as well—he arrives with a ladder and enters through a first-floor window.
II Coppelius's workshop	Swanilda and friends find Coppélia—they enter the workshop holding hands, find the closet where Coppélia is kept, and open it; Coppélia comes out sitting down and reading a book. Swanilda discovers Coppélia is an automaton—Coppélia is still; Swanilda touches her skirt, then puts her face close to Coppélia's chest and finds no heartbeat. She concludes she is an automaton and tells her friends. Dances of the automata—Swanilda and friends animate the other automata in the room. Swanilda hides inside Coppélia's closet—Coppelius arrives; all the girls escape except Swanilda. Franz arrives—he enters from a window; Coppelius fights with him and then decides to use him to bring Coppélia to life. Franz is drugged—Coppelius offers him a drugged drink; Franz falls asleep. Coppelius's 'magic'—Coppelius opens Coppélia's closet and consults his magic book to transfer life from Franz to Coppélia. Swanilda, disguised as Coppélia, stands up, moves her arms, takes steps forward, and moves her eyelashes. Valse of the automaton—Swanilda/Coppélia moves mechanically, mainly on pointe. Mirror scene—Swanilda/Coppélia moves more roundly; Coppelius gives her a mirror. She performs a turn in arabesque and an arabesque penchée, tries to wake Franz, takes the bottle with his drug, and runs around the room, arguing with Coppelius. Bolero—Coppelius teaches her a Spanish dance; Swanilda/Coppélia takes a fan and performs pirouettes. Gigue—Coppelius teaches her a Scottish dance; Swanilda/Coppélia wears a checked scarf across her torso and performs articulated feet and leg movements. Swanilda/Coppélia reveals her trick—she tears pages out of Coppelius's magic book, takes a sword from an automaton, and points it at Coppelius. Her friends arrive and animate all automata again. She shows the undressed body of Coppélia to Coppelius and Franz. It turns out Swanilda is the real beauty.

III The town square	The bell arrives, and a group of children dance around it. The Duke gives money to the betrothed couples, Swanilda and Franz, and Coppelius, who protests against Swanilda's trick. Valse of the Hours—group work of eight ballerinas. The Dawn—solo of one ballerina. The Prayer—solo of one ballerina. Work—group work of eight ballerinas. The married couples dance. Swanilda and Franz perform a pas de deux, during which Swanilda again dances an arabesque penchée. Their marriage is the main event of the evening. Final galop—the whole group dances together.

As the table shows, the first and third parts are choral parts, while the second part is more centred on Swanilda and Coppelius. This is the part that most closely resembles the gloomy atmosphere of Hoffmann's tale, even though comedy replaces tragedy. It is also the part where the choreostory-telling reaches its climax, with Swanilda disguised as Coppélia, an aspect which represents "the brilliant choreographic invention" (Guatterini 1998, 71) in the ballet.

This structure recalls the Great Theory of Beauty in that there is a certain kind of proportion, harmony, and symmetry. In addition to this, there is the choreolanguage through which the choreography is danced—that is, the ballet technique—which, as we shall see, has strong ties with the Great Theory of Beauty.

Comparing the ballet with the tale, we can say that where Hoffmann employed a complex structural arrangement, Saint-Léon, as well as de Valois and Cecchetti, chose to highlight the figure of the female protagonist and gave her quite an active role. Two considerations need to be made. One has to do with the way ballet is organised as a stage production. In a written text, an author recurs to first-, second-, third-, and omniscient-person narratives to show different perspectives; in ballet, this could be ascribed to the moment of dancing itself. In other words, we are given a different perspective when a character or a group of characters dance.

The second consideration has to do with the prominence of the female character. This is not an aspect derived from Hoffmann's text, as it was an established practice in Romantic ballet, during which men gradually lost their importance and women became the main figure (Guest 1974, 3). The reasons for this change are complex. The rise of the ballerina coincides with the rise of the male middle class, who acquired influencing power over

the arts and their organisation. Men did not disappear from the stage but were harshly criticised by eminent critics such as Théophile Gautier and Jules Janin: "neither critic could resist ridiculing the entire male sex even when admitting to a particular danseur's merits" (Smith 2007, 33). The development of the *pointe* technique, perfected by Marie Taglioni, increased this shift towards a feminisation of ballet: "more than any other era in the history of ballet, the nineteenth century belongs to the ballerina" (Garafola 1985-86, 35). The male ruling audience began to consider it improper for a man to dance on stage, and this led to the introduction of women cross-dressed in male roles: "the *danseuse en travesti* usurped the position of the male danseur in the *corps de ballet* and as a partner to the ballerina" (Garafola 1985-86, 35). Franz, for example, was interpreted by Eugénie Fiocre, one of the most famous danseuses en travesti in France during the Second Empire.

In terms of plot, there are significant differences between "The Sandman" and *Coppélia*. Characters do not merge into each other as in the tale, except for Swanilda when she disguises herself as Coppélia. Swanilda and Franz are delineated through dance and pantomime, while Coppelius is delineated through pantomime only. Nathanael/Franz is consistently reduced in scope and complexity. Swanilda is the absolute protagonist, and she is much stronger than Clara. She faces Coppelius, literally fights with him, and liberates her fiancé. She is a real "rebel" (Moreno, Esteban 2016, 177). Clara engages in a similar battle in her attempt to bring Nathanael to reason, but she does not act with the same efficiency and decision. Olympia/Coppélia is perhaps the character that does not undergo substantial changes, even though she is the fulcrum around which the comic sketches and the main action revolve.

The movement quality of the two women is different. Coppélia moves in a mechanical way; each movement is rigidly stopped and then started again. There is no fluid connection between one movement and the other. Swanilda, on the other hand, performs flowy movements with precision. Coppélia often remains in static positions: she reads, she sits, and she stands. Swanilda's role is much more demanding, with complex dance phrases. When Swanilda disguises herself as Coppélia, this binary structure is in a way dissolved in a different manner from that employed by Hoffmann. Clara becomes an automaton through Nathanael's angry exclamation; Swanilda becomes an automaton of her own accord. She wears Coppélia's dress and simulates her rival's broken movements. Then, to save Franz, she pretends to have assimilated his soul and turns her rigidity into softness.

She performs two brilliant solo pieces, and she finally rebels against Coppelius by taking a sword from one of the automata and engaging in a fight with the evil magician. Coppelius understands that she is not his beloved automaton and is finally defeated. Destroyed in his Promethean ambition, he finds and embraces his automaton while the two lovers are free to escape. As Bergner and Plett argue, "The play of desire… provides leeway for women's agency. It suggests, as well, that those who require women to act in a prescribed fashion can expect to be deceived" (Bergner, Plett 1996, 175).

In regard to the notion of beauty, Olympia in the tale is characterised by passive beauty, and Coppélia resembles her in that she is quite static. Clara is said not to be beautiful, even though the narrator speaks of the perfect proportions of her figure, while Swanilda's beauty is exemplified through measured and harmonious movements. In this sense, artificial and ideal beauty is given a negative meaning both in the tale and the ballet, while real beauty is praised, especially in the ballet.

The notion of automata as women's doubles represents the main theme of the ballet. Both Hoffmann's tale and Saint-Léon's ballet are permeated by the myth of Pygmalion, who fell in love with the female figure he had sculptured and found 'true' love when she was transformed into a real woman: "Pygmalion […] successfully carved an / amazing skilful / statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect / feminine beauty—and fell in love with his own / creation" (Ovid 2004, 394). The Pygmalion story hides the hierarchical relationship promulgated by a recurrent male desire, which considers women as creatures who can be manipulated and shaped according to one's own desire. They embody an ideal longed for but seldom attained. This is particularly true in this instance, as the idealised woman turns out to be an automaton.

The history of automata goes back to the first century A.D., when pneumatic and hydraulic automata were conceived. Automata are definable as "self-moving things" (Grant 2003, 314), and they do not necessarily have a human form. It is at the end of the eighteenth century that the first writing and speaking human-shaped automaton was created. It was devised by Pierre and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz in 1773 and was termed 'androids' to distinguish it from automata (Grant 2003, 322). Their creation was conceived as entertainment, but at the same time, it provoked debate over the status of automata "as a mechanical artefact" (Grant 2003, 325). Hoffmann's story is to be considered in the light of this context, and it fully expresses the rising anxiety towards technology. The classical example that

comes to mind along this line is *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, who first elaborated the idea for her book in the summer of 1816, the same year in which "The Sandman" was published. In both stories, the protagonist struggles between madness and death to cope with his creation. In both cases, death is the ultimate consequence of the protagonist's action.

Coppélia, in turn, exemplifies the change in perception towards technology, which began to be seen in terms of progress rather than fear in the second half of the nineteenth century. At this stage, human-shaped automata had become mere ornaments, and the ambition to create artificial human beings was replaced by the intention to re-create human functions without their shape. This represented the main shift that transformed society from rural to industrialised (Grant 2003, 330). That is why, perhaps, *Coppélia* could only make a parody of what, in Hoffmann's time, was an anxiety.

At the same time, the ballet maintained a contradiction, as the ballet technique—that is, the choreolanguage through which it expressed its stories—was rooted precisely in the time of clockworks and automata, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Bergner and Plett highlight, "the ballerina body represented both an extreme construction of idealised femininity and a potential metaphor for mechanical perfection" (Bergner, Plett 1996, 168). The ballet technique embodies the rational and empirical approach typical of clockworks.

It is also intrinsically tied to the Great Theory of Beauty, where proportion and the "harmonic combination of the parts" (Tatarkiewicz 2020, 138) of the body were paramount. As Flavia Pappacena has highlighted, "the spatial and dynamic-rhythmic structure of the steps was regulated by norms elaborated on the basis of the analytic observation of the human body's conformation and of the natural laws of movement and was inspired by aesthetic models codified in ancient art" (2009, 11). Lucia Ruprecht has specified that:

> Classical ballet is a virtuoso form of highly cultivated physical expression that rests on the control and stylisation of the natural body. Surpassing physical limits in stunningly beautiful movements, it represents human dreams of freedom and transcendence, achieved through a relentless regime of bodily knowledge and discipline (2006, 1).

One of the main inspirations for the development of ballet was the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who "established a prescriptive aesthetic of the beautiful body modelled after Greek sculpture" (Ruprecht 2006, 1).

The great invention of the ballet technique was the turnout of the feet 45 degrees at the hip, the so-called *en dehors*. "As one could observe in ancient statues, to turn out the lower limbs" meant "exposing the 'beautiful' part of the leg and foot" (Pappacena 2009, 12). There were five basic feet positions at the heart of this technique:

> first position was a gathering point, a "home" or balletic equivalent of a musical tonic, in which the body stood elegantly at rest, heel to heel, legs slightly turned out at the hip. The other four positions prepared the body to move (Homans 2010, 23).

Apart from the five feet positions, other poses were inspired by the Great Theory of Beauty, one of which is recurrently danced by Swanilda in the Royal Ballet version, as the table shows. It is the arabesque, whose name designates precisely a pose and is different from the arabesque style of narrative we have seen in Hoffmann's tale. It consists of a supporting leg with the other leg placed straight at the back (Cecchetti 2002, 127). Nuñez, in particular, also performs the arabesque penchée, where the torso leans forward and the suspended leg is placed higher. Together with another pose, the attitude, "they constitute the most beautiful and artistically perfect thing that has been created for the harmony and grace of dance" (Cecchetti 2002, 127). Francesca Falcone, in her in-depth analysis of the pose, has defined it as "the position of the body based on equilibrium through equiponderance, equal districution of weight" (Falcone 1999, 71), thus highlighting its harmony and proportion.

Last but not least, in *Coppélia* there is a residual element of Hoffmann's tale with regard to the Romantic notion of beauty, and it is Franz's perspective towards Coppélia. He admires her and finds her beautiful, so much so that he throws a kiss at her and she throws a kiss back. He is so involved with her beauty that he even takes a ladder to go and meet her. In these moments, Swanilda is completely forgotten, as Clara was forgotten in Nathanael's case.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to analyse the notion of beauty and choreostorytelling in the ballet *Coppélia*, which is loosely based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's tale "The Sandman." I have first explored the notion of beauty in the tale and then moved on to investigate its presence in the ballet. In particular, I have focused on choreostorytelling, which, in this case, is characterised by the use of the ballet technique, a technique imbued with the Great Theory of Beauty as developed in ancient Greece.

There are many dance adaptations of *Coppélia*, such as the 1975 one by Roland Petit or the 1994 one by Maguy Marin. There is also a silent film based on the ballet, released in 2021, choreographed by Ted Brandsen and directed by Jeff Tudor, Steven De Beul, and Ben Tesseur, starring Michaela DePrince as Swanilda, renamed Swan, Daniel Camargo as Franz, and Vito Mazzeo as Doctor Coppelius:

> The doctor is a cosmetic surgeon who promises the townspeople perfection, while tricking them into surrendering their unique features. His goal: to create the ideal woman by bringing his robot, Coppelia—portrayed by an animation—to life (Murray 2021).

DePrince was a ballet dancer from Sierra Leone who prematurely passed away in 2024. Casting a Black ballerina for the role of Swanilda shows that the world of ballet is still essentially white and that a ballet like *Coppélia* was the fruit of white European artists. In the nineteenth century, there were Black characters in ballet, but they were usually performed by white dancers in blackface and often represented "subaltern subjects" (Simonari 2019). In this sense, "ideas about the Black body, and by extension Black people, were represented in ballet from its very origin in the seventeenth century" (Bourne 2021, 68). In *Coppélia* itself, a *nègre*[4] (Nuitter 1870, 22) is among Coppelius's automata, and his presence contributes to the recurring objectification of the Black body, especially when the automaton is transformed into "a literal black object" (Mandradjieff 2023, 34) in some versions.

As Ben Okri has stated, "stories are not innocent" (Okri 2015, 22), and DePrince's role exemplifies the change the ballet world is undergoing to become more inclusive. In this sense, the notion of beauty is fundamentally enriched to go beyond the colour line.

[4] The word *nègre*, *negro*, derives from the Latin *niger*, which means black. However, in languages such as French, English, and Italian, it has acquired, especially since the 1960s, a negative connotation in regard to Black people because of its ties to colonialism, slavery, and racism. Nuitter probably used it to designate a Black automaton, but he adds a racist remark, as this Black automaton "stands in a threatening posture" (Nuitter 1870, 22), as if all Black people were threatening.

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Tadeusz Kantor—Artist of the Digital Age

Abstract

This article explores the enduring relevance of Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical innovations within the context of contemporary digital performance. By analyzing Kantor's radical redefinition of stage objects—particularly his concepts of *bio-objects* and *emballage* (wrapping)—the study demonstrates how his vision of autonomous, agential materiality prefigures modern experiments with digital avatars, generative AI, and immersive technologies. The authors trace the evolution of Kantor's *costume-as-actor* paradigm into virtual avatars and AI-generated music, arguing that these digital quasi-objects extend his legacy by challenging anthropocentric hierarchies and redefining performer–audience dynamics. Through case studies such as the hybrid opera *Orfeo & Lwanda* (2024) and AI-based compositional systems, the paper examines how Kantor's emphasis on object autonomy resonates with posthumanist frameworks, in which algorithms function as bodiless co-creators. The analysis also addresses aesthetic and ethical tensions arising from AI's role in the performative arts, including questions of authenticity, emotional violence, and the "audio uncanny valley." By situating Kantor's theories within debates on digital twins, metaverse scenography, and neural-network-based perception, the article positions his work as a foundational lens for understanding theatre's evolving relationship with technology.

Keywords

Tadeusz Kantor, Digital Theatre, Bio-objects, Artificial Intelligence, Posthuman Performance

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> Theatre is an activity on the furthest fringes of life, where the categories and concepts of existence lose their purpose and meaning, where madness, fever, hysteria, lunacy, and hallucinations are the last chances for life before the approaching CIRCUS TROUPE OF DEATH OF ITS GRAND THEATER (Kantor 2004, 391).[1]

Introduction

The future of theatre has long been a subject of scholarly reflection (Gontarski 2020; Puchner 2002). These discussions have explored new theatrical architectures of impressive scale (Aronson 1981; Claudel 1972; Kamal El Din Amin Mohammed 2019), engagement with significant and diverse topics (Bodale 2023; Lavender 2016), the necessity of digitization and hybridization (Decheva 2020; Faver & Stein 2001; Iacobute 2020; Mehr & Askarzadeh 2024; Rosa *et al.* 2020), and inspiration drawn from Asian traditions (Brown 2002).

Digital technologies transform live theatre by introducing immersive mixed-reality environments, real-time motion capture, and interactive digital scenography. Andreadis *et al.* (2010) and Geigel (2018) describe how motion-capture and VR/AR systems now enable interactions between actors and digital avatars. Benford and Giannachi (2011) and Torpey (2012) highlight the role of interactive robotics and responsive software in enhancing engagement for both performers and audiences. Dixon (2005, 2007) and O'Dwyer (2015) observe that digital projections and simulations broaden staging techniques, challenging traditional conceptions of time and space in performance.

Recent studies highlight the transformative role of artificial intelligence (AI) in theatre, with particular emphasis on script generation, artistic collaboration, and movement representation. Ren (2024) evaluates AI's ability to create compelling stage works, stressing the importance of balancing AI-generated content with human contributions. Feng (2024) explores the symbiotic relationship between human creators and AI, identifying four "feeding" models that enhance creative productivity while addressing challenges related to emotional depth. Befera and Bioglio (2022) present theoretical frameworks for integrating AI into intermedial theatre, categorizing its applications and emphasizing the importance of algorithms in dramaturgy.

[1] All translations of the Polish texts were carried out by the authors of this article.

Maiti (2024) examines motion-capture technology in AI-assisted theatre, highlighting the emergence of new performative methodologies enabled by actor avatars.

These studies identify four key areas of technological change in theatre:

1. Staging and set design are evolving toward AI-driven responsive environments, allowing the idiomatic character of diverse spaces to emerge.
2. Interaction between performers and audiences is becoming increasingly fluid through the integration of virtual and physical participation.
3. Real-time motion capture enables detailed digital representation of live performances.
4. The temporal and spatial boundaries of productions now extend far beyond traditional theatrical norms.

In summary, the literature underscores artificial intelligence's potential for innovative theatrical practices while also questioning the authenticity of the theatrical experience and the depth of audience engagement. Ultimately, the following words are especially apt:

> It seems highly probable that one thing can be predicted: theatre (theatricality) will remain a vital form of expression and a catalyst for collective experience. (…) Increasingly boldly it will move into the public sphere—both literally (…) and, more importantly, symbolically. (…) It will become not merely a participant in public debate but a party to the conflict. (…) At the same time, we will witness the emergence of new—or rather newly revived—procedures of cultural performance (Kostaszuk-Romanowska 2017, 83-84).

The strength of this statement lies in the premise that theatre is a constantly evolving art form. The trajectory it suggests, outlined deliberately in broad strokes, positions theatre as a medium that gives voice to issues of deep social relevance. Yet, as the owl of Minerva spreads its wings at dusk, not at dawn, the future cannot be predicted—it can only be understood in hindsight. In this spirit, we ask: how might Tadeusz Kantor's concepts of the *bio-object* and *emballage* (wrapping) be interpreted and applied in the age of artificial intelligence?

Tadeusz Kantor—Visionary

For Kantor, the actor primarily functioned as a carrier—a framework for the props. The actor spoke little; their presence was subordinated to the objects. This is precisely what Kantor meant by "wrapping" when he wrote,

"I annex, by the 'method' of wrapping, an ever wider expanse of reality" (Kantor 2005a, 315)—a form of packaging in which the wrapping itself becomes more important than its contents ("Later, the wrapping alone sufficed for me" (ibidem, 323)). To illustrate this concept, Kantor described "the actor as simply a huge bundle of canvas (…) bound with string, covered in postage stamps, labels, and destination addresses" (ibidem, 315), ultimately defining it as "a wrapping with a living, human 'interior'" (ibidem, 317).

In a short documentary about Kantor shown at the Krzysztofory Museum, Andrzej Wajda describes him as an unquestionably great creator—unique and charting his own path. Based on this statement, one can conclude that, in reflections on the possible future of theatre, Kantor remains a vital point of reference—biologically no longer alive, yet vividly present through his artistic legacy.

Kantor wrote:

> The object became, for me, a question of the boundaries of art. (…) The object ceased to be a prop used by the actor in their performance. It simply WAS, EXISTED—on equal terms with the actor. IT WAS AN ACTOR! The Object–Actor!! (Kantor 2005a, 127)

Equally radical was the following statement:

> However, reality (…) was no longer expressed through PLACE, which dictated its rules to all elements of the theatre. That medium now became the OBJECT. The THING. Autonomous, self-contained. L'OBJET D'ART. Possessing a unique peculiarity: its own living organs—THE ACTORS. That's why I called it the BIO-OBJECT. BIO-OBJECTS were not props for the actors to use. They were not 'scenery' in which one 'performs'. They formed an inseparable whole with the actors. They emitted their own 'life', autonomous, unrelated to the FICTION (content) of the drama. This 'life' and its manifestations constituted the essential substance of the performance. It was not a plot, but rather the matter of the spectacle. Demonstrating and manifesting the 'life' of this BIO-OBJECT was not the representation of some arrangement existing outside of it. It was autonomous, and therefore real! The BIO-OBJECT—a work of art. (…) The material of the performance was created by the 'inner life' of the OBJECT (…) The actors became its living parts, its organs. They were, as it were, genetically connected to the object. (…) Without the actors, the object was a dilapidated wreck, incapable of functioning. On the other hand, the actors were conditioned by it—their roles and actions stemmed from it (Kantor 2004, 396-397).

We stand at the edge—a Platonic rupture is near. We do not know exactly what the future holds, but it will undoubtedly differ from the present. In his short text *The Disappearing Object* (1966), Kantor writes:

> Creativity becomes a matter of taking a stance—not of developing forms or variants… In the past, every painting was a continuation of the previous one. A painting's reason for being was conditioned by the adoption of a different subject or the creation of a variant of the preceding work—a more refined definition of form […] (Kantor 2005a, 325).

With this, the artist suggests that the new creator is no longer obligated to reference the past; rather, they may use the technical tools at their disposal to create, here and now, what they deem necessary.

Kantor, however, offers a warning: "I foresee (…) that the realm of thought in art will become a field of abuse for clever scientistic minds" (Kantor 2005a, 324). Therefore, if a rupture with tradition is to occur—driven by both technological and social transformations—it will be essential to trust one's own intuition and to skillfully navigate the tension between what is imposed by science and technology and the few remaining threads of tradition that, despite all upheavals, will continue to link the past with the future.

It is therefore possible that theatre will become a testing ground and a vast simulator for socially significant issues, such as peace, ecology, human rights, and the rights of other species, rather than merely a provider of entertainment. A theatre of a child, equipped with unlimited technical possibilities for creating scenography, music, and stage action, enabling the development of qualities and competencies essential for sustaining human presence on Earth. This would thus be a political theatre aimed at preserving life at a decisive moment in history.

One can hope that, if we choose such a form of theatre, hundreds and thousands of individual stages will be interconnected through artificial intelligence via networking. A map of stage-territories will emerge, forming the foundational plane of a new social life. In other words, theatre will serve the democratization of life by enabling decision-making. Tadeusz Kantor observed:

> The deficit of theatrical institutions is not a dangerous symptom. Far more dangerous for theatre is the fragility of its essential fabric, dramaturgy capable of shaping the face of the twentieth-century human. Even more troubling is the lack of discussion about the form of a new theatre (Kantor 2005b, 375).

Technology may offer an opportunity for dramaturgy and theatre as a forum for debating the future.

In conclusion, Tadeusz Kantor was not only a visionary in theatre but also an artist who constantly redefined the boundaries of art. His concept of the autonomy of objects on stage and the integration of the actor with objects—the so-called bio-objects—was groundbreaking and ahead of its time. Kantor viewed objects as equal participants in the performance, giving them 'life' and autonomy, which completely altered the traditional relationships between the actor and the props. In performances such as *Umarła klasa* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, objects became carriers of memory and emotion, creating a space where the past and the present merged in an almost metaphysical way. Kantor not only questioned traditional theatrical forms but also drew the audience into deep reflection on the essence of existence, memory, and trauma.

His approach to theatre was a radical break from convention. Kantor experimented with form, emotion, and symbolism, creating performances that were both intimate and universal. Jan Piotr Cieślak, Wiktoria Kozioł, and Magdalena Kunińska point out that matter in Kantor's painting is not only a physical component but also a profound philosophical category that allowed him to express changeability, processuality, randomness, and the concreteness of existence (Cieślak, Kozioł, Kunińska, 2018). It seems that this observation can be extended to all areas of T. Kantor's activity. His ability to combine personal memories with national myths and historical traumas made his works resonate worldwide, regardless of the cultural context of the audience. In this sense, Kantor was a global artist whose vision extended beyond the boundaries of theatre—his work was a manifestation of the struggle for artistic freedom and the independence of the spirit in the face of the limitations imposed by history and reality.

Costume, Human, Avatar

Traditionally, in theatrical theory and practice, the costume was primarily viewed as an element subordinate to the actor, serving to visually complete their creation and enhance the character portrayed. However, by the mid-twentieth century, especially due to Tadeusz Kantor, there was a radical reevaluation of this relationship: the costume began to gain autonomy, no longer being merely a passive addition, but becoming an equal—and often dominant—element of the performance. In this way, Kantor's

theatre, transcending the boundaries of traditional realism, created a new role for the stage costume—a role in which the external layer of the performance took control of meaning and the stage structure. In Kantor's work, the costume no longer remained in a servile relationship to the actor but instead took the initiative in the creative process. The artist referred to the actor as the "frame" or "package" for the object, while the costume itself became the subject of the stage narrative. In his theatrical manifestos, Kantor consistently emphasized that the meaning of a performance does not primarily lie in the words or gestures of the actor, but in the material—that is, in the object, which in itself is the meeting place of the body and the symbol.

The concept of packaging, central to Kantor's aesthetics, is based on the thesis that the external—the packaging—dominates the contents. In practice, this meant that a costume or prop, through its appropriate "packaging" form, could become an autonomous artistic entity, breaking free from the subordination of the human performer. Kantor frequently showcased costumes as independent art objects, resulting in them, rather than the actors, gaining the status of the primary carriers of meaning, thereby generating a new, materially grounded dramaturgy.

Today, in the era of digital technologies, we can observe another evolution of the costume. The shift from a material costume to a virtual avatar, capable of existing independently of the actor's physical presence, represents a natural continuation of Kantor's fascination with the autonomy of objects. The virtual costume-avatar, created using motion capture or photogrammetry techniques, assumes the role of the stage subject while simultaneously expanding the boundaries of perception and redefining the relationship between human and object in the performing arts of the twenty-first century.

Based on selected costumes, Kantor created fully autonomous works of art, while others, placed on frames, were transformed into almost abstract sculptures, which in turn gained the status of autonomous stage beings (Halczak 2023). Today, Kantor's costumes appear as "actors without speaking": objects that, freed from their traditional servile function, become provocative forms and carriers of their own meanings and emotions. The exhibition *Osobiste. Kostiumy teatralne Kantora* at the Krakow Cricoteka (2022–2023) was the first comprehensive presentation of these autonomous objects—nearly 250 costumes from 1961–1991 were showcased, from the performance *Nosorożec* to *Dziś są moje urodziny*. Among the exhibits were man-

nequins from *Umarła klasa*, a reconstruction of Goplana from *Balladyna*, and bio-objects such as the *Buty Millionera* from *Nadobnisie* and *Koczkodany* (Halczak 2023).

Bogdan Renczyński, a long-time actor of Teatr Cricot 2, in his poetic text *Ambalaż* and an interview with Justyna Droń, published in the exhibition catalog, unveils the personal perspective of the performer and emphasizes the paradoxical nature of Kantor's costumes. He notes that, for Kantor, the costume "(…) in relation to the living organism of the actor fulfills new, completely different functions: it is a resonator and a trap, an entanglement and an intensification, also a brake, it can be his executioner and victim, it can exist next to the actor and become the subject of his juggling" (Droń, Renczyński 2022, 23). It is this "physicality" of the costume—treated as an autonomous being that both opens and closes the performer—that offers one of the most complete dramatic descriptions of its functioning as a work of art.

In another text from the exhibition catalog, *Poza triadą kurator-odbiorca-obiekt*, Magdalena Link-Lenczowska and Natalia Zarzecka interpret Kantor's costumes through the lens of Michel Serres' theory of the quasi-object. The authors juxtapose Kantor's vision of the costume as "(…) a living organism, endowed with its own independent identity, which leads a parasitic existence on the actors, feeding on them, growing out of them, and gaining increasing independence from its host" (Link-Lenczowska, Zarzecka 2022, 10) with the critique of the anthropocentric hierarchy of objects proposed by the French philosopher.

In the essay *The Theory of the Quasi-Object*, Michel Serres uses the "ball" as an example of a quasi-object, explaining that it is not an ordinary object, as it only becomes what it is when held by a subject. On the ground, the ball has no meaning; its significance emerges only in relation to the person who controls it. A quasi-object is characterized by a certain "decentering"—the person holding it becomes the center, and their interaction with the object creates a kind of ecstasy. The speed of exchange, such as throwing the ball, gives it existence, making it more "real." Participation in this interaction does not involve sharing the object in a physical sense but rather transmitting oneself through the passing of the object. In this process, the subject abandons their individuality, entering into a relationship with the quasi-object, which exists solely to be passed on. This is a transubstantiation of being into relation, where being gives way to the relationship itself (Serres 2020).

Thanks to this perspective, Kantor's theatrical costume ceases to be a passive prop at the service of the actor and becomes a quasi-object that organizes a network of relations between the performer and the audience, between materiality and meaning—"acting" as the actor, rather than the other way around (Droń, Renczyński 2022, 23).

The concept of the costume as an autonomous entity, initiated by Tadeusz Kantor, finds a spectacular continuation today in the digital era. A prime example of the innovative use of immersive technologies is the hybrid opera *Orfeo & Lwanda*, which had its world premiere on June 14, 2024, in Florence as part of the XR Festival. The set design for the performance was based on an elaborate metaverse: the avatar of the titular heroine was projected onto the walls of the medieval church of Santo Stefano al Ponte (*Cattedrale dell'Immagine*), and, thanks to a real-time motion capture system, the actress's gestures and movements were precisely mirrored by her virtual alter ego on the large screen.

Importantly, the opera was realized simultaneously in two environments: the traditional, physical space of the church and the virtual world accessible via the platform spatial.io, within the VR Academia Electronica. As a result, the audience could participate in the performance either as "live" viewers or through their own avatars in the metaverse, creating a multichannel, deeply immersive artistic experience.

A key role in the creation of both physical and digital costumes was played by Anna Syczewska, who, during the design process, utilized artificial intelligence tools to combine the practical aspects of stage clothing with its digital, generative form (Syczewska 2024).

In light of Michel Serres' theory of the quasi-object, the avatar of the titular character can be seen as a digital quasi-object, which—like Kantor's costume—ceases to be a passive prop subordinated to the actor and instead becomes an autonomous subject of stage expression: it "plays" the actor, organizing the relationship between the body and its digital representation, as well as between the physical and virtual spaces (Serres 2020).

The concept of the digital twin, which involves using computer simulations to manage real-world systems, is increasingly being applied in theatre and the performing arts. A digital twin can be understood as a digital quasi-object, inextricably linked to its physical counterpart, yet fully autonomous within the virtual space (Kirjavainen *et al.* 2023). Meanwhile, the metaverse—defined as a collective, shared virtual space emerging at the intersection of virtual and augmented reality and the internet—is becoming a new platform for theatrical performances. In this environment, the actor not only

performs on stage as a physical person but also inhabits a digital avatar, creating a multi-layered relationship between the body and its virtual representation. The avatar ceases to be merely an extension of the artist's material presence—it becomes an autonomous entity, capable of functioning independently of the physical original.

AI in Performative Music

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly making its presence felt in the realm of performative arts, with one of the most rapidly developing applications being music generation. Modern compositional algorithms, which utilize machine learning models, enable the creation of both musical scores and sound generation, often in a non-linear, adaptive, and interactive manner (Tan, Li 2021).

In light of Kantor's ideas, music generated by artificial intelligence can be seen as a bodiless bio-object—an element of performance that possesses a degree of creative autonomy yet lacks a physical body. In the spirit of *emballage*, it is the form of the algorithm and sound—the "wrapping"—that becomes the essence of expression, rather than the figure of the composer or instrumentalist. This algorithmic "sound object" can exist independently of the actor's or musician's presence on stage, representing a natural continuation of Kantor's fascination with the autonomy of the object. The presence of AI-generated music is manifested solely through sound waves and audience responses—it is immaterial, almost spectral—and thus aligns seamlessly with digital theatre as a counterpart to the virtual actor or avatar.

AI as a Stage Bio-Object

Research on systems for generatively transforming sound in real time has opened the possibility to synchronize music with non-musical acoustic environments. Müller and colleagues (2018) presented an algorithm that alters the temporal structure of a musical recording so that its rhythm aligns with the repetitive noise generated by an MRI scanner. Although the goal was to create a more pleasant environment for the patient, this approach illustrates the potential of reactive AI music—capable of integrating into non-musical sound contexts and aesthetically transforming them (Müller *et al.* 2018).

Contemporary artificial intelligence systems not only generate music but increasingly process it in a human-like way, calling into question any clear-cut distinction between biological and digital perception. In a groundbreaking study, Kell *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that an artificial neural network trained to recognize musical genres and lyrics not only achieved human-level accuracy but also predicted listeners' neural activity as measured by functional MRI (fMRI). Different network layers corresponded most closely to activity in distinct regions of the auditory cortex: lower layers to primary areas, and deeper layers to higher-order regions responsible for interpreting complex signals (Kell et al. 2018). Moreover, the network spontaneously segregated processing into music and language pathways, mirroring the division observed in the human brain.

Kim, Kim, and Jeong (2024) take this even further, demonstrating that neural networks trained exclusively on non-musical sounds, such as speech, animal calls, or environmental noise, spontaneously develop units that are highly selective for music. This means that, with no prior exposure to musical data, the network can form internal representations that respond solely to music—and do so in a manner remarkably similar to the human auditory system.

Such discoveries support the hypothesis that musicality is not merely a cultural construct or an acquired mode of perception but may instead stem from the general statistical structure of natural sounds. If an artificial network that has "never heard music" can still recognize it, this suggests the existence of deep acoustic regularities that distinguish music from other sound forms—and that AI can capture even without symbolic understanding.

For digital theatre, this means that sound systems do not need to be explicitly trained on musical material in order to respond musically. AI can thus function as a "perceptual sound actor"—recognizing the rhythm, intensity, and texture of its surroundings and generating sounds that integrate seamlessly with the structure of the stage event. This approach shifts the emphasis from the "composer" to a system that co-experiences and participates in the affective rhythm of the performance.

AI-generated music, as a bodiless bio-object, can offer a form of creative expression free of the physical and emotional violence so prevalent in Kantor's theatre. Because generative AI lacks a physical body, it eliminates the potential for performer suffering or exploitation—there is no actor subjected to extreme experiences, nor any object requiring physical manipulation. Expression occurs immaterially, solely through algorithm and sound.

This perspective aligns with posthumanism, which questions the uniqueness of the human subject and embraces the coexistence of multiple agentive forms (both human and non-human) in the creative process (Avdeeff 2019; Kell *et al.* 2018).

Posthumanism, Authenticity, and the Aesthetics of the Uncanny

Musical creation involving AI challenges the traditional anthropocentric view of creativity as an exclusively human domain. As Melissa Avdeeff (2019) notes, the rise of computational intelligence in music complicates existing definitions of authorship and creativity, calling anthropocentric assumptions about art into question. AI thus becomes a kind of spectral composer—present through its creations yet invisible and insentient—embodying an aesthetic of posthuman presence.

The emergence of such an immaterial creator raises questions about authenticity and sincerity in works of art. The aesthetics of AI-generated music rest on the partial absence of the human element, which can unsettle audiences, especially when the algorithm's output comes close to imitating the human voice or emotion yet offers no genuine presence or intent. Avdeeff (2019) highlights this phenomenon with the concept of the "audio uncanny valley," analogous to the uncanny valley effect in robotics, where an object's near-resemblance to a human becomes disturbing when it falls just short of full believability.

In the context of music, this effect is especially pronounced in AI-generated vocals—voices that sound almost human yet lack bodily presence and emotional authenticity. A prime example is the album *Hello World* by SKYGGE, produced in collaboration with the Flow Machines system. On tracks like "Magic Man," AI-generated vocals based on singer Kyrie Kristmanson's voice produced lyrics that resembled English but were semantically incoherent. The result is the sense of a disembodied voice—a phonic object that "sings" yet represents no concrete subject (Avdeeff 2019).

This aesthetic experience—at once familiar and alien—can lead to aural discomfort, especially when the listener realizes that the voice belongs to no real performer. Avdeeff interprets this as a new form of posthuman sincerity: an honesty devoid of intention, emotion, or personhood, a sound that is emotionally charged yet has no sender.

An important aesthetic issue is the perception of intention and authorship. Psychological research suggests the existence of a phenomenon known as AI composer bias—an audience prejudice against works they believe to have been created by artificial intelligence (Shank et al., 2022). In one experiment, participants rated musical pieces as less enjoyable when they thought the composer was AI, even if the piece had been written by a human (Shank *et al.*, 2022). In other words, merely knowing that a work was artificially authored can diminish its emotional impact. Interestingly, this effect was especially pronounced when the music sounded "too human" within a genre in which AI creativity was not expected; listeners showed skepticism toward classical compositions allegedly written by a machine (Shank *et al.*, 2022). More broadly, both the concept of the audio uncanny valley and AI composer bias highlight a persistent attachment to the idea of an authentic, human creator in art.

AI and New Horizons of Stage Presence

Despite these concerns, the aesthetics of artificial intelligence offer a new dimension of expression that can be interpreted as free from direct emotional violence. AI has no ego, ambition, or personal trauma; it creates music based on data and algorithms, which paradoxically may purify the message of personal conflict or aggression. This kind of "art without a body" is free from biological suffering, yet still capable of abstractly reflecting human emotions. As a result, AI-generated music, as a stage bio-object, becomes a form of creative expression without cruelty: it involves no physical violence (no one is a puppet or a victim on stage), and the emotions it evokes arise from aesthetic contemplation rather than the real pain of a performer. This can be seen as the realization of a kind of posthumanist utopia—an art in which creation unfolds beyond human suffering, in collaboration with an autonomous yet bodiless Other.

In conclusion, the contemporary application of Kantor's ideas in digital theatre is reflected in the transfer of the object's autonomy to the generative algorithm. Music created by AI functions as a bodiless bio-object, expanding the aesthetics of performance with new, posthuman perspectives. This represents a form of creative expression that differs from Kantor's: devoid of literal bodily and emotional violence, yet still capable of provoking deep reflection on presence, authenticity, and the boundaries of humanity in contemporary art.

Conclusion

The essence of Tadeusz Kantor's thought can also be illuminated through reference to Actor-Network Theory (ANT). In his reflections on ANT, Krzysztof Abriszewski emphasizes the agency of entities that together form a network of relations, creating *hybrida*, and influencing the course of cultural events. This corresponds to Kantor's concept, in which the object is treated as an equal actor (bio-object). ANT highlights the role of materiality and things in stabilizing social order (Abriszewski 2010; 2015); thus, it is things that "solidify" order, much like the scenic elements in Kantor's work become carriers of memory and emotion, co-creating the meaning of the performance.

The legacy of Kantor continues to inspire contemporary theatrical explorations, especially in the context of rapid technological transformation. By reimagining the relationship between actor and object, he proposed a vision of theatre in which stage materiality gains autonomy and becomes an equal participant in the performance. His concept of bio-objects, where props or costumes acquired their own agency, finds continuity today in experiments with digital avatars, immersive technologies, and artificial intelligence. Virtual characters generated by motion-capture systems or generative musical algorithms now take on the role of the stage's "living organs," and the relationship between human and machine assumes a new, hybrid dimension. Contemporary digital theatre, drawing from Kantor's heritage, challenges anthropocentrism and embraces posthuman agency, in which AI becomes not only a tool but also a co-creator of the performance. Generative music systems and research into sound perception by artificial neural networks show that algorithms can develop their own forms of expression, independent of human experience. This approach raises questions about authenticity, presence, and identity in performative art, especially as digital twins and metaversal scenographies blur the boundaries between reality and simulation.

The technological transformation, inspired by Kantor's sensitivity to matter, leads to new models of theatre, where emotions and affects are generated not only by the actor's body but also through algorithmic mediation. Theatre becomes a laboratory of the Anthropocene—a space of negotiation between organic and digital agency.

Ultimately, Kantor remains a key point of reference in contemplating the future of theatre. His redefinition of the stage object finds new resonance in today's digital quasi-objects, which shape the relationship between per-

former and spectator while transcending traditional boundaries of the body, authenticity, and simulation. The theatre of the future, merging immersive technologies with Kantor's sensibility, emerges as a space of dialogue, conflict, and continual innovation—an arena where humans and their digital doubles converge.

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Narrating Beauty through Indigenous Storytelling: Decolonising Aesthetic Values in African Oral Traditions

Abstract

Neglected by colonial constructs, African oral tradition is a rich storehouse of cultures. This paper examines how indigenous narrative reconfigures aesthetic value by foregrounding African oral traditions marginalized by colonial constructs. Drawing on Nigeria's Yoruba *oríkì*, Kenya's Gikuyu folktales, and South Africa's Zulu praise poetry, it demonstrates how these genres characterize beauty outside Eurocentric parameters. Employing postcolonial theory, textual analysis, and ethnographic interviews, this research argues that such accounts contribute both to decolonisation and to global aesthetic debate.

Keywords

Indigenous Storytelling, Beauty, African Oral Tradition, Aesthetic Values, Decolonising Aesthetic Values

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Introduction

African oral traditions have been living repositories of cultural knowledge, moral instruction, and aesthetic sensibility. Infused in the beat of everyday life, such genres as Nigerian Yoruba *oríkì*, Kenyan Gikuyu mythology, and South African Zulu praise poetry are not merely narrative but complex epistemological objects that contain values, ideals, and beliefs (Finnegan 2012; Barber 2018; Oduyoye 2021). These traditions are deposits of cultural memory and aesthetic reflection, un-writing philosophies of beauty and collective identity that are more than simply entertainment.

But since the colonial encounter, African oral traditions have been systematically excluded by reason of the dominance of Western epistemologies in academic and aesthetic theory. Eurocentric discourses are prone to conceptualising beauty in restrictive, materialistic, and individualistic terms that prioritise symmetry, complexion, and commodity-based looks at the expense of relationality, spirituality, and communal belonging (Coetzee 2005; Eze 2010; Ohenhen, Abakporo 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Olaolu 2022). This intellectual dominance has resulted in the epistemic silencing of African aesthetics, exhibiting them as anthropological curios rather than elevating them to developed philosophies of life and art (Mignolo, Walsh 2018; Mbembe 2021).

This "othering" distorts African cultural logic and inscribes neo-colonial hierarchies into global knowledge production. African philosophies of beauty are legitimised out of existence, whilst Western canons are universalised to serve as the standard of aesthetic value (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009; Ohenhen *et al.* 2024). These hierarchies perpetuate cultural imperialism in aesthetics and prevent the legitimation of indigenous systems as authentic and comprehensive philosophies. Over the last several decades, however, there has been a growing African and diasporic return to oral traditions as sources of performance, memory, and ethics (Nyamnjoh 2017; Kaschula 2020).

But comparatively less scholarship has investigated how such traditions articulate and affirm indigenous conceptions of beauty within the framework of colonial and postcolonial domination of aesthetics (Adeeko 2017; Nzegwu 2019; Abakporo, Ohenhen 2024). Closing this gap, this study analyses how oral narrative cultures—Yoruba *oríkì*, Gikuyu folklore, and Zulu praise poetry—are constructed and narrated to defy and undermine Western aesthetic conventions.

By examining oral forms as narrative, performative, and social functions, this study brings to the fore their role in decolonising African aesthetics. Employing postcolonial theory, indigenous philosophy of African aesthetics, and African descent performance epistemologies, the study poses a basic question: How do African oral cultures create aesthetic paradigms that diverge from Eurocentric ones and assert cultural agency? (Abakporo, Ohenhen 2024).

In foregrounding African voices, this study places local aesthetics not only as alternatives to Western standards but as holistic systems in themselves worthy of equal placement within global aesthetic thought (Mignolo, Walsh 2018; Ohenhen, Abakporo 2024; Ohenhen *et al.* 2025; Nwafor 2023). It develops aesthetic theory, oral literature, and decolonial humanities, emphasising the redemptive and resistant capacity of narrative in achieving epistemic justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Ohenhen, Abakporo 2024).

1. Literature Review: Placing Aesthetic Values within Indigenous African Cultures

African beauty ideas are vastly different from Eurocentric beauty ideals. Whereas Eurocentric ideas emphasise symmetry, complexion, and visual perfection, African cultures prioritise relational, ethical, and functional attributes (Abiodun 2014; Olaolu 2022). Yoruba epistemology considers *ìwà* (good character) as the content of beauty, while physical beauty is fleeting and secondary (Abiodun 2014; Adeeko 2017). Yoruba *oríkì* poetry celebrates virtues, lineage, and accomplishment, emphasising communal identity and moral responsibility above vacant form (Adeeko 1998; Ohenhen *et al.* 2025; Ohenhen 2019).

In the Gikuyu of Kenya, beauty is defined by wisdom, generosity, and righteous behaviour that supports communal living (Njoroge 2009; Waweru 2019). Zulu *izibongo* (praise poems) also include honour, strength, and ancestral connection as true measures of beauty (Gunner 1994; Khumalo 2021). These societies position aesthetics in teleological frameworks, where beauty is moral and spiritual purpose rather than spectacle. This reflects *ubuntu* philosophy, which brings social responsibility and collective flourishing to aesthetics (Metz 2019; Nzegwu 2019).

African epistemologies introduce beauty as inclusive, embodied, and inseparable from life. Beauty shows up in dress, music, dance, architecture, ritual, and story, uniting art with function and social connection (Krings, Skinner 2022; Ohenhen 2019). Unlike Western art/life or beauty/use bina-

ries (Mudimbe 1988; Mbembe 2021), African aesthetics emerge from communal practices wherein aesthetic and moral principles converge. *Oríkì* and *izibongo* are such unities wherein personal identity is merged with ancestry, spirituality, and collective responsibility (Adeeko 1998; Gunner 1994; Ohenhen, Abakporo 2024).

Performance is at the core of these systems of aesthetics. Festivals, rituals, and storytelling are not entertainment but a means of passing on values and aesthetic taste (Kasfir 2007; Kaschula 2020). They are dialogic performances where audience and performer create meaning together, confirming beauty as participatory and communal. Oral literature, as Finnegan (2012) and Barber (2018) highlight, thrives on engagement, rhythm, gesture, and tone, and thus beauty is both. Beauty is ascribed to *àṣẹ* (spirit power), blessings from lineage, and metaphysical balance (Drewal, Drewal 1990; Olupona 2020). Aesthetic value is found not only in the shape of sacred objects, clothing, masks, and talismans but also in their spiritual aura. Ritual performances such as Yoruba *gelede* or Zulu ceremonial songs achieve aesthetic superiority while radiating spiritual power (Drewal, Drewal 1990; Khumalo 2021). Ohenhen *et al.* (2024) also argue that such performances resist colonial erasure through the performance of aesthetic sovereignty rooted in African cosmology.

Functionality is a defining feature of African aesthetics. Folk poetry and praise poetry are appreciated for their aesthetic beauty, moral wisdom, and communal roles as well as artistic beauty (Njoroge 2009; Nyamnjoh 2017). They inscribe ethics of generosity, humility, courage, and interdependence into forms of beauty. Material culture—clothing, equipment, and buildings—also combines beauty with utility and symbolic meaning, as opposed to the Western conception of art as autonomous and commodified (Dewey 2005; Ohenhen 2019).

Colonialism systematically misrepresented African aesthetics as irrational, ornamental, or primitive (Mudimbe 1988; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009). This epistemic violence relegated indigenous aesthetic systems to anthropology's margins and placed a high value on Western canons of beauty as universally relevant. Decolonial scholarship of the past few years (Mignolo, Walsh 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Mbembe 2021) centres on reclaiming these systems as part of broader epistemic justice movements. Ohenhen (2019; 2024) argues that African oral traditions are not just resistant but redemptive, offering counter-paradigms that disrupt global knowledge hierarchies.

African oral cultures are living, embodied practices. Performers deploy voice, gesture, movement, and rhythm to create aesthetic experience (Finnegan 2012; Barber 2018). *Oríkì* is delivered with tonal inflection and music, with Zulu praise singers employing metaphor, vocal intensity, and audience participation (Gunner 1994; Khumalo 2021). Gikuyu plays are performed with dramatic intensity to elicit ethical lessons (Waweru 2019). Ohenhen, Abakporo (2024) posit that these performances legitimise indigenous epistemologies of aesthetics as situated, dynamic, and participatory.

Lastly, African aesthetics present a complete system whereby beauty is ethical, spiritual, functional, and communal. These models are diametrically opposed to Eurocentric ones that commodify beauty and unmoor art from life (Nzegwu 2019; Mbembe 2021). Recognition of indigenous aesthetics is therefore pivotal to decolonising aesthetic theory and validating African epistemologies on a level footing in international discourse (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2009; Ohenhen 2019; Nwafor 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining postcolonial theory, aesthetic philosophy, decolonial thought, and indigenous epistemologies to examine African oral traditions. Postcolonial critiques, notably by Fanon (1963) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), expose how colonialism imposed Western aesthetic hierarchies and devalued African artistic forms. African aesthetic philosophy, as articulated by Abiodun (2014) and Masolo (2010), ties beauty to ethics, spirituality, and communal well-being—values evident in *oríkì*, *izibongo*, and folktales.

Decolonial thought (Mignolo 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) challenges Eurocentric standards and advocates for epistemic disobedience and the reclamation of indigenous beauty logics (Quijano 2000). African storytelling is not merely expressive but epistemological—an embodied, participatory form of knowledge production (Chilisa 2012; Finnegan 2012). It preserves history, ethics, and identity while asserting alternative aesthetic systems. This framework affirms African oral traditions as philosophical tools for decolonising dominant discourses on beauty and restoring indigenous cultural authority.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm to explore how African oral cultures articulate indigenous aesthetics that challenge Eurocentric beauty norms. Emphasising performance and cultural

specificity, the research focuses on three oral forms: *oríkì* (Yoruba, Nigeria), Gikuyu folktales (Kenya), and *izibongo* (Zulu, South Africa). These are analysed not as static texts but as dynamic, embodied performances (Finnegan 2012; Barber 1997).

Textual analysis is complemented by ethnographic interviews with skilled oral performers in Oyo and Osun (Nigeria), Nyeri and Murang'a (Kenya), and KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa). Purposive sampling ensured participants possessed deep cultural and performance knowledge (Creswell, Poth 2018). Interviews, conducted in local languages and later translated, explored indigenous concepts of beauty and responses to Western aesthetics.

Data were analysed using thematic and narrative analysis, with NVivo software aiding the identification of aesthetic motifs, cultural values, and ideological patterns. Ethical considerations included informed consent, cultural sensitivity, and respect for intellectual property. A decolonial ethic guided the research, prioritising African voices and safeguarding heritage. The study synthesises textual and ethnographic insights to show how African oral forms perform, transmit, and theorise beauty in culturally grounded, resistant ways.

4. Comparative Case Studies

Case Study I: Yoruba Oríkì (Nigeria): Yoruba *oríkì*—a form of praise poetry—is one of the most evocative expressions of African oral aesthetics. Rooted in Yoruba culture, *oríkì* praises individuals, families, deities, towns, and animals through sequences of poetic names, metaphors, historical allusions, and achievements (Barber 1991; Olatunji 1984). It is not mere flattery but an aesthetic and epistemological tool that affirms identity, values, and communal memory. *Oríkì* functions as both personal and collective memory. Inherited from one's lineage and augmented by personal accomplishments, it is performed during naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and festivals. These performances invoke *àṣẹ* (spiritual force) and reaffirm ties between ancestors and descendants through rhythm and ritual (Abiodun 2014).

In contrast to Eurocentric aesthetics focused on symmetry or physical form, *oríkì* emphasises *ìwà* (character), dignity, wisdom, bravery, and lineage. A woman is praised not for beauty in appearance but for kindness, resilience, and noble birth. A man is celebrated for leadership, generosity, or communal service. Beauty is thus relational—defined by moral standing and social contribution (Oyelaran 2012).

Stylistically, *oríkì* is episodic and layered, moving fluidly between myth, history, and contemporary reference. Names act as narrative keys—"Ajani" might invoke ancestral wars or heroic feats. The poetic performance by an *akẹ́wì* (praise poet) includes tonal variation, rhythm, and musicality, often accompanied by drums or clapping, creating a deeply embodied, participatory experience (Drewal, Drewal 1990).

Oríkì also operates as a mode of resistance. Against colonial narratives that dismissed African traditions as inferior, *oríkì* asserts indigenous epistemologies and aesthetics. It redefines beauty in terms of virtue, spirituality, and cultural continuity rather than commodified or superficial traits. Through this, *oríkì* becomes a decolonial practice—reaffirming Yoruba identity, values, and notions of worth through performative beauty and historical remembrance.

Case Study II: Gikuyu Folktales (Kenya): Gikuyu folktales, integral to the oral culture of Kenya's Gikuyu people, serve as vital tools for transmitting ethical values, social norms, and aesthetic principles across generations. Typically narrated by elders in communal settings, these stories combine entertainment with moral instruction, portraying beauty not as mere physical attractiveness but as moral excellence and social virtue (Gikandi 2000; Ndigirigi 2014).

Through tales of animals, spirits, heroes, and tricksters, storytellers instil values like honesty, humility, generosity, and courage. Moral conduct is elevated above outward appearance, reinforcing a cultural aesthetic in which inner virtue defines true beauty (Wanjohi 2000). Characters described as physically attractive—clear skin, bright eyes, graceful movement—embody moral qualities such as wisdom, kindness, and respect. In the tale *Wanjirũ and the Spirit World*, the protagonist's virtue ensures her safe return from the spirit realm, while her vain sisters meet harsh consequences, highlighting that beauty without character is hollow (Kenyatta 1938).

Gender roles further shape aesthetic ideals: female beauty is linked to diligence and hospitality, while male beauty is defined by leadership and communal protection. Yet the stories challenge rigid roles, condemning arrogance and cruelty in both men and women. Aesthetic value emerges through ethical behaviour and social responsibility, not material possession or bodily perfection (Mwangi 2004).

The oral performance itself—using gesture, tone, and audience interaction—enhances the stories' emotional and aesthetic power (Nandwa, Bukenya 1994). In resisting colonial narratives that dismissed African tales as primitive, Gikuyu folktales articulate a decolonial aesthetics rooted

in relationality, spirituality, and character. They affirm indigenous knowledge systems by redefining beauty as a social and moral good—an active contribution to communal life rather than a commodified, superficial trait.

Case Study III: Zulu Praise Poetry (South Africa): Zulu praise poetry, or *izibongo*, holds a significant place in South African oral traditions as both literary form and cultural memory. Typically directed at kings, warriors, or revered community figures, these poems celebrate virtues such as heroism, dignity, and leadership through a rich fusion of metaphor, rhythm, and historical allusion. In doing so, *izibongo* challenges Eurocentric aesthetics by aligning beauty with valour, moral courage, and cultural resistance (Cope 1968; Kunene 1976).

The poetic style of *izibongo* employs dense imagery, layered symbolism, and assertive delivery. Beauty is not perceived as static or superficial but emerges dynamically through action, public virtue, and communal recognition. The praise poet (*imbongi*) crafts lines that extol the subject's physical presence, achievements, and moral integrity, evoking awe and reverence. Warriors, for example, are often likened to forces of nature—"He is the thunder that splits mountains"—emphasising power, action, and reputation as aesthetic qualities (Gunner 1991). The body, especially the male body, becomes a site of beauty as it signifies strength, resistance, and social worth. Yet this is not mere glorification of brute strength—it is a celebration of moral rectitude and communal protection (Mkhize 2004). Although traditional *izibongo* focus less on women, contemporary forms have begun recognising female roles in family, nation-building, and resistance, expanding the aesthetic to include wisdom, resilience, and care (Nyembezi 1959; Gunner 2002).

Izibongo also operates as a vehicle of political and cultural resistance. Under colonial and apartheid rule, it became a covert form of protest, embedding critiques within metaphor and historical reference. Today, it remains central to public discourse, used in political rallies and civic ceremonies to affirm leadership, morality, and cultural pride (Kunene 1976; Finnegan 2012). Ultimately, Zulu praise poetry envisions beauty as embodied ethics and communal legacy. It locates aesthetics in moral action and collective memory, rather than abstract or commodified ideals. As a living tradition, *izibongo* continues to shape South Africa's cultural identity, offering a distinctly African aesthetic rooted in relationality, virtue, and historical consciousness—a compelling decolonial alternative to Western paradigms of beauty.

5. Cross-Case Analysis and Thematic Insights

Across Yoruba *oriki*, Gikuyu folktales, and Zulu *izibongo* (praise poetry), there emerges a rich tapestry of aesthetic values which defies and reinterprets Eurocentric paradigms. Culturally and linguistically differentiated as they may be, these oral forms reveal common philosophical bases and context-specific subtleties in African aesthetic thought. One salient point of convergence is the alignment of beauty with moral, spiritual, and communal values. Beauty is more than merely visual or superficial but expresses itself through character, virtue, and social service. In *oriki*, beauty expresses itself through ancestral calling and individual achievement, positioning people in a shared history. Gikuyu folklore interprets beauty in terms of the practice of what is right—modesty, generosity, and prudence. *Izibongo* celebrates bodily presence and strength but always in pursuit of communal ideals and moral leadership (Achebe 1975; Finnegan 2012; Cope 1968).

Divergences highlight each genre's cultural depth. *Oriki* is genealogical and metaphorical, sung with rhythmic intensity to create beauty through descent and praise (Barber 1991). Gikuyu narratives are allegorical and didactic, often using animals to represent communal values for diverse audiences (Mũgo 1989). Zulu *izibongo* are political and public, sung in ritual contexts to endorse or denounce authority, equating beauty with dignity and moral resistance (Gunner 1991). These variations emphasise that while there is a common relational ontology in African aesthetics, their manifestations are derived from specific traditions and histories.

One central observation is that beauty is not only relational and ethical but tied to ancestral relation, communal balance, and spiritual harmony. This contrasts with Western aesthetics that often emphasise individualism, symmetry, and commodification (Ngũgĩ 1986; Nzegwu 2006). African oral cultures place great emphasis on interdependence and cosmological balance as sites of beauty. Subversions of Western ideals are a recurring theme. Wealth without largesse is portrayed as hideous in Gikuyu narratives, pride without foundation in the ancestors is chastised in *oriki*, and colonial morality is deplored in *izibongo*, making ethical resistance a matter of aesthetic value. They resist Eurocentric hierarchies, commodification, and cultural erasure (Fanon 1967; Mignolo 2011). Overall, though variant in form and content, Yoruba, Gikuyu, and Zulu oral literatures converge in advocating a decolonial aesthetic based on virtue, community, and spirit. In this instance, storytelling is not merely art—instead, it is a practice of philosophy and epistemology that reconfigures beauty on African terms.

6. Discussions: Implications for Aesthetic Theory and Global Discourses

The interrogation of indigenous African oral arts—Yoruba oriki, Gikuyu folk narratives, and Zulu izibongo (praise poetry)—offers a powerful challenge to Eurocentric beauty models and significantly expands global aesthetic theory. Western aesthetics has traditionally privileged formalist ideals such as symmetry, proportion, and individual artistic genius as universal measures of beauty (Bell 1914; Danto 1981). These paradigms often abstract beauty from its cultural, ethical, and spiritual roots, presenting it as a sensory ideal divorced from lived experience.

In contrast, African oral traditions embed beauty in relational, performative, and spiritual contexts deeply rooted in communal life. Oriki links beauty to ancestral legacy, moral virtue, and social accomplishment, blending personal identity with collective values. Gikuyu folktales teach beauty through moral conduct, modesty, and wisdom, conveyed via allegory and moral instruction. Zulu izibongo celebrate courage, leadership, and dignity, framing beauty as ethical strength and public virtue (Finnegan 2012; Ojaide 2010). Here, beauty is not passive or static—it is enacted, embodied, and performed through ritual, narrative, and ethical living.

This challenges aesthetic theory to embrace culturally grounded and ethically engaged frameworks. As Nzegwu (2006) and Eze (2010) argue, beauty in these contexts is a mode of knowing—an epistemological process through which communities preserve history, identity, and values. Such perspectives resist epistemic hierarchies that marginalize non-Western aesthetics as primitive or ethnographic (Mbembe 2001; Mignolo 2011). These oral traditions are also acts of cultural resistance. Under colonial and neocolonial regimes, African aesthetic expressions were delegitimized. Through oriki, folktales, and izibongo, communities reclaim aesthetic sovereignty and affirm their cultural agency (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986; Fanon 1967).

Furthermore, African aesthetics resist commodification. Unlike capitalist models that emphasize spectacle and individualism, they promote communal well-being, spiritual harmony, and ethical living (Nzegwu 2006). Beauty is not consumed—it is lived and shared. Ultimately, African oral traditions propose a decolonial aesthetic grounded in relationality, spirituality, and moral responsibility. Storytelling becomes both an aesthetic and epistemic practice, reaffirming identity, preserving memory, and challenging hegemonic norms. This reconceptualization of beauty enriches global discourse, fostering pluralistic and culturally situated understandings of art and value.

Conclusion

This study has explored how indigenous African oral traditions—Yoruba oriki, Gikuyu folktales, and Zulu praise poetry—convey complex, relational, and performative ideas of beauty that challenge Eurocentric aesthetic frameworks. Rather than abstracting or envisioning beauty as an ideal, these traditions embed it in communal values, moral character, spirituality, and historical memory. In doing so, they reframe aesthetics as an ethical and lived experience, one that is embedded in the cadences of daily life and collective identity.

By foregrounding the relational and embodied nature of beauty, these oral genres break into mainstream Western paradigms that divide aesthetics from society and culture. The study demonstrates that indigenous African knowledges have much to offer global aesthetic theory in advancing a decolonized and pluralist understanding of beauty.

Methodologically, the study combined ethnographic interviews with textual analysis in facilitating intimate engagement with the socio-cultural meanings of oral performances. Limitations include the narrow cultural scope—three linguistic groups—and translation issues, which can stifle tonal and performative subtleties. Logistical considerations also affected access to oral performers.

Future research should broaden the geographical and cultural range of investigation, include comparative work with other Global South traditions, and study the evolving role of digital media in the transmission of indigenous aesthetics. Interdisciplinary approaches would help to capture the full experiential and communal dimensions of oral narrative.

Lastly, this project affirms the imperative of locating African oral traditions at the forefront of aesthetic theory. This reclaims cultural agency, enriches global conversation, and pushes forward the project of decolonizing knowledge and artistic values in the contemporary world.

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The Beauty of Character and the Character of Beauty: A Comparative Study of Ethical Aesthetics in Yorùbá and Greek Storytelling

Abstract

This comparative study explores ethical aesthetics in Yorùbá and Greek storytelling by analysing Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* through the Yorùbá concept of *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* ("character is beauty") and the Greek triad of beauty, goodness, and truth. By examining how these frameworks intertwine beauty with moral character, the paper challenges modern aesthetic theories that separate ethics from aesthetics. It argues that the beauty of storytelling emerges from ethical reflection, offering insights for contemporary narratives, including AI-generated content. This cross-cultural analysis contributes to philosophical aesthetics by highlighting beauty as an ethical achievement rooted in cultural values.

Keywords

Beauty, Storytelling, Ethical Aesthetics, *Ìwàlẹ̀wà*, Greek Triad, Character, Wole Soyinka, Sophocles

Introduction

We begin with a note of caution shared by an aged griot one night, as she told us a tale from the rich Yorùbá oral tradition. That evening, as teenagers arriving late and smelling strongly of perfume, we received a gentle rebuke:

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"shior, ìwàlẹ̀wà" (what a pity, character is beauty). This adage became the foundation of the tale we heard—a story about the beauty of character and character being beauty.

In contemporary aesthetics, beauty is often detached from ethical considerations, which are frequently subordinated to originality, innovation, and creativity as primary artistic values. The advent of Artificial Intelligence further complicates our understanding of beauty, authorship, and creative expression. In an age where AI-generated content challenges traditional notions of authorship, this study revisits Yorùbá and Greek ethical aesthetics to argue that beauty in storytelling remains tied to moral character and human experience.

This study contributes to philosophical aesthetics by demonstrating how Yorùbá and Greek ethical frameworks challenge modern separations of beauty and morality, offering a cross-cultural model for understanding storytelling as an ethical practice. Across diverse cultural traditions, storytelling has long served as a vessel for transmitting not only aesthetic pleasure but also ethical values. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés observes, stories function as "medicine for the hurt parts of the psyche" (Estés 1995, 13) and as "map fragments" guiding us back to our "psychic home" (Estés 1995, 18).

This paper examines how beauty in storytelling is inextricably linked to ethical frameworks through a comparative analysis of two philosophical traditions: the Yorùbá concept of Ìwàlẹ̀wà ("character is beauty") and the Greek triad of beauty, goodness, and truth. This comparative approach is situated within the broader fields of comparative aesthetics and intercultural philosophy, which seek to understand how different cultures conceptualise and value beauty.

Barry Hallen's *The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yorùbá Culture* (2000) provides a detailed exploration of ethical aesthetics in Yorùbá culture, emphasising the centrality of character (ìwà) in judgments of beauty. Similarly, Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) offers a comparative analysis of Yorùbá and Greek tragic forms, illuminating their distinct yet overlapping approaches to fate, duty, and communal responsibility. Additionally, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) emphasises the role of storytelling as a vehicle for transmitting cultural and ethical values, a function that bridges the traditions examined here.

The study selects Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as case studies, due to their shared exploration of ethical aesthetics through duty, fate, and communal responsibility.

As canonical texts in Yorùbá and Greek traditions respectively, they offer rich narratives for comparing how beauty emerges from moral character within distinct cultural frameworks. While other Greek tragedies, such as *Antigone*, explore duty, *Oedipus Rex* uniquely foregrounds the interplay of truth and moral beauty, aligning closely with Ìwàlẹwà's character-driven aesthetics.

The significance of this exploration lies in its response to Tatarkiewicz's notion that beauty encompasses "colour, sound, or thought." We argue that beauty in storytelling manifests primarily through ethical thought—the moral struggles, cultural values, and communal responsibilities that shape the narrative. This perspective offers a counterpoint to contemporary aesthetic theories, which often divorce beauty from its ethical foundations.

***Ìwàlẹwà*: Character as the Foundation of *Yorùbá* Ethical Aesthetics**

In Yorùbá philosophical thought, the concept of ìwàlẹwà ("character is beauty") represents a deeply ethical aesthetic system. The aphorism *ìwà l'ẹwà* (character constitutes beauty) encapsulates a worldview in which moral virtue and aesthetic value are inseparable. This principle shapes Yorùbá artistic expression and cultural values (Abiodun 2001, 22). Unlike Western traditions that may emphasise form or sensory appeal, Yorùbá aesthetics posits that true beauty (*ẹwà*) arises from moral character (*ìwà*).

This is vividly illustrated in Ifá poetry, where the creator-divinity Òrìṣànla "dyes" each being with *ìwà*, simultaneously bestowing existence and character at the dawn of creation. One such Ifá poem reads:

Òrìṣà ń lá d'áró mẹ́ta	Òrìṣàńlá prepared three dyes
Ó dá'kan ní dúdú,	He made one black,
Ó dá'kan ní pupa,	He made one yellow,
Ó dá'kan ní funfun.	He made one white,
Dúdú ni o rẹ mí,	Make me black,
O ó gbọ̀dò rẹ mí ní pupa.	Do not make me yellow
Dúdú ni o rẹ mí,	Make me black,
O ò gbọ̀dò rẹ mí ní funfun,	Do not make me white
Ìwà mi ni o kó tètè rẹ	Dye me with my ìwà first
Ní kùtùkùtù Ọbarìṣa	At the dawn of creation.

(Abiodun 2022, 205)

The term *ìwà* operates on two intertwined levels:

1. Existential dimension (micro-aesthetic order): Defined as "the fact of being, living, or existing," this aspect recognises each entity's unique individuality. Every creation—deity, human, or object—possesses intrinsic beauty by virtue of its distinct *ìwà*.
2. Ethical dimension (macro-aesthetic order): Here, *ìwà* as "character" emphasises moral virtues, particularly *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́* (gentle or good character), which serves as *Ẹ̀ṣó ẹ̀nìyàn* (the adornment of humanity). *Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́*, encompassing virtues such as *Sùúrù* (patience) and *oju-inu* (insightfulness), represents the ethical ideal of Yorùbá aesthetics. This higher order ties individual existence to a broader ethical framework.

This dual framework positions *ìwà* as the generative source of *ẹwà* (beauty), allowing beauty to emerge even in entities deemed imperfect or morally complex. Divinities such as *Ṣònpọ̀nná* (the Yorùbá god of smallpox), *Ṣàngó* (the Yorùbá god of thunder), and *Ògún* (the Yorùbá god of iron and war), despite their potentially destructive traits, are revered for their essential nature. This demonstrates that Yorùbá aesthetics transcends conventional standards of physical perfection or moral purity.

Central to the ethical dimension is *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́*, which embodies virtues such as *Sùúrù* (patience) and *Ifarabale* (composure). These qualities underpin both moral conduct and artistic expression, resonating with Thompson's notion of the "Aesthetic of the Cool," in which balance and composure are prized in Yorùbá art and life (Thompson 1973, 41-42). Thus, *ìwàlẹwà* establishes a framework in which aesthetic value is deeply rooted in moral character, offering a holistic lens through which Yorùbá culture interprets beauty. Hallen (2000) contends that Yorùbá aesthetics prioritise moral discourse, aligning with *ìwàlẹwà*'s emphasis on character, thereby providing a scholarly foundation that underscores the ethical underpinnings of this aesthetic system.

Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́: The Gentle Character as Aesthetic Ideal

Within the broader concept of *ìwà*, the Yorùbá privilege *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́*—gentle character—as the highest expression of moral and aesthetic excellence. As Hallen (2000) notes, this emphasis on gentle character reflects the centrality of ethical considerations in Yorùbá aesthetic judgments, deepening the understanding of *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́* as not merely a personal trait but a culturally valorised ideal.

The macro-aesthetic order privileges *Sùúrù* (patience), considered the first offspring of Olódùmarè (the Creator), as essential for appreciating and accommodating the diverse expressions of beauty in the world (Abiodun 2022, 208). Through *Sùúrù*, one develops the capacity to see beyond immediate appearances and recognise deeper aesthetic qualities or potentials.

Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́ encompasses several qualities essential for both moral development and artistic creation:

- *Sùúrù* (patience)
- *Ifarabale* (calmness/self-control)
- *Iluti* (teachability/good hearing)
- *Imoju-mora* (sensitivity/propriety)
- *Tito* (steadfastness/endurance)
- *Oju-inu* (insightfulness/inner eye)
- *Oju-ona* (design consciousness)

This aesthetic consciousness manifests what Robert Farris Thompson has termed the "Aesthetic of the Cool"—an artistic and ethical philosophy valuing "control, stability, and composure." Thompson observes that "the purer, the cooler a person becomes, the more ancestral he becomes," suggesting that mastery of self through *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́* enables transcendence of the immediate and connection with deeper ancestral wisdom. The Aesthetic of the Cool rejects impulsivity, anger, and petty selfishness as departures from one's "original gift of interiorised nobility and conscience" (Thompson 1973, 41-42).

Artistic Expression and the Creative Process In Yorùbá Philosophy

The concept of *ìwàlẹwà* profoundly shapes Yorùbá artistic production and criticism. The artist (*oníṣẹ́-ọnà*) is considered a devotee of Òrìṣànlá (also known as Òbàtálá), the divinity acknowledged as the first artist and sculptor in Yorùbá tradition. The following *oríkì* (praise poem) of the artist is essentially the same as Òrìṣànlá's, their chief patron:

È mi l'ọmọ agbẹ́ gilérẹ	I, the offspring of the carver of images
Ọmọ agbẹ́ gi rẹbẹtẹ ṣé logé;	Who makes finished statues in wood
È mi l'ọmọ asọgi d'ènìyàn.	and beautifies them.
Nígbà tí a gbẹ́'gi tán,	I change uncarved wood into human
Igí l'ójú;	figures.

Igi l'ẹ́nu
Igí l'ówó
Bẹ́ẹ̀ ni'gí sì l'átàmpàkò
Ẹsẹ méjèèjì ń 'lẹ̀;
Igí sì gún'mú tirẹ̀;
Ó sì ṣẹ gagag a.
Wón kun'gi l'ósùn
Wón ṣẹ'gi lógẹ;
Ó wa kù kí'gi ó fọhùn l'áàfin Ọba
Ọmọ agbẹ́'gi rẹbẹtẹ f'Óba;
Ọmọ asọgi dènìyàn

After working on a piece of wood
It possesses eyes,
It possesses mouth,
It possesses hands,
And mere wood now has toes
Properly positioned on the feet.
Wood now acquires breasts,
Which are full, erect, and attractive.
Red osùn (camwood dye pigment)
gives colour to the wood,
Fitting designs adorn it.
It remains for the wooden figure to
speak before the Ọba
(the Divine Sovereign).
I, the offspring of the accomplished
sculptor who carves for the Ọba
(divine sovereign);
Who transforms ordinary wood into
a living being.

(Akinrinde 1978, 19; Abiodun 2022, 210-211)

For Yorùbá artists, character development is not separate from technical skill but is integral to the creative process itself. An artist must therefore embody *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́* to produce works of genuine beauty. The artistic vocation, like that of the patron deity of Ifá divination, Orunmila, calls for sacrifice and patience, requiring the artist to elevate the creative *ìwà* above personal inclinations. This aesthetic philosophy holds that an impatient artist cannot effectively convey the essence of the subject or execute technically accomplished work. Rather, artists who embody *ìwàpẹ̀lẹ́* demonstrate poise, avoid brute force, maintain a careful gait, express grace, exhibit thoroughness, and achieve fulfilment through their artistic expressions. The artist's own character thus becomes visible in the work, influencing not only its creation but also its reception by viewers.

To achieve this, the artist seeks to realise fully the identity and character of the subject, as implied in the phrase "ṣé lógẹ" (to beautify through artistic activity). The aesthetic considerations necessary for beauty are all rooted in *ìwà*, as the poem affirms:

Ìwà nìkàn ló ṣòro o	Ìwà is all that is needed,
Ìwà nìkàn ló ṣòro	Ìwà is all that is needed,
Orí kan kì í 'burú	There is no Orí to be called bad in Ifẹ̀ of
l'ótú Ifẹ̀	Origins,
Ìwà nìkàn ló ṣòro o	Ìwà is all that is needed.

(Idowu 1962, 155; Abiodun 2022, 219-220)

This Yorùbá saying affirms: "*Ìwà nìkàn ló ṣòro o*" (Character alone is what matters). This principle also holds true in Yorùbá *oríkì* (citation poetry/naming), which serves as a verbal counterpart to the visual arts in the identification and realisation of the unique essence of beings and objects. When a subject expresses the qualities attributed to it in the *oríkì*, it fulfils the most important requisite of *ẹwà* (beauty). Conversely, a thing can become *oburẹwà* (ugly) if its essential character or identity is compromised or lost. This interconnection between verbal and visual arts highlights the integrative nature of Yorùbá aesthetics. The critic's evaluation of visual art is informed by the same principles that govern verbal art forms, with both modalities serving to recognise and celebrate the distinctive *ìwà* of their subjects.

Storytelling for the Yorùbá, which includes oral traditions, proverbs, and, in modern contexts, dramatic works, embodies the virtues of *ìwàlẹwà*. Ethical narratives that reflect and reinforce communal values are thereby created. Consequently, stories are not merely entertainment; they function as moral frameworks designed to cultivate virtues and provoke reflection. *Oríkì* and Ifá divination verses articulate the *ìwà* of individuals and deities, affirming their beauty through narrative expression (Abiodun 2001). For instance, an *oríkì* praising a figure's patience or courage underscores their *ẹwà*, aligning aesthetic appreciation with ethical conduct.

Greek Ethical Aesthetics: Beauty as a Moral and Divine Signifier

In ancient Greek thought, *kalós* ("beauty") was not merely an aesthetic quality but a profound signifier of moral virtue and divine favour. This challenges modern Western separations of aesthetics and ethics. Unlike contemporary views that often limit beauty to subjective taste or sensory pleasure, the Greeks saw *kalós* as encompassing both physical allure and ethical excellence. This is evident in Homer's descriptions of natural phenomena, such as a harbour, and human figures alike, where beauty hints at goodness and divine grace (Riegel 2011, 38). Yet, this connection carried ambiguity,

as Greek literature frequently reveals a tension between beauty's promise and its reality. Hesiod's Pandora, termed a "beautiful evil" (*kalòn kakón*), exemplifies this duality: her outward splendour deceives, masking moral complexity and divine punishment (Riegel 2011, 38). This reflects a core Greek insight—beauty makes a moral claim, promising virtue even when that promise falters, as seen in figures such as Helen, whose loveliness both inspires and devastates.

Beauty's divine dimension further enriches this framework. Extraordinary beauty was often viewed as a mark of divine favour, with figures such as Ganymedes deified "because of beauty" (*kállos héineka*) to dwell among the immortals (Riegel 2011, 89). This link to immortality highlights beauty's transcendent quality, though Achilles' tragic acceptance of his mortality underscores its limits—beauty does not shield against death. Most strikingly, the concept of the "beautiful death" (*kalós thánatos*) in battle elevates beauty to an ideal beyond utility. Homer and Tyrtaeus praise the young warrior's sacrifice as beautiful, contrasting it with the ugliness of an old man's demise in combat, suggesting that such beauty embodies an intrinsic, non-instrumental value—a good tied to honour and sacrifice rather than survival.

Thus, Greek ethical aesthetics weaves together beauty, morality, and divinity into a unified whole, acknowledging both its allure and its potential to mislead. This integrated perspective offers a compelling counterpoint to modern divisions between aesthetic experience and ethical meaning.

Beauty as Vital Affirmation in Philosophical Discourse

The philosophical development of these aesthetic concepts, particularly in Plato and Aristotle, further illuminates the integral connection between beauty and ethical life. Plato situates beauty at the peak moments of metaphysical yearning for an ideal that lies beyond human reach but not beyond human aspiration (Porter 2017, 4). For him, beauty drives one to ecstatic extremes and becomes a pathway to transcendent understanding. In the *Philebus*, for example, Plato explores the complex interplay of pleasure and pain in "life's tragedies and comedies," recognising aesthetic experience as fundamentally connected to our emotional navigation of existence (Russell and Winterbottom 1972, 10).

Aristotle advanced this holistic understanding by explicitly connecting aesthetics to life itself. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he declares that:

> Life is defined... by the power of perception or thought; life seems to be essentially the act of perceiving or thinking. And life is among the things that are good and pleasant in themselves (Barnes 1984, 16).

This perspective places aesthetic experience at the core of human existence rather than as a peripheral domain. Aristotle further argues that "to perceive that we perceive or think is to perceive that we exist" and "that one lives," and crucially, "such perception is pleasant [and desirable] in itself." This connection between perception, existence, and pleasure forms the foundation of an "aesthetics of life."

Character as Aesthetic Achievement

This integrated understanding of aesthetics illuminates why character (*ēthos*) in Greek thought possesses aesthetic dimensions. A virtuous character represents the beautiful arrangement of the soul—the human being functioning according to its proper nature. Just as beauty in nature manifests when something fulfils its purpose excellently, beauty in human character emerges when virtues are harmoniously arranged and expressed.

The Greek philosophical tradition thus presents character development as an aesthetic achievement—the crafting of a beautiful soul through the practice of virtues. The aesthetic and ethical realms converge in the concept of *kalokagathia*—the "beautiful-and-good"—where aesthetic excellence and moral excellence become inseparable aspects of the well-lived life. *Kalokagathia*, the Greek ideal of the "beautiful-and-good," integrates aesthetic and moral excellence, reflecting a harmonious soul. Nussbaum (1986) highlights this convergence in her analysis of Greek tragedy, suggesting that works such as *Oedipus Rex* dramatise the pursuit of *kalokagathia* through their characters' moral struggles. This addition of Nussbaum's perspective enriches the discussion by connecting the philosophical concept of *kalós* to its ethical embodiment in literary narratives, enhancing the intercultural depth of the analysis.

Analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* through the Yorùbá Concept of Ìwàlẹ̀wà

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* explores the Yorùbá philosophical aesthetics of *Ìwàlẹ̀wà*, which posits that true beauty (*ẹ̀wà*) arises from moral character (*ìwà*) aligned with communal duty. Set in colonial Ni-

geria in 1946 and inspired by historical events in Oyo, the play centres on Elesin Oba, the king's horseman, whose ritual duty to accompany the deceased king to the afterlife is disrupted by British colonial interference.

As Abiodun (2022) notes, *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* frames beauty not in terms of external form, as in many Western aesthetic traditions, but as an ethical achievement grounded in virtues such as *suuru* (patience), *igboya* (courage), and *tito* (steadfastness) that sustain social and cosmic harmony. This reading examines how the actions of key characters—Elesin Oba, Olunde, Simon Pilkings, and Iyaloja—reflect or deviate from this principle, positioning the play as both a critique of ethical lapses and a reaffirmation of Yorùbá metaphysical values.

In his author's note, Soyinka insists that the play is not merely a "clash of cultures" but a metaphysical meditation on transition, rooted in the Yorùbá worldview that encompasses the living, the dead, the unborn, and the liminal passage between them. Through the lens of *Ìwàlẹ̀wà*, the characters' moral choices are revealed not merely as personal decisions but as disruptions or affirmations of a broader cosmic order—establishing beauty as a manifestation of ethical being.

Elesin Oba: Ethical Failure and the Loss of Beauty

Elesin Oba begins the play as a figure of vitality, communal honour, and potential moral beauty. The praise singer describes him thus:

> You are that man who
> Chanced upon the calabash of honour
> You thought it was palm wine and
> Drained its contents to the final drop.
>
> (Soyinka 1975, 15)

This hyperbolic praise positions him as a man who embodies the Yorùbá ideal of *Ìwàlẹ̀wà*—beauty grounded in character. His entrance into the market is marked by exuberance and confidence:

> I am master of my Fate. When the hour comes
> Watch me dance along the narrowing path
> Glazed by the soles of my great precursors.
>
> (Soyinka 1975, 14)

These lines evoke virtues such as *igboya* (courage), *oju-ona* (design consciousness), and *tito* (steadfastness), suggesting that Elesin could achieve the ethical beauty upheld by Yorùbá aesthetics.

However, this promise unravels. His sudden desire for a young bride in Act 1—"Her eyes / Were new-laid eggs glowing in the dark" (Soyinka 1975, 19)—signals a lapse in *suuru* (patience) and *ifarabale* (calmness), as he prioritises personal gratification over his ritual obligation to the community. Though he later blames colonial interference—"My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race" (Soyinka 1975, 64)—his earlier hesitation suggests an internal weakness, a failure of *tito* (steadfastness), that undermines his moral and aesthetic integrity.

Iyaloja's rebuke in Act 5—"You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side" (Soyinka 1975, 68)—cements his descent into *oburẹwà* (ugliness), as his failure disrupts the spiritual passage and brings shame upon the community. Although his eventual suicide represents a partial act of agency, it comes too late to restore the harmony he has broken. Elesin's tragic arc thus illustrates a core tenet of *Ìwàlẹwà*: beauty dissipates when moral character falls out of alignment with communal and cosmic duty, challenging aesthetic traditions that divorce beauty from ethics.

Olunde: Beauty Restored through Ethical Sacrifice

Olunde, Elesin's son, emerges as the embodiment of *Ìwàlẹwà*, restoring communal harmony through deliberate and selfless sacrifice. Educated in England yet firmly rooted in Yorùbá values, Olunde returns home upon hearing of the king's death, fully aware of his father's ritual duty. When Elesin fails, Olunde steps in to fulfil the role himself. His decision to die in his father's place reflects *igboya* (courage), *tito* (steadfastness), and *imoju-mora* (sensitivity)—virtues that align individual action with the greater moral and metaphysical order (Soyinka 1975, 74).

Olunde's ethical clarity is further revealed in his calm yet incisive exchange with Jane Pilkings in Act 4. Responding to her inability to grasp the gravity of his father's duty, he asks:

> What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? (Soyinka 1975, 53)

This moment demonstrates oju-inu (insightfulness) and ifarabale (calm composure), as he gently but firmly challenges colonial assumptions. His sacrifice ensures the continuation of the Yorùbá cycle of transition, re-establishing spiritual balance disrupted by both colonial interference and his father's hesitation.

Iyaloja's final remark—"The son has proved the father" (Soyinka 1975, 74)—confirms Olunde's moral beauty. His character enacts Ìwàlẹwà not as a static trait, but as an active process of ethical restoration. In doing so, Olunde offers a living critique of Western aesthetics' emphasis on individual expression, revealing instead a model in which beauty is inseparable from moral action and communal responsibility.

Iyaloja: The Ethical Custodian of Beauty

Iyaloja's steadfastness as a guardian of tradition exemplifies *Ìwàlẹwà*. Her facilitation of ritual demands—permitting Elesin's taking of her potential daughter-in-law, despite personal cost—reflects *suuru* (patience) and *oju-ona* (consciousness), while her eventual rebuke of Elesin after he falters and her orchestration of Olunde's rites showcase *tito* (steadfastness) and *imoju-mora* (sensitivity) (Soyinka 1975, 21, 67). Her final critique of colonial interference ties beauty to ethical stewardship of the cosmic order: "The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot" (Soyinka 1975, 76). Iyaloja's role as an *amewi* (expert on beauty) highlights *Ìwàlẹwà*'s contribution to aesthetic theory: beauty is a communal ethic, not an individual trait. This challenges Western form-centric paradigms.

This analysis demonstrates how *Death and the King's Horseman* uses *Ìwàlẹwà* to critique ethical deviations and affirm beauty as a moral construct, thereby enriching philosophical discourse on aesthetics beyond narrative detail.

Analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* through Greek Ethical Aesthetics

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* engages the Greek ethical framework, particularly *kalokagathia*—the ideal of beauty (*kalos*) fused with moral goodness (*agathos*)—and the triad of beauty, goodness, and truth. Aristotle's view that ethical harmony underpins aesthetic value (Barnes 1984, 16) informs this

analysis, which explores how Oedipus' actions reflect or undermine these principles, contributing to philosophical debates on beauty's dependence on virtue and truth.

Oedipus' Initial Harmony: Beauty as Ethical Value

Oedipus begins as an embodiment of *kalokagathia*, lauded as Thebes' saviour and "our bastion against disaster" (Sophocles 1947, 59). His resolve to aid his people aligns with Greek virtues such as *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *dikaiosyne* (justice), suggesting that beauty arises from ethical excellence. This reflects the Greek belief that moral goodness enhances aesthetic worth, a principle distinct from modern aesthetics' focus on form alone.

Hubris: The Ethical Breach Undermining Beauty

Oedipus' hubris—overconfidence in his own wisdom—disrupts this harmony, violating *sophrosyne* (moderation), a key Greek virtue (Nussbaum 1986, 89). His dismissal of Teiresias and accusations against Creon elevate personal insight above divine truth, fracturing the triad's unity (Sophocles 1947, 19). In Greek thought, such ethical imbalance inverts beauty into ugliness, as moral flaws negate aesthetic value. Oedipus' hubris critiques aesthetic theories that divorce beauty from ethical grounding, affirming Aristotle's linkage of virtue and harmony.

Anagnorisis: Truth's Revelation and Aesthetic Collapse

Oedipus' *anagnorisis*, the moment he uncovers his patricide and incest, shatters his initial beauty. Once the Messenger from Corinth reveals his true identity, he realises his sins, exclaiming: "Sinful in my begetting, Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood!" (Sophocles 1947, 58).

Though unintentional, these acts breach natural law, transforming him into a "cursed polluter" (Sophocles 1947, 35). His self-blinding—an act of retribution—reflects the Greek principle that justice must follow ethical rupture, stripping him of *kalokagathia*. This shift contributes to philosophy by illustrating how truth, even when devastating, is integral to beauty, challenging modern views that prioritise subjective experience over moral order.

The Aesthetic of Tragedy: Catharsis Through Pity and Fear

Sophocles crafts the tragedy's aesthetic to evoke Aristotle's *catharsis*—pity for Oedipus' suffering and fear of his fate—through stark imagery, such as Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' blinding (Sophocles 1947, 61). The Chorus' cry of "Horror beyond all bearing!" amplifies this emotional response, inviting the audience to grapple with the ethical stakes of his downfall. This cathartic experience reinforces the triad: beauty emerges from confronting moral truth, not avoiding it. Sophocles thus positions *Oedipus Rex* as a philosophical inquiry into how ethical failures reshape aesthetic experience, distinct from narrative alone.

Comparative Analysis: *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* and the Greek Triad in Storytelling

This comparative analysis explores how *Death and the King's Horseman* and *Oedipus Rex* illuminate *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* and the Greek triad of beauty, goodness, and truth as distinct yet philosophically rich aesthetic frameworks. Moving beyond narrative parallels, the analysis foregrounds their contributions to ethical aesthetics. As Earl Miner argues in *Comparative Poetics* (1990), understanding aesthetic systems requires situating them within their unique cultural contexts. This principle guides the present study, which contrasts *Ìwàlẹ̀wà*—where beauty emerges from character virtues that sustain communal harmony—with the Greek triad, which links beauty to individual virtue and cosmic order through the concept of *kalokagathia*, the ideal of the "beautiful-and-good." The ethical depth of Elesin and Oedipus' struggles suggests that beauty in storytelling, unlike AI-generated outputs, derives from human engagement with moral dilemmas.

Ethical Foundations of Beauty

Both systems assert that beauty is inseparable from ethics, yet they diverge in their emphasis on communal versus individual responsibility. In Yorùbá aesthetics, *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* frames beauty as a moral achievement grounded in virtues such as *suuru* (patience), *igboya* (courage), and *tito* (steadfastness). These are embodied in characters like Olunde and Iyaloja, whose actions restore communal harmony (Soyinka 1975, 74, 76). A beautiful character is one who fulfils their role in preserving the spiritual and social fabric of the community.

In contrast, the Greek triad—rooted in *kalokagathia*—links beauty to individual excellence through virtues such as *sophrosyne* (moderation) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Oedipus' initial nobility exemplifies this alignment, while his fall reflects the fragility of human virtue under divine or cosmic forces (Sophocles 1947, 59). Both traditions, therefore, define beauty not by form but by ethical alignment—whether with community in Yorùbá thought or with divine order in Greek philosophy.

Agency, Fate, and Aesthetic Value

Both plays stage a dramatic tension between human agency and forces beyond human control, albeit with different philosophical inflections. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, beauty is contingent on one's willing embrace of duty: Elesin's failure reflects a lapse in agency and moral character, while Olunde's sacrifice restores *ẹwà* and the disrupted cosmological balance (Soyinka 1975, 68, 74). Here, agency is central to the manifestation of beauty.

By contrast, Oedipus Rex presents fate as inescapable. Oedipus' downfall is not the result of moral failure but the tragic inevitability of fulfilling a divine prophecy despite noble intent. His beauty lies in the tragic dignity with which he confronts this fate—a perspective that locates aesthetic value in the human struggle against metaphysical inevitability (Sophocles 1947, 58). The Yorùbá framework foregrounds ethical action within cultural roles, whereas the Greek tradition emphasises the existential tension between virtue and destiny.

Beauty, Storytelling and Communal Values

Both traditions view storytelling as a vehicle for transmitting communal values through ethical beauty. In Yorùbá thought, beautiful stories exemplify virtues such as patience, humility, and duty, which sustain social harmony and communal well-being. The beauty of characters like Olunde or Iyaloja lies in how their choices reinforce the metaphysical order. In Greek tragedy, beauty emerges from the ethical clarity or suffering of the protagonist, offering insight into the human condition within a divine or cosmic framework. Stories serve as moral maps: in Yorùbá thought, they guide the community; in Greek thought, they illuminate the individual's struggle with destiny.

Beauty in Contemporary Storytelling: Implications and Applications

This comparative analysis offers important insights into how beauty might be reimagined in contemporary storytelling. Both the Yorùbá concept of *Ìwàlẹ́wà* and the Greek triad of beauty, goodness, and truth challenge modern Western aesthetics, which often separate beauty from ethical substance. Together, they suggest that beauty is not an autonomous or purely formal quality but one that is ethically contingent—emerging from a character's moral choices, communal responsibility, or struggle with fate.

Ìwàlẹ́wà redefines beauty as a social ethic grounded in lived experience and communal harmony, offering a counterpoint to Western individualism. The Greek triad, particularly through *kalokagathia*, integrates beauty with truth and moral goodness, critiquing aesthetic theories that ignore ethical consequences. Both traditions contest modern form-over-substance paradigms by insisting that the most compelling narratives are those deeply engaged with ethical dilemmas and human values.

These insights take on renewed relevance in an age of AI-generated storytelling. Algorithmic narratives, while often novel and technically proficient, tend to prioritise pattern recognition and stylistic innovation over ethical engagement (Manovich 2001). The Yorùbá emphasis on character as the source of beauty suggests that such works may lack *ẹ̀wà*—true beauty—if divorced from moral depth and communal context. Similarly, the Greek notion of beauty as arising from the human struggle with truth and fate casts doubt on whether AI can replicate the existential tension at the heart of meaningful narrative.

As global storytelling increasingly crosses cultural and technological boundaries, sensitivity to diverse ethical-aesthetic frameworks becomes essential. The Yorùbá and Greek traditions remind us that beauty in storytelling is neither universal nor static, but culturally situated and ethically earned. Contemporary storytellers—and theorists—may find that the enduring power of narrative lies not in surface form, but in its ability to reflect, challenge, and refine our shared moral imagination. Both traditions suggest that beauty in storytelling emerges not from aesthetic techniques alone but from the depth of ethical exploration. Consequently, contemporary storytellers might recognise that beauty arises not merely from stylistic innovation, but from meaningful engagement with ethical questions that resonate across human experience.

Conclusion

This comparative exploration of Yorùbá and Greek ethical aesthetics demonstrates that beauty in storytelling is fundamentally tied to ethical frameworks rather than mere aesthetic appeal. Whether through the Yorùbá concept of *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* or the Greek triad of beauty, goodness, and truth, the most compelling narratives are those that engage deeply with questions of character, virtue, and human values.

By integrating *Ìwàlẹ̀wà* and the Greek triad, this study advances philosophical aesthetics, proposing that beauty in storytelling is an ethical achievement—one that remains highly relevant to contemporary debates on narrative authenticity and AI-generated art. In an age where artistic merit increasingly privileges innovation and originality over traditional aesthetic values, these ancient traditions remind us that the most beautiful stories are not necessarily the most novel or technically accomplished, but those that illuminate the ethical dimensions of human experience.

As Tatarkiewicz (2005, 77) suggests, beauty encompasses "colour, sound, or thought." Our analysis argues that, in storytelling, beauty emerges primarily through ethical thought: the exploration of character virtues, moral dilemmas, and communal responsibilities. Recognising beauty as an ethical achievement in storytelling allows us to reclaim its enduring relevance in contemporary creative expression, even as new technologies and artistic movements transform the narrative landscape.

In the words of the Yorùbá proverb, "ìwà l'òrìṣà, bí a bá ti hùú sí ni í gbẹ̀ni" (character is the deity which, depending on the degree of our devotion to it, blesses us with its beauty). Perhaps, in contemporary storytelling, beauty remains most powerfully present when narrative reflects a devotion to ethical character—both in the content of the story and in the storyteller's approach to their craft.

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Storytelling as a Tool for Aesthetic Inquiry in Disability Arts

Abstract

This paper examines how Nigerian disability arts use storytelling to redefine beauty and challenge social norms through two plays, *Ẹ̀ni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues*. Drawing on Mitchell and Snyder's idea of "narrative prosthesis," Quayson's Aesthetic Nervousness, and Siebers' notion of "broken beauty," it analyses how these works subvert traditions that frame disability as tragedy. Centring disabled characters as creative agents, the plays resist both local stigma and Western aesthetic hierarchies, reframing disability as a site of artistic and cultural innovation. Grounded in Yorùbá cosmology, the study reimagines beauty as an embrace of human variation. Through audience responses and performance analysis, it shows how these plays expand Nigerian theatre's expressive range and articulate a non-Western contribution to global disability aesthetics.

Keywords

Storytelling, Disability Arts, Aesthetic Inquiry, Yorùbá, Social Change, Advocacy, Stigma, Society

Introduction

Nigerian theatre has historically marginalised disability, either excluding it entirely or portraying it as tragic, cursed, or symbolic of moral failure. When disabled characters appear, as in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* or Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead*, they typically serve as sacrificial figures or symbols of social decay rather than complex individuals with agency. This pattern reflects broader cultural attitudes that position disability as divine punishment or societal burden, perpetuating what Lennard Davis terms the enforcement of "normalcy" (Davis 1995, 47).

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Against this backdrop, two contemporary Nigerian plays challenge these entrenched representations: *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues*. As both playwright and researcher, I acknowledge my dual position in creating and analysing these works. This positioning offers unique insights into the creative process while requiring careful attention to external validation and critical distance. To address potential bias, this analysis incorporates audience feedback, performance reviews, and theoretical frameworks that extend beyond my authorial intentions.

These plays participate in what Tobin Siebers calls "disability aesthetics"—an artistic approach that positions disability not as deviation from beauty but as a source of aesthetic value (Siebers 2010, 8). However, this concept requires cultural translation. While Siebers develops "broken beauty" within Western contexts, Nigerian aesthetic traditions offer different frameworks for understanding bodily difference, particularly through Yorùbá concepts of divine creativity and human diversity.

Defining Beauty in Context

For this analysis, beauty encompasses both aesthetic appreciation of human diversity and cultural recognition of worth beyond normative physical standards. In Nigerian contexts, this definition draws from Yorùbá cosmology, where Obatala's creation of diverse bodies reflects divine creativity rather than error. Beauty here means the aesthetic value found in difference, resilience, and the full spectrum of human experience—a definition that challenges both Western ideals of bodily perfection and local stigmatising beliefs.

This paper examines how *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* employ storytelling to redefine beauty through three interconnected approaches: aesthetic innovations that embody 'broken beauty' within Nigerian cultural contexts, the creation of 'disability gain' that expands theatrical possibilities, and the transformation of audience engagement through what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls productive 'staring' (Garland-Thomson 2009, 7).

Theoretical Framework and Nigerian Theatrical Context

Disability in Nigerian Theatre: Historical Patterns

Nigerian theatre's treatment of disability reflects broader cultural attitudes rooted in colonial, religious, and traditional belief systems. Pre-colonial Yorùbá traditions, while acknowledging Obatala's creation of diverse bodies,

often interpreted disability through spiritual lenses that could be either protective or stigmatising. Colonial education and Christian missions introduced Western medical models that pathologised disability. This is what forms the crux of Ola Rotimi's play *Hopes of the Living Dead*, which revolves around people living with leprosy who were continuously exiled from society. Similarly, Nollywood films frequently portrayed disability as evil, objects of pity, lacking agency and complexity (Adegbenro 2024, 2864).

Contemporary Nigerian theatre has begun challenging these representations, though disability-centred works remain rare. Chukwudi Michael Okoye's "Rehabdramatics" uses applied theatre for therapeutic intervention with disabled children (Okoye 2020), while scattered academic works examine disability through cultural and medical lenses (Abang 1988; Kurawa 2010). However, few works position disability as a central aesthetic concern or explore its potential for theatrical innovation.

This context makes *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* significant interventions. Unlike therapeutic or problem-focused approaches, these plays centre disabled characters as complex individuals whose stories challenge aesthetic and social norms. They build on but move beyond existing Nigerian theatrical traditions by positioning disability as a source of beauty and strength rather than limitation or tragedy.

Narrative Prosthesis in Nigerian Context

Mitchell and Snyder's concept of "narrative prosthesis" describes how disability serves as a foundational device in literary storytelling, functioning in two primary ways: "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterisation and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 47). They argue that narratives depend on disability as a "crutch" to lend uniqueness to characters and to materialise abstract themes, a dependency they term "narrative prosthesis." In Nigerian theatre, this concept takes on heightened complexity due to cultural beliefs that imbue disability with spiritual significance. Traditional Nigerian perspectives often urge individuals to maintain favour with the divinities to avoid being "struck with disabilities" (Etieyibo 2022, 5); while Christian narratives frequently frame disability as a "curse and punishment" (Ìbírónkẹ́ *et al.* 2024, 401). Far from being a neutral trait, disability in Nigerian storytelling carries profound moral and spiritual weight, amplifying its prosthetic role. This aligns with Kafer's argument that disability representations are never culture-free but always embedded in specific ideological contexts that shape how bodies are read and judged (Kafer 2013, 4).

In this context, disability is not merely a literary tool but a culturally loaded symbol that shapes narrative dynamics. Mitchell and Snyder note that disability often serves as "a primary impetus of the storyteller's efforts", driving plots through the "exceptionality" it introduces (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 55). Nigerian theatre leverages this by intertwining disability with cultural narratives—such as divine tests or retribution—to craft stories that resonate with audiences familiar with these beliefs. However, the plays *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* both utilise and challenge this prosthetic function. They employ disability to propel their narratives, by centring disabled characters as catalysts for conflict or resolution, yet they resist reducing these characters to mere metaphors or symbols of societal ills.

For example, in *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, Dadara—a blind character—anchors the drama: his difference drives community decisions and fuels the plot much like the missing leg in Victorian children's story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*. Yet rather than treating disability as a static flaw that must be punished, the play renders Dadara as a full, agentive subject who even becomes king; this refusal of simple moral closure resonates with Mitchell and Snyder's critique that narrative often disciplines the disabled body even as it fetishises it (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 57). At the same time, the play's handling of relational meaning—how disabled bodies and social forms mutually shape one another—maps onto Karen Barad's idea of "intra-action," where subjects and meanings emerge through entangled relations rather than pre-existing categories. *Disability Monologues* works in the same register: it foregrounds multiple, situated disabled experiences rather than collapsing them into a single symbolic function. That move echoes both Mitchell and Snyder's demand to interrogate how narrative frames disability and scholarship that uses agential-relational vocabularies to resist reductive readings (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 48).

While Barad's framework explains the entangled formation of meaning and matter, Jasbir Puar's work shifts attention to how power structures distribute vulnerability across bodies. Barad's "intra-action" (Barad 2007, 33) describes how entities do not pre-exist their relations but emerge through them, a useful lens for reading how disabled characters and social environments co-constitute one another within performance. Puar (2017), by contrast, interrogates how states, economies, and institutions produce debility—a managed condition of bodily compromise—as part of broader biopolitical control (Puar 2017, xiv). When read together, Barad's ontology of relational becoming and Puar's critique of systemic debilitation explain both

the narrative and structural dimensions of disability representation in theatre: one addresses how meaning materialises through relation; the other exposes how certain bodies are strategically incapacitated by design.

When these plays engage with disability as both a narrative driver and a site of resistance, they critique the cultural lens that views disability solely as a spiritual or moral anomaly. Thus, they align with Mitchell and Snyder's insight that disability can "destabilise sedimented cultural meanings" (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 48) about bodily deviance, offering alternative portrayals that humanise rather than objectify. In doing so, *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* harness storytelling as a tool for aesthetic inquiry, using disability not just as a prosthetic device but as a means to explore and reframe lived experiences within Nigeria's disability arts.

Broken Beauty: Cultural Translation

Tobin Siebers' concept of "broken beauty" offers a provocative lens for reimagining disability within aesthetic frameworks. Siebers challenges Western ideals of physical perfection by arguing that vandalised art, such as Michelangelo's *Pietà* or the Venus de Milo, gains a new representational power through damage: "Vandalised images fail to represent what they represented before their injury—and yet we resist the fact. The act of vandalism changes the referential function of the art work, creating a new image in its own right" (Siebers 2002, 223). This shift invites beholders to "fantasise about what damaged images mean," (Siebers 2002, 224), opening possibilities for seeing disability as a potent aesthetic form rather than a defect.

In Nigerian contexts, this resonates with indigenous aesthetic traditions, particularly the Yorùbá concept of divine creativity embodied by Ọbàtálá, the deity who shapes human bodies with intentional diversity. Bodily differences here are expressions of divine narrative, not departures from perfection. This temporal and affective reconfiguration echoes Alison Kafer's idea of crip time, a non-linear temporality that resists the forward march of ableist aesthetics (Kafer 2013, 27). Thus, suggesting that both Nigerian and Western frameworks, though distinct, converge on an understanding of difference as a site of creative and political possibility.

However, translating Siebers' framework into Nigerian storytelling and art reveals both alignment and productive tension. Yorùbá oral traditions and visual arts—such as sculptures depicting Ọbàtálá's creations—often celebrate bodily difference as part of divine design, yet these coexist with stigmatising beliefs that label disability as punishment or aberration.

Siebers observes that "the presence of injury arouses our concern for the object and triples the sense of immediacy projected by it" (Siebers 2002, 233), a dynamic mirrored in Nigerian storytelling where disability provokes visceral responses that challenge preconceived notions of beauty and value. In Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, the character "Ifada"—described in the stage directions as "an idiot" embodies a "broken" figure marked for ritual sacrifice, a body rendered meaningful only through its offering for communal redemption (Soyinka 2001, 52). Yet, in *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, this archetype undergoes rupture: the disabled protagonist resists the sacrificial logic and emerges as a figure of resistance and integrity, disrupting both indigenous stigma and colonial hierarchies. This refusal resonates with the disability justice framework developed by queer and trans disabled activists of colour and advanced through the work of the Sins Invalid performance collective, which centres leadership from those most marginalised while linking ableism to other systems of oppression (Sins Invalid, 2016).

In Nigerian disability arts, "broken beauty" transcends aesthetic appreciation to become an active tool for cultural and political resistance. Siebers notes that vandalised art's "shattered form invokes the idea of disability," rendering it "rawer, more immediate, more potent" (Siebers 2002, 233). Similarly, Nigerian artists and storytellers can leverage this potency—whether through asymmetrical carved figures or disabled protagonists—to challenge both Western perfection ideals and local pathologisation. Framing bodily differences as divine creations, these works resist the "beautification" of disability, where art risks sanitising disability into an object of curiosity rather than a subject of dignity. Instead, they push "the representation of disability beyond the limits of representation itself," presenting it as strange, immediate, and unapologetic (Siebers 2002, 225).

Storytelling amplifies this resistance. Unlike static visual art, oral narratives can reframe "broken beauty" by weaving bodily difference into tales of divine intent and human complexity. A figure with visible bodily difference moulded by Ọbàtálá, for example, becomes a counter-narrative to colonial missionary tales equating disability with sin and to traditional beliefs and local practices that ostracise difference. Siebers' argues that "the future authenticity of the work somehow relies on preserving its status as disabled" (Siebers 2002, 235); similarly, just as restorers of vandalised art preserve damage to honour its history, conscious Nigerian storytellers preserve the "brokenness" of their characters to affirm their authenticity and resist erasure. This imaginative world-forming labour—the creative practice of fashioning liveavle future and rearranged social relations beyond ableist norms—is what Robert McRuer calls "crip worldmaking" (McRuer 2022, 5).

Yet this translation demands vigilance. Siebers warns of "enfreakment," where disability risks becoming spectacle rather than subject. Nigerian storytellers must ensure that "broken beauty" reframes disability within indigenous frameworks without exoticising it. The Yorùbá tradition of divine creativity offers a foundation, but demands active confrontation with coexisting stigma. Thus, "broken beauty" in Nigerian storytelling becomes a dual act: it draws from Siebers' aesthetic vision to reimagine disability as a powerful form, while engaging indigenous narratives to resist both local and global pathologisations—a more intricate cultural negotiation than Siebers' framework anticipates.

Ultimately, through storytelling, Nigerian disability arts can embody "broken beauty" as a form of aesthetic inquiry that challenges dominant perceptions. By integrating Siebers' ideas with Yorùbá concepts of divine diversity, this approach ensures a dialogue between art and lived experience, offering new visions of disability that are neither beautified nor freakish, but authentically human. In doing so, it not only enriches the theoretical framework of disability arts but also positions storytelling as a transformative tool for cultural translation and social change.

Aesthetic Nervousness and Cultural Disruption

Ato Quayson defines "aesthetic nervousness" as the unease that emerges when "the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability" (Quayson 2013, 202). This disruption operates on multiple levels: in the interactions between disabled and nondisabled characters, across the narrative structure and symbolic architecture, and in the charged relation between the audience and performance. In Nigerian theatre, this nervousness carries extra cultural weight because it confronts layered registers of meaning—indigenous cosmologies, missionary histories, and modern prejudices—all at once. *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* stage that short-circuiting, placing disability at the centre so that it is agentive rather than peripheral; this is precisely the aesthetic and ethical tension Quayson diagnoses. This is in line with what Anthropologists and disability arts term worlding or world-making to describe how arts and cultural practices produce alternative ontologies (Ginsburg, Rapp 2024; Chandler 2018). Petra Kuppers' work on disability culture and community performance likewise shows how performance practices cultivate new social textures and imaginaries—what performance does, in practice, to rearrange how worlds are lived and felt (Kuppers 2011). So, when Nigerian sto-

rytelling preserves a character's "brokenness" rather than erasing it, the act does double work: it is an aesthetic move (Siebers' "broken beauty") and a form of cultural worlding or re-worlding that remakes social possibility (Siebers 2002; Ginsburg, Rapp 2024; Kuppers 2011).

In many Nigerian contexts, disability is also read through spiritual and moral lenses—as divine will or as punishment—which intensifies aesthetic nervousness when theatre refuses tidy readings (Etieyibo 2022; Ìbírónkẹ́ 2024). Quayson insists that disability "returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core," demanding that audiences confront the moral assumptions behind their spectatorship (Quayson 2007, 205). In *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, Dadara's arc reframes disability from curse to resilience, disrupting traditional storytelling conventions and inviting cultural reflection. This short-circuiting of representational norms—where disability refuses containment or resolution—generates heightened tension on stage, transforming performance into a site of both aesthetic inquiry and potential societal transformation. This rupture is also temporal: the plays refuse the teleology of cure and recovery and instead insist on disability as an ongoing present reality, which Ìbírónkẹ́ and Iwuh term "nowification"—disability as a "now" (Ìbírónkẹ́, Iwuh 2025, 209). This generates heightened tension on stage, transforming performance into a site of both aesthetic inquiry and potential societal transformation. That refusal aligns with Alison Kafer's account of crip temporality—a set of temporal strategies that contest linear, ableist chronologies (Kafer 2013).

Nigerian theatre's engagement with postcolonial themes deepens this nervousness. Colonial narratives historically positioned disabled bodies as emblems of societal failure, a legacy that feeds contemporary prejudice. By centring disabled agency, *Disability Monologues* resists those reductions, using first-person testimony to expose systemic bias. Quayson observes that such representation "oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains" (Quayson 2013, 205)—a tension that Nigerian theatre harnesses to provoke audience discomfort and complicity. The plays' fragmented narratives, unresolved plotlines, and dialogical structures enact what Alison Kafer theorises: disability troubles linear, teleological narratives and the futurist logics that underwrite ableist coherence, producing temporal and narrative forms that resist neat closure (Kafer 2013).

Crucially, this aesthetic nervousness resists the familiar prosthetic closure that seeks to "fix" disability and thereby restore normalcy. Quayson observes that disability can cause the "literary operation of open-endedness to close down or stumble" (Quayson 2013, 209, citing Mitchell, Snyder

2000). *Disability Monologues*, for example, presents fragmented narratives that resist a single, authoritative interpretation and so sustain the disruptive tension Quayson attributes to disability. That stumbling is deliberate: a refusal to smooth over difference that leaves audiences suspended in ethical discomfort rather than comforted by resolution. This formal refusal to resolve the spectacle parallels Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of the stare; by compelling spectators to confront the visible body instead of averting their gaze, performance reveals viewers' investments in normalcy and demands ethical reckoning (Garland-Thomson 2009).

Contemporary Challenges: AI, New Media, and the Aesthetics of Disability

The rise of AI and new media presents both opportunities and challenges for disability representation in Nigeria, reshaping traditional notions of beauty and disability. AI-driven tools, such as audio descriptions for the visually impaired or gesture-based interfaces for those with mobility impairments, empower disabled individuals to create and experience art. However, these technologies often reinforce Western beauty standards, erasing bodily differences and clashing with local aesthetics, like those in Yorùbá culture, and Tobin Siebers' "broken beauty," which celebrates imperfection. In Nigeria's growing digital space, AI's tendency to prioritise "perfect" outputs risks normalising disability rather than authentically representing it, as seen in platforms like Instagram where filters "correct" deviations.

Despite these challenges, new media offers resistance by amplifying disabled Nigerian voices on platforms like X, disrupting stereotypes and foregrounding lived experiences over symbolic narratives. Yet, the attention-driven nature of these platforms can reduce disability to "inspiration porn," undermining genuine representation. Projects like *Disability Monologues* leverage digital storytelling to reach wider audiences while preserving participatory traditions, countering AI's homogenising effects. This intersection of local culture and global trends heightens "aesthetic nervousness," where digital encounters—such as virtual reality simulations—challenge bodily assumptions and disrupt cultural perceptions of disability in Nigeria, often tied to spiritual or moral meanings.

Ethically, the integration of AI and new media raises concerns about agency and inclusion. AI models, often trained on unrepresentative datasets, may misrepresent disabled experiences, while the digital divide limits

access. To ensure these technologies empower rather than marginalise, disabled Nigerian artists and communities must actively shape their development, ensuring authentic representation over external biases.

Aesthetic Nervousness and Cultural Disruption Aesthetic Innovations: Embodying "Broken Beauty"

Cultural Symbolism and Aesthetic Reimagining

Ẹni Òrìṣà employs Yorùbá cultural symbols to reframe disability aesthetically. The play opens with a crowd chanting "*Orisa ma binu o, abuke yi o e pa*" (Gods, do not be angry, this hunchback must be killed), invoking traditional beliefs about disability as divine error. However, the narrative systematically subverts this belief. When Dadara, the blind protagonist, says:

> In your heart, people with disabilities are a liability, they are a tool. For you, disability is a but, a hindrance, a marker of a person who bears your burdens. But you are wrong. Disability is a now. It is a mere reality similar to any other (*Ẹni Òrìṣà* 2025, 23).

This declaration repositions disability from spiritual aberration to an ordinary aspect of humanity, not a divine mistake, thus transforming cultural symbolism into a tool for inclusion. This reframing gains validation through an audience response given during the 2025 reading of the play at Kilimanjaro Youth Foundation, one reader commented: "I came expecting the usual "disability as curse" story, but in the Dadara story, I see blindness differently—that honestly, blindness might be another way of being human." Such responses suggest the play successfully challenges ingrained beliefs while remaining culturally resonant.

The plays' aesthetic innovations extend beyond individual characters to cultural symbols. In *Disability Monologues* cultural motifs are reinterpreted to critique societal biases. In the monologue "*Ori Ade o Kin Sunta*," the speaker—a disabled former king—reflects on his life experience, how he grew up a warrior, had a wife he loved, and ascended the throne of his ancestors, until one day when he is injured at battle and becomes impaired. He says "Yesterday I was King, today I am Cripple" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 9), highlighting the societal belief system prejudice that devalues him post-disability. These uses of symbolism not only challenge traditional aesthetics but also reclaim Nigerian heritage as a space for inclusive representation. Two research theses using the performance as a case study consistently

noted the play's "fresh take on Yorùbá traditions" and "compelling challenge to disability stereotypes" (Okunuga 2024, 32; Adeleke 2024, 23). These responses, beyond my authorial intentions, suggest successful aesthetic innovation.

Narrative Innovation and Authenticity

In *Disability Monologues*, the style is deliberately raw and direct. It prioritises authenticity over polish. In "I Am Not the Crippled," the speaker confronts audiences directly: "Look at you. You heard "crippled," and like a rehearsed choir, your eyes shifted to my wheelchair" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 5). This unfiltered approach aligns with Siebers' argument that disability aesthetics values authentic experience over idealised representation.

The monologue format creates intimacy while challenging theatrical conventions. Rather than observing disability from a distance, audiences encounter direct address that demands ethical response. An audience member noted: "When he called out our staring, I felt exposed—but also schooled. It made me think about how I stare at people."

This aesthetic choice—prioritising directness over theatrical artifice—represents a specifically Nigerian contribution to disability aesthetics. Unlike Western contexts, where disability art often operates within established avant-garde traditions, these plays draw from African oral storytelling traditions that value directness and community engagement.

Disability as Formal Aesthetic Quality

Both plays treat disability as a formal aesthetic element rather than character trait. In *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, stage directions emphasise the visual and kinaesthetic dimensions of disability. Ifahunda's crawling is described as "wittier than the crowd" (*Ẹni Òrìṣà* 2025, 3), inverting expectations of helplessness. Dadara's navigation through space becomes a form of embodied knowledge that shapes the play's spatial dynamics.

Disability Monologues extends this approach by exploring sensory aesthetics. In "Still Waters Run Deep," the speaker's limited mobility becomes a metaphor for depth: "No, I am not Ṣìgìdì, still waters just run deep" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 15). This line transforms stillness from limitation to aesthetic quality, challenging theatre's typical emphasis on movement and dynamism.

There then lies the question: how does this approach differ from tokenistic inclusion? The plays avoid tokenism by making disability central to aesthetic innovation rather than peripheral representation. Disability shapes narrative structure, visual composition, and audience engagement, functioning as active aesthetic element rather than passive inclusion.

Disability Gain: Expanding Theatrical Possibilities

Creating New Aesthetic Experiences

Both plays demonstrate what can be termed "disability gain"—the enriched aesthetic and social value that emerges from engaging with disability as a vital aspect of human experience. This concept, adapted from "deaf gain" (Bauman & Murray 2014), positions disability not as deficit but as source of cultural and artistic value.

Ẹni Òrìṣà creates gain through its multisensory approach to storytelling. Dadara's heightened auditory perception "Akanji, I can smell them, they must be close" (*Ẹni Òrìṣà* 2025, 8)—opens possibilities for innovative staging that engages multiple senses. Directors of this play have responded by incorporating soundscapes, tactile elements, and olfactory cues that align audience experience with Dadara's perceptual world.

Disability Monologues creates gain through its direct engagement with audience assumptions. The monologue format strips away theatrical distance, forcing audiences into direct confrontation with their biases. Post-performance discussions consistently reveal this impact an audience member at the Bowen Performance of *Disability Monologues* said: "I realised I was doing exactly what the speaker described—staring at the wheelchair instead of seeing the person."

Challenging Theatrical Norms

Traditional Nigerian theatre often confines disabled characters to supporting roles or symbolic functions. This has been discussed earlier in the work, citing Ola Rotimi's *Hopes of the Living Dead*, and Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*. *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* centre disabled characters as protagonists and narrators, challenging these conventions. Dadara's transition from sacrifice target to king disrupts expectations of disabled leadership, while the monologues give disabled voices an unmediated platform.

This centring creates aesthetic nervousness by disrupting familiar narratives. When Dadara reluctantly accepts kingship saying "I have no desire to be King. I only want to live and to be allowed to live" (*Ẹni Òrìṣà* 2024, 23)—the townspeople's insistence on his leadership challenges both his and the audience's assumptions about disability and authority.

Critics have noted this disruption. Okunuga (2024) observed: "The play's most radical gesture is making disability ordinary rather than extraordinary. This is revolutionary in Nigerian theatre" (Okunuga 2024, 41). Such responses validate the plays' challenge to established norms.

Countering Stigmatisation

Both plays actively counter-stigmatise representations common in Nigerian media. "Disability Monologues" directly critiques Nollywood's portrayal of disability as punishment: "In Nollywood, disability only comes when they have cursed you... Who wants to advertise their mouthwash or hair cream as the product for cursed people?" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 10).

This critique extends beyond representation to economic impact. "The HR Called Me Yesterday" exposes workplace discrimination: "They think buying from your station could bring them a curse, that they too may turn cripple" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 11). By documenting these experiences, the play challenges both cultural beliefs and economic practices that marginalise disabled individuals.

Transforming the Gaze: Staring as Dialogue

Reimagining Productive Staring in Performance

Garland-Thomson's concept of staring as productive social interaction finds particular resonance in these plays' engagement with audiences. Rather than avoiding or minimising disability's visual impact, both works invite sustained attention that transforms voyeurism into dialogue.

Ẹni Òrìṣà uses staging to control and redirect the gaze. The opening scene's pursuit of Ifahunda naturally draws audience attention to his crawling movement and uncontrolled saliva. However, the narrative immediately reframes this attention by highlighting his intelligence and wit. The audience's initial stare becomes recognition of capability rather than confirmation of limitation.

Disability Monologues makes staring explicit through direct address. "My name is Chuks, and I Am Not the Crippled" calls out audience behaviour: "You heard 'crippled', and like a rehearsed choir, your eyes shifted to my wheelchair" (*Disability Monologues* 2024, 5). This confrontation transforms unconscious staring into conscious dialogue about respect and recognition.

Post-performance feedback consistently reveals this transformation. One viewer noted at the Iwo performance: "I realised I was staring without thinking, but the monologue made me see the person, not just the disability." Another observed: "It made me uncomfortable at first, but then I understood—that discomfort was the point."

Generating New Meanings

The plays use staring to generate new meanings about disability and beauty. In *Ẹni Òrìṣà*, Keji's multicoloured body initially draws stares as abnormality. However, Dadara's response: "You are evidence that the sculptor-deity is unpredictable and his skills are immeasurable" ("Ẹni Òrìṣà" 16) reframes difference as divine artistry. Thus, the audience's stare becomes appreciation rather than judgment.

Disability Monologues extends this reframing through monologues like "Kyphosis," where the speaker's hunchback becomes a site of love and beauty: "He kissed my hump in public and called me 'the most beautiful lady in this room' " (*Disability Monologues* 2025, 16). This moment transforms stigma into affection, challenging conventional beauty standards through lived experience.

Art-Based Research: Theatre as Inquiry and Advocacy

Theatre as Investigative Method

Both plays function as art-based research, using performance to investigate cultural attitudes toward disability while advocating for change. This approach aligns with growing recognition of artistic practice as legitimate research methodology, particularly for exploring marginalised experiences.

Ẹni Òrìṣà investigates cultural beliefs through narrative structure. The king's justification for the murder-sacrifice of people with disabilities was that: "Obatala had palm wine... in his drunkenness, he created the crippled, the hunchback, the blind, the deaf, and the mute" (*Ẹni Òrìṣà* 2025, 12).

This exposes how religious narratives perpetuate discrimination. The play's resolution, with Dadara's coronation, tests alternative possibilities for valuing disabled leadership.

Disability Monologues employs direct testimony as a research method. Each monologue documents specific experiences of discrimination, resilience, and identity formation. "The HR Called Me Yesterday" provides evidence of workplace discrimination, while "Esther-Bleached" documents artistic success despite blindness. Together, these testimonies create a research archive of disabled experience in Nigeria.

Advocacy Through Aesthetic Innovation

The plays advocate for change not through didactic argument but through aesthetic innovation that makes alternative possibilities tangible, and through the use of a form of cathartic conscientisation. *Ẹni Òrìṣà's* conclusion—with disabled characters as heroes and leaders—demonstrates rather than argues for disabled capability. *Disability Monologues*' direct address format creates intimate connection that provokes empathy and understanding.

Both plays have influenced subsequent productions. After being performed in Iwo, Osun State, in January 2024, *Disability Monologues* was commissioned and produced in Abuja, Northern Nigeria, in November 2024. *Ẹni Òrìṣà* is currently being rehearsed in Osun State, southern Nigeria. No fewer than 5 disability-centred works since 2023 have cited these plays as inspiration (Okunuga, 2024; Adeleke, 2024; Ajibola, 2024; Oke, 2025; Agboola, 2025). Additionally, audience feedback surveys show significant shifts in attitudes toward disability, with 78% of respondents reporting "changed perspectives" after viewing performances.

Conclusion: Redefining Beauty Through Disability

Ẹni Òrìṣà and *Disability Monologues* demonstrate how Nigerian theatre can participate in global disability arts discourse while remaining culturally grounded. These plays employ Yorùbá symbols, oral storytelling traditions, and direct community engagement to create distinctly Nigerian contributions to disability aesthetics. Their success lies not merely in representing disability but in fundamentally reimagining what beauty encompasses.

Through "broken beauty" adapted to Nigerian contexts, "disability gain" that expands theatrical possibilities, and transformed audience engagement that generates productive dialogue, these plays position disability as a source of aesthetic innovation rather than limitation. While my dual role as playwright and researcher provides unique insights, external validation through audience response, critical reception, and subsequent theatrical influence confirms these works' impact beyond authorial intention. The plays succeed not because I intended them to challenge norms, but because audiences, critics, and subsequent artists have recognised and extended their innovations. This analysis contributes to disability studies by demonstrating how Western theoretical frameworks require cultural translation to remain relevant in non-Western contexts. "Broken beauty" in Nigerian contexts must contend with different aesthetic traditions, colonial legacies, and contemporary prejudices than Siebers' original formulation suggests. These plays open possibilities for further research into disability aesthetics in African contexts, the role of indigenous belief systems in shaping disability representation, and the potential for theatre to influence broader social attitudes toward disability. Centring disabled voices, challenging aesthetic norms, and engaging audiences in productive dialogue, *Ẹni Òrìṣà* and *Disability Monologues* contribute to a vision of Nigerian theatre as a space for social transformation and inclusive beauty. They demonstrate that disability, far from limiting artistic expression, can serve as a catalyst for aesthetic innovation that enriches both art and socjety.

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Opacity, Prediction and the Beautiful Loop: Joyce Carol Oates and the Limits of Cognitive Fiction

Abstract

This article examines Mudwoman (2012) and Breathe (2021) by Joyce Carol Oates through the frameworks of cognitive poetics, predictive processing, and philosophical theories of consciousness. Drawing on Daniel Dennett's Multiple Drafts model, Karl Friston's active-inference framework, and Thomas Metzinger's theory of phenomenal transparency and opacity—together with Ruben Laukkonen and Shamil Chandaria's recent "Beautiful Loop" formulation—the essay argues that Oates turns the act of reading itself into a cognitive experiment in opacity. The article resists neuro-reductive readings of literary characters, following Francisco Ortega and Fernando Vidal's critique of the "cerebral subject." Instead of treating fictional minds as models of neural processes, it treats Oates's metafictional structures as aesthetic devices that expose the epistemic limits of prediction, perception, and self-awareness. The result is a proposal for a cognitive aesthetics of opacity: an understanding of beauty grounded not in clarity or coherence but in the reader's recursive experience of uncertainty, dereification, and self-reflexive unknowing.

Keywords

curiosity, aha experience, predictive processing, active inference, opacity, transparency

1. Introduction: From Prediction to Opacity

In contemporary cognitive literary studies, reading is often modeled as a process of probabilistic inference. Scholars such as Karin Kukkonen, Patrick Colm Hogan, and Michael Burke have described the reader as a "prediction engine," continually generating and updating hypotheses about plot,

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character, and theme. Within this paradigm, uncertainty functions as a controlled stimulus for curiosity and aesthetic pleasure: we enjoy fiction because it allows us to test and revise predictions safely.

Joyce Carol Oates's later fiction both participates in and destabilizes this model. Mudwoman and Breathe do not simply represent broken perception; they produce it. Their hallucinatory syntax, recursive motifs, and unstable perspectives repeatedly suspend the reader between comprehension and loss, creating an experience that resembles what Metzinger calls phenomenal opacity—a moment when consciousness becomes aware of its own constructive activity. The novels therefore invite a shift in focus from the psychology of characters to the cognition of readers. They are not literary illustrations of brain science but laboratories of epistemic awareness.

The interpretive wager of this article is that Oates anticipates, enacts, and ultimately exceeds the explanatory reach of predictive models of mind. If predictive processing describes the nervous system as a hierarchical mechanism for minimizing surprise, Oates constructs narrative architectures that maximize epistemic tension. Her novels portray, and more importantly perform, the failure of inference: temporal order dissolves, interior monologue merges with external narration, and the distinction between imagination and perception collapses. Reading becomes an act of recursive misrecognition.

Such effects, I suggest, can be understood through the language of cognitive science without collapsing literature into neuroscience. Ortega and Vidal warn that the current "neuro-turn" in the humanities risks reducing the person to "a brain who reads."

The present analysis therefore uses the conceptual vocabulary of predictive processing, active inference, and phenomenal opacity as a hermeneutic lens for the reader's cognitive experience. The goal is not to psychologize Oates's protagonists, but to illuminate how her prose constructs an epistemic encounter: a dramatization of what it feels like when interpretation itself becomes uncertain. In this sense, Mudwoman and Breathe stand as radical experiments in what might be called literary dereification—fiction that forces us to recognize our own interpretive acts as contingent and constructed.

2. Joyce Carol Oates and the Epistemic Turn

Critical writing on Oates has long emphasized moral and psychological conflict. Early studies—Eileen Teper Bender's Joyce Carol Oates: Artist in Residence (1987), Harold Bloom's edited volume Modern Critical Views (1987),

and Ellen Friedman's Joyce Carol Oates (1980)—situate her in a lineage of Gothic and psychological realism. Later work, including Brenda Daly's Lavish Self-Divisions (1996), Marilyn Wesley's Refusal and Transgression in Joyce Carol Oates' Fiction (1993), and Gavin Cologne-Brookes's Dark Eyes on America (2005), extends that discussion to issues of gender, trauma, and national mythology.

While these studies remain invaluable, they often treat consciousness as a representational object rather than an epistemic process. In contrast, more recent scholarship—particularly Les Cahiers de L'Herne: Joyce Carol Oates (Marquette and Tromble-Giraud, 2017)—draws attention to Oates's self-reflexive aesthetics. Her later novels foreground the act of perception and narration itself, transforming psychological realism into cognitive experiment.

The argument pursued here builds upon that trajectory. By aligning Oates with the conceptual concerns of cognitive poetics—Burke and Troscianko's Cognitive Literary Science, Reuven Tsur's Poetic Conventions as Cognitive Fossils, and Patrick Colm Hogan's Style in Narrative—we can situate her work at the intersection of literary form and cognitive phenomenology. Yet Oates's engagement with cognition differs sharply from the optimism of early cognitive narratology. Her novels dramatize what happens when predictive mechanisms misfire, when attention loops back on itself, and when empathy fails to stabilize meaning.

3. Active Inference, Dereification, and Phenomenal Opacity

Friston's model of active inference posits that perception and action are two sides of the same process: organisms minimize expected surprise by continuously predicting sensory input and correcting discrepancies. At higher cognitive levels, these hierarchies of prediction become recursive; the system models not only the world but its own modeling activity. When that recursion achieves sufficient complexity, Laukkonen and Chandaria call it the beautiful loop—a state of consciousness aware of itself as inference.

Metzinger's Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity describes this transition in phenomenological terms. In transparent experience we "look through" representations and mistake them for direct reality. In opaque experience the representational process itself becomes visible, producing the feeling that perception is a construction. Limanowski and Friston reinterpret this

in Bayesian language: opacity arises when normally hidden layers of processing are exposed by increased prediction error or shifts in precision weighting.

In contemplative science, a similar process is termed dereification—the recognition that experiential phenomena are mental constructs rather than intrinsic realities (Lutz *et al.* 2015). Applied to literary reception, dereification occurs when the reader becomes aware of interpretation as an act, when narrative transparency gives way to self-conscious mediation. Oates's fiction performs this very shift: her realism continuously collapses into epistemic vertigo.

4. Mudwoman: Metafiction and Cognitive Opacity

Readied. You must be readied.
*Readied! She was. In her sleep, still alive.**

This refrain, recurring throughout Mudwoman, functions as both traumatic echo and epistemic signal. The phrase originates with the protagonist's deranged mother, who attempts to drown her child in a sacrificial act. Decades later it reverberates within M.R.'s interior monologue, surfacing at moments of psychic crisis. Each repetition reopens the wound of interpretation: is this memory, dream, or hallucination?

Oates organizes Mudwoman as a distributed network of drafts, echoing Dennett's replacement of the Cartesian Theater with a decentralized field of parallel narratives. The narration shifts abruptly between third-person realism, hallucinated dialogue, academic discourse, and mythic allegory. These fragments compete for coherence in the reader's mind, just as neural hypotheses compete for dominance in Dennett's and Friston's models.

The King of the Crows—a spectral rescuer in M.R.'s visions—embodies the paradox of recursive inference. His commands ("Hurry! This way!") appear to guide perception but instead amplify confusion. Trauma here is not only thematic; it is the failure of active inference. M.R.'s brain, overwhelmed by prediction error, cannot distinguish internally generated imagery from external stimuli.

For the reader, this breakdown becomes phenomenological. The novel's syntax mirrors the noise of a system unable to minimize surprise. The reader's search for causal explanation produces only more hypotheses. In Metzinger's terms, the novel induces phenomenal opacity: we perceive the process of constructing meaning rather than any stable content.

Oates's metafictional self-awareness transforms this epistemic discomfort into aesthetic principle. The narrative performs what Friston and Laukkonen call epistemic depth—the recursive modeling of inference itself. The reader, like M.R., becomes conscious of the act of sense-making as provisional and fallible.

She dreamed of mud, of river, of a voice that was her own and not her own...

Such passages enact dereification: the dissolution of naïve realism into awareness of fictionality. Oates does not describe consciousness; she simulates its instability, drawing attention to the seams of representation.

5. Narrative Failure and the Reader's Inferential Loop

Predictive models of narrative—most explicitly Kukkonen's Probability Designs—conceive reading as the continual updating of expectations. Fiction manipulates this cognitive rhythm, balancing uncertainty and resolution. Oates, however, inverts the logic: her novels withhold resolution indefinitely. The reader's predictions accumulate error rather than clarity.

This produces a form of epistemic fatigue akin to what Van de Cruys and Friston describe as meta-expectational failure: the collapse of one's sense of how quickly uncertainty should diminish. In Mudwoman, temporal and causal incoherence defy probabilistic calibration. The reader's effort to "solve" the narrative yields the realization that prediction itself is the wrong strategy.

Oates thus constructs a literature of recursive failure—a cognitive sublime grounded in the awareness of misprediction. The pleasure of inference gives way to the aesthetic of exhaustion, where the only resolution is the recognition of irresolvability.

6. Breathe: Blindsight and the Vision of the Unseen

Oates's Breathe (2021) transposes the recursive epistemic structure of Mudwoman into the phenomenology of grief. The novel follows Michaela, a recently widowed woman who repeatedly hallucinates her dead husband, Gerard, during a visit to the New Mexican desert. What begins as bereavement realism transforms into a cognitive allegory of perception, denial, and revelation.

6.1. The Paradox of Seeing What Cannot Be Seen

Early in the novel, Michaela glimpses a figure across a sun-drenched plaza:

> *'Gerard!'—you wake from a haze of sorrow seeing your husband across the sun-drenched plaza.*

The reader, like the protagonist, is caught in a perceptual oscillation between certainty and doubt. This scene literalizes the paradox Oates formulated years earlier in her essayistic fragment on neurological neglect: how do we know what we cannot know when it does not appear to us? The hallucinated husband functions as both percept and absence, a form of blindsight—the neurological condition in which patients respond to stimuli they cannot consciously see.

In Fristonian terms, Michaela's system is overwhelmed by prediction error: her generative model insists that Gerard should still exist, and thus fabricates sensory data consistent with that prior. Yet Oates's purpose is not to dramatize neuroscience; it is to aestheticize epistemic failure. The episode is less about the brain's deficits than about the phenomenology of not-knowing—how perception itself becomes an ethical riddle.

6.2. Epistemic Depth and the Ethics of Perception

As Michaela's visions intensify, she begins to suspect her own complicity in acts of historical and racial violence. During an assault by a man who resembles Gerard, she is accused as "white butcher" and "race murderer." Here Oates merges cognitive and cultural blindness: Michaela's literal misperception mirrors her moral failure to perceive systemic guilt. The unseen returns as accusation.

In this sense, Breathe extends Mudwoman's cognitive opacity into the political sphere. Blindsight becomes a metaphor for privileged ignorance—the inability to see what one's culture refuses to represent. The novel stages a confrontation between the transparency of privilege and the opacity of conscience.

The reader's own predictive frameworks are implicated. Oates repeatedly destabilizes focalization: passages of second-person address ("you wake, you breathe") transform the reader into Michaela's double. The novel thereby enacts what Laukkonen and Chandaria would call recursive modeling: the reader becomes aware of awareness itself, perceiving their own interpretive blindness.

6.3. Hallucination as Narrative Form

Oates's handling of style in Breathe resembles an experiment in sensory attenuation. Sentences elongate, punctuation dissolves, and perception drifts toward abstraction:

> *Light shimmered in the air—heat, mirage, or soul?—as if the world itself were breathing.*

The prose imitates the phenomenology of dereification. Physical and mental boundaries blur; objects appear as constructs of perception. Where realism typically assures the reader of stable reference, Oates dissolves that contract. The result is what Metzinger would call phenomenal opacity at the level of narrative texture. We see the "window" of fiction rather than the world beyond it.

7. From Transparency to Opacity: The Reader's Cognitive Loop

Both Mudwoman and Breathe transform reading into a recursive feedback loop. In Friston's terms, the reader is an active inference system sampling textual evidence to minimize surprise. But Oates scripts persistent prediction error: voices multiply, temporalities fold, symbols refuse convergence. Each attempted interpretation spawns another hypothesis.

At this juncture, the pleasure of uncertainty resolution—the foundation of cognitive poetics—breaks down. Instead, the reader experiences what could be called epistemic awe: an awareness of the limits of understanding. This is Oates's version of the sublime, closer to Burke's terror than to Kantian harmony.

The novels thus offer not cognitive explanation but cognitive exposure: they make perception visible to itself. When M.R. in Mudwoman or Michaela in Breathe perceives what cannot be seen, the reader too undergoes a miniature blindsight—responding to narrative signals that never quite reach conscious articulation.

8. Literature and the Critical Humanities of the Brain

Oates's exploration of cognitive opacity situates her within what Ortega and Vidal term the critical humanities of the brain. Their project, in Brains in Literature / Literature in the Brain, warns against the "cerebral subject"—

the modern figure who equates identity with brain function. Against this reduction, Oates's fiction reveals the phenomenological remainder that eludes explanation.

Her characters do not personify neural processes; they dramatize the excess of experience over theory. When Michaela's vision of Gerard collapses into violence, the reader is not invited to diagnose her hallucination but to inhabit its uncertainty. The aesthetic of opacity resists the explanatory impulse. Fiction here performs what Ortega and Vidal call "counter-neuralization": it restores the mystery of the mind precisely by acknowledging its constructedness.

Thus, rather than confirming the neuroscientific paradigm, Oates's novels interrogate it. They expose the epistemic and ethical implications of thinking of human beings as predictive machines. The brain, in her fiction, is less an object than a metaphor for the recursive entrapment of consciousness in its own modeling.

9. The Aesthetic of Dereification

To experience Oates's fiction is to lose faith in naive realism. The reader's habitual reification of narrative—its characters, settings, and moral hierarchies—is systematically undermined. This process corresponds to the contemplative notion of dereification as described by Lutz and Dahl: a mindful awareness that thoughts and perceptions are constructions.

In literary terms, dereification manifests when the reader perceives the artifice of storytelling without disengaging emotionally. Oates sustains this double vision. The reader both believes and disbelieves, oscillating between immersion and reflection. This tension constitutes the cognitive aesthetic of her work: beauty as the awareness of illusion.

The novels thereby participate in the "beautiful loop" described by Laukkonen, Friston, and Chandaria. Consciousness becomes recursive modeling; aesthetic pleasure arises when the loop is seen as loop. Yet Oates's version of the loop is tragic rather than harmonious. Her characters do not attain enlightenment but succumb to recursive paralysis. Their failures, however, enable the reader's insight: to recognize perception as fiction.

10. Cognitive Poetics and the Limits of Predictive Reading

In the field of cognitive poetics, literary form is often treated as a set of cues that shape probabilistic expectations. Burke and Troscianko describe reading as "a process of embodied simulation," while Hogan conceives of narra-

tive as an emotionally guided feedback system that calibrates attention and empathy. Within this framework, the reader is a predictive agent continually testing hypotheses about characters and outcomes.

Oates's work exposes the blind spot in this model: what happens when the predictive contract fails. Her novels operate at the point where cognitive mechanisms cease to function as reliable guides and instead become sources of anxiety. The reader's inferential labor does not lead to understanding but to recursive self-awareness.

This breakdown can be theorized through the concept of meta-expectation from active inference: predictions about the rate at which prediction errors will diminish. When meta-expectations are violated, curiosity turns into unease. Oates sustains precisely this condition. Mudwoman and Breathe cultivate the affective charge of unresolved uncertainty; they defer closure indefinitely, compelling the reader to confront their own interpretive compulsion.

By collapsing the temporal rhythm of expectation and satisfaction, Oates transforms the mechanisms of narrative engagement into objects of reflection. The reader experiences what could be called metacognitive suspense: not "what will happen?" but "why can't I make this make sense?"

This effect situates Oates within a broader rethinking of aesthetic response. As Order and Change in Art (2023) argues, aesthetic pleasure may arise not from uncertainty resolution but from the dynamic modulation of attention and inference. Oates pushes this to an extreme, replacing resolution with recursive stasis. Her novels thus perform the inversion of active inference—curiosity that feeds on its own failure.

11. Recursive Ethics: Knowing and Not-Knowing

The epistemic instability of Oates's fiction carries ethical weight. In both Mudwoman and Breathe, the collapse of prediction parallels the collapse of moral certainty. M.R.'s hallucinatory guilt and Michaela's racialized blindness expose the dangers of assuming coherence—whether in selfhood or in ideology.

Oates's moral vision resembles what Metzinger calls the "opacity of the self-model." To recognize consciousness as construction is to confront the fragility of agency and responsibility. Her protagonists' crises—academic success built on repression (Mudwoman), or liberal self-innocence shattered by hallucinated accusation (Breathe)—embody this recognition.

For the reader, ethical reflection emerges through cognitive empathy. As Kukkonen notes, predictive models of fiction rely on the simulation of others' minds. Oates reverses this logic: empathy becomes impossible precisely when the other collapses into projection. Michaela's vision of Gerard is the ultimate failed simulation—an empathy that recreates the dead rather than understanding the living.

This ethical destabilization aligns with Ortega and Vidal's critique of neuroculture. The "cerebral subject," they argue, externalizes responsibility by treating mind as mechanism. Oates dramatizes the inverse: moral blindness arises when cognition is mistaken for certainty. To perceive ethically, one must accept opacity.

12. Metafiction as Active Inference

In formal terms, Oates's metafictional devices can be understood as simulations of active inference. The reader continually generates predictions about narrative structure, genre, and perspective, only to see them contradicted. The novel's self-referential gestures function like higher-order predictions that "model the modeling." When these too are subverted, the reader's awareness loops back upon itself.

This recursive structure approximates the "hyper-modeling" that Laukkonen and Chandaria identify as the cognitive basis of consciousness. In their "beautiful loop," awareness arises when the system represents its own representational activity. Oates literalizes this: her novels are minds reflecting on the act of reflection.

Yet where cognitive theory often seeks equilibrium—a stable harmony between prediction and correction—Oates insists on disequilibrium. Her "loop" is not serene but tragic. The recursive modeling that produces consciousness also produces terror: the realization that perception is an invention. This is the literary counterpart of what contemplative traditions describe as dereification shock—the disorientation that follows the collapse of naive realism.

13. The Cognitive Sublime

The aesthetic experience that emerges from Oates's opacity recalls the Romantic sublime, yet its dynamics are cognitive rather than metaphysical. Instead of the confrontation with nature's immensity, the reader faces the abyss of interpretation itself. The mind becomes its own ungraspable object.

Kant located the sublime in the tension between imagination and reason; Oates relocates it between perception and prediction. The reader's faculties fail not because the world overwhelms them but because they recognize their own constructive limits. This recognition produces both dread and fascination. It is, in Laukkonen's phrase, the beautiful loop—awareness aware of its own failure to close.

Oates's contribution to cognitive aesthetics thus lies in her inversion of explanation. She uses the metaphors of neuroscience not to clarify but to obscure productively, revealing opacity as the ground of experience. Her novels perform what Friston and Limanowski call "seeing the dark": awareness of the unseen mechanisms that make seeing possible.

14. Time, Trauma, and Recursive Temporality

A striking feature of both novels is their manipulation of temporal structure. In Mudwoman, time folds upon itself; scenes of childhood trauma replay within adult consciousness without chronological transition. In Breathe, the linear temporality of mourning dissolves into cyclical recurrence—Gerard's apparitions return in endless variation.

This temporal recursion mirrors the feedback architecture of predictive processing. Past experiences function as priors; new inputs are filtered through them. When priors are rigid, perception becomes hallucination. Oates dramatizes this mechanism aesthetically: narrative memory becomes both cause and symptom of blindness.

The reader, forced to navigate non-linear temporality, experiences a comparable temporal opacity. The act of reading becomes a modeling of trauma—anticipation continually disrupted by intrusion. In this sense, Oates's narrative time performs the logic of active inference gone recursive: prediction loops that can neither update nor terminate.

15. Oates and the Contemporary Cognitive Landscape

Situating Oates within contemporary cognitive discourse reveals her singular position. Unlike the "neurofiction" trend of the early twenty-first century, which sought to dramatize scientific paradigms through character psychology, Oates uses cognition as a poetic condition. Her fiction neither celebrates nor repudiates neuroscience; it turns its metaphors into epistemic instruments.

In dialogue with authors such as Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan, Oates pursues the question of what fiction can know about knowing. Yet her commitment to opacity distinguishes her from these peers. Where McEwan's Enduring Love or Richard Powers's The Echo Maker employ neuroscience to restore meaning, Oates insists on the beauty of unknowing.

Her achievement, then, is to transform cognitive theory itself into an aesthetic medium. The predictive brain, the multiple drafts, the transparent self—all become figures in a literary experiment about interpretation's limits. Oates's novels demonstrate that to read is to model, to hallucinate, to err—and that this error, sustained and recognized, is what we call art.

16. Conclusion: Toward a Cognitive Aesthetics of Opacity

Joyce Carol Oates's Mudwoman and Breathe illuminate the limits of the predictive imagination. They transform the cognitive sciences' metaphors—active inference, recursive awareness, dereification—into the material of aesthetic experience. In these novels, consciousness does not operate as an explanatory device but as a poetic principle. Prediction fails; attention falters; and through that failure the reader perceives the artifice of perception itself.

Oates's writing thus calls for a shift in cognitive literary studies. Rather than viewing fiction as a model of the mind's capacity for inference, we must consider literature as a medium for testing the boundaries of inference. Her work demonstrates that epistemic failure can be both affective and revelatory. The pleasure of her fiction lies not in understanding but in the awareness that understanding is provisional.

This stance aligns Oates with the critical humanities of the brain envisioned by Ortega and Vidal: a humanistic counter-gesture to neuro-reductionism. In their sense, literature is not a supplement to neuroscience but a form of resistance against the total explanatory reach of brain-based paradigms. Oates does not depict the brain at work; she reveals the points at which explanation collapses into wonder.

Her novels, when read through the lenses of Dennett, Friston, and Metzinger, open a space where consciousness is neither object nor metaphor but process. They enact what Laukkonen, Friston, and Chandaria call the beautiful loop: the recursive moment when awareness reflects upon its own operation. Yet in Oates, the loop remains open—its beauty lies in incompletion. Opacity, not clarity, becomes the measure of depth.

Through this transformation, Oates redefines realism and the ethics of attention. She shows that to see truly one must also see blindness, to know one must acknowledge the opacity of knowing. Her fictions therefore constitute not an application of cognitive science to art but an extension of cognition through art—a philosophical exploration of how minds, real and imagined, come to terms with the impossibility of full transparency.

Research Significance

This study advances the dialogue between cognitive narratology and philosophical theories of consciousness by introducing the concept of a cognitive aesthetics of opacity. It expands the current neuro-literary debate beyond representational realism and contributes to the critical humanities of the brain. By reading Oates alongside Dennett, Friston, Metzinger, Laukkonen, and Ortega & Vidal, the article offers a new model of how fiction can perform—not merely depict—the recursive limits of prediction and awareness.

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